

## UN agency wants to talk to the Taliban on the issue of child soldiers

By Lalit K Jha - Jan 31, 2008 - 10:38

United Nations (PAN): The United Nations wants to open a channel of dialogue with the Taliban, which has increasingly been recruiting child soldiers and deploying them for suicidal attacks, a top UN official said Wednesday.

The Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, said UN offices and its other agencies on the ground like UNICEF have approached the Government of Afghanistan in this regard.

Afghan Government has not yet approved (our proposal to talk with the Taliban). We have to negotiate with them (the Afghanistan Govt), Coomaraswamy said.

However, the Government of Afghanistan has recently agreed to allow the appointment of child protection officers attached to the United Nations peacekeeping operations in the country. Such dialogues are normally carried out by these officials, she said.

Coomaraswamy was addressing the press at the UN headquarters on Wednesday, a day after the release of the annual report on Children and armed conflict.

The report by the Secretary General expresses deep concern over the recruitment of child soldiers by the Taliban to be used in terrorist attack against the government and international forces. Taliban, in fact, figures in the reports list of shame which includes the name of organizations that recruit child soldiers.

The 45-page report, which speaks in detail about recruitment of child soldiers in the conflict prone areas all over the world, also expresses concern over use of children as human shield and the increasing attack by the Talibans on schools, its students and teachers.

The UN Security Council is slated to discuss the report at a special meeting on this issue on February 12, following which it is expected to either pass a resolution with a set of recommendations or issue presidential statements.

Coomaraswamy said the idea behind the List of Shame where the Taliban is placed -- is that the UN or its agencies on the ground would try and enter into a dialogue with these non-state actors to have them prepare an action plan to have the child soldiers released.

There is a very specific procedure laid down by the Security Council in this regard. There is a problem in the sense that some nation States do not like us talking to the non-state actors. So first we have to find a mechanism and technical procedure where we can talk to the non-state actors that the nation State is comfortable with. On many occasions we have come through that process, she said.

With regard to the Afghanistan situation specifically, she said: We have been hindered by the fact that normally this kind of work is done by child protection officers attached to peacekeeping operations. It was absent from the UNs Afghan operations.

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we are happy to announce that it has just been approved that such officers would now join the peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan, she said.

The only problem is the Government of Afghanistan does not like the UN speaking to the Taliban. So whether on the child protection issue, we can get the government to agree that at the technical level they would allow child protection officers to speak to the Taliban, we have to negotiate that (with the Afghan Govt.), Coomaraswamy said,

The portion of the report dealing with Afghanistan refers to numerous reports of child soldiering by the Taliban and associated forces. Though there have been reports of such a thing by other forces in the country too, the verification process of them have not been completed.

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