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Stakeholder report on Afghanistan
Submitted by World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe Office

Rights of the Child

World Vision Afghanistan is particularly concerned about the effect of the on-going conflict on all aspects of children's lives. Afghanistan is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties, but institutional mechanisms to translate formal commitments into appropriate action do not have the capacity to do so or are all-together absent. World Vision welcomes that the Government has begun work in 2008 to draft the initial State party report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Abuse and exploitation

i. Child Labour

It is estimated that there are roughly one million child labours between the ages of seven and fourteen in Afghanistan¹. In Kabul, 37,000 children beg or work in the streets², employed in a range of fields from carpet weaving to heavy vehicle repair to metal working. Many are also exploited in activities related to narcotics, including through their own addictions. Almost 96 percent of child labourers in Afghanistan are prematurely forced into labour because of poverty and poor economic conditions.³

ii. Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence

Children begging or working on the streets are at an especially high risk of sexual abuse and of being trafficked for prostitution and forced labour. Recent reports suggest that Afghanistan is a primary country where children are abducted, smuggled over the borders, and sold as sex slaves or child labourers in the neighboring countries or in the Gulf States – most prominently Saudi Arabia.⁴ Reports indicate that sexual violence against Afghan boys is common throughout the country, but is most prevalent in the north.⁵ In northern Afghanistan, “Bacha bereesh” (beardless boys) are kept by powerful older men and made to dance at special parties where they are sexually abused afterwards.⁶ This practice has become more common; one reason is the growing

¹ Rogers, Paul. “Afghanistan: Six Years of War.” 4 November 2007. Open Democracy.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM). “Trafficking in Persons – An Analysis of Afghanistan.” January 2004.

⁵ Tufts University USA, Feinstein International Famine Centre, Youth and Community Program. 2004. “Human Security and Livelihoods of Rural Afghans, 2002-2003.” A report for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). June. DDR Afghanistan's Young Soldiers Pg. 15

⁶ Ibrahimi, Sayed Yaqub. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). “The Dancing Boys of the North.” 14 November 2007.

influence of local strongmen, who regard these boys as status symbols. However, it is ultimately poverty that drives these boys into a world of sexual abuse. This issue is not treated as seriously as other sexual abuse violations and the practice is likely to spread.⁷

iii. Early marriages

Another form of sexual exploitation is the marrying-off of young girls to much older men in exchange for a “bride price” (or dowry). Sixteen percent of Afghan girls – particularly from poor and rural families - are married before the age of 15 – and fifty-two percent before they turn eighteen.⁸ Early marriages, in combination with inadequate child spacing, means that women are having children too young and too frequently, and are at a greater risk of domestic violence due to their age. Such girls are also deprived of an education.

The impact of the conflict upon children

i. Child soldiers

UNICEF estimates that there are 8,000 child combatants in Afghanistan (both active and former).⁹ In a recent survey of over 30,000 Afghans the HRW found that up to 30 percent had participated in military activities as children.¹⁰ The recruitment of children as suicide bombers is an increasing threat and often involves significant cajoling and trickery.¹¹ UNICEF indicates that children as young as six have been recruited to carry out such attacks.¹²

Many of these children are from destitute families in volatile regions of the country and are more easily persuaded to join the insurgents for protection. Children are no longer reportedly recruited into the Afghan National Army, but there are unconfirmed reports that the police auxiliary maintains informal associations with children.¹³ Nonetheless, the greatest cause for concern remains the Taliban, who continue to recruit children.¹⁴

ii. Other impacts of conflict on children

Internal displacement:

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan children have become displaced with or without their parents. The government estimates as many as 60,000 street children occupy the territory

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ IRIN. “Widespread Child Marriage Blamed for Domestic Violence.” 16 October 2007.

⁹ UNICEF. “Child Alert Afghanistan: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War.” 2007. UNICEF.

¹⁰ Becker, Jo. 2004. “Children as Weapons of War.” Human Rights Watch Report.

¹¹ UNAMA reports that suicide attacks in Afghanistan have increased from 0 in 2002 to 123 in 2006, and 100 until November 2007 (<http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/nonUN%20Docs/Others/Afghanistan-profile-Relief-web.pdf>)

¹² UNICEF. “Child Alert Afghanistan: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War.” 2007. UNICEF.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

under its control – many of these children are malnourished and chronically ill.¹⁵ With the return of refugees from Iran and Pakistan, the number of vulnerable children living on the streets is expected to rise.

The right to life:

Children are at particularly high risk of becoming casualties of direct attacks, suicide bombings and from UXO. They are inquisitive, often play in public areas, and gather in crowded places.¹⁶ According to the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), 600 civilians have been killed in military operations and suicide attacks in 2007 (up until June), either by Coalition forces or Anti-Government Elements (AGE).¹⁷ Mines and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) kill or injure an average of 2 Afghans per day – 50 percent of these victims are children.¹⁸ According to experts, there is a direct link between the high numbers of child casualties of Mines and UXO and the traditional role that children have had and continue to have in supporting the home of rural Afghan families, where many children might encounter mines and UXO whilst tending flocks or harvesting crops.¹⁹

Right to Education

Of the total population, one in five is a school-aged child, giving Afghanistan the highest proportion of school-age children in the world. However, approximately 50 percent of these children remain out of school.²⁰ In the southern provinces alone, more than 60 percent of school-age children do not attend school. According to the Ministry of Education, at least a million girls of school age – 35% of the total population of girls - are not enrolled.²¹ This is attributed to the lack of safe accessibility and transport to school, socio-cultural pressure that girls must be taught by women, male preference in Afghan culture, and poverty.²² Afghanistan has the lowest female literacy rate in the world (between 9 and 18 percent).²³

The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Survey (NRVA) clearly indicated in 2005 that the location and availability of schools are two of the main reasons that children are denied education. Seventy-five to 85 percent of school buildings at all levels have been damaged or destroyed throughout the ongoing conflict.²⁴ When rebuilding first began, 60 percent of the country's 7,000 or more schools were destroyed or were in no

¹⁵ UNICEF. "Rebuilding Hope in Afghanistan." The United Nations Children's Fund, New York. November 2003.

¹⁶ UNICEF. "Child Alert Afghanistan: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War." 2007. UNICEF.

¹⁷ Annex II

¹⁸ UNMACA. 2006. Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan – 1384 Progress Report. Kabul.

¹⁹ Email from MRE/VA Advisor, UNMACA, 21 June 2006.

²⁰ UNICEF. "Child Alert Afghanistan: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War." 2007. UNICEF.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "Afghanistan National Development Strategy: An Interim Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction." Website: <http://www.ands.gov.af/> (accessed October 2007)

²³ Human Rights Watch. Report. "Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan." July 2006. Vol. 18, Number 6c.

²⁴ Ibid.

condition to receive students.²⁵ Fifty-two percent have no safe drinking water and 75 percent offer inadequate sanitation facilities.²⁶ More than 100 schools had landmines located on the school grounds or in the surrounding area.²⁷

The Ministry of Education admits that 10 to 13 percent of children drop out of school each year. Although the Afghan Constitution promises free education up to the secondary school level, there are significant amounts of informal user fees for households pursuing education for their children. These costs often deter families from sending their children to school. While the average amount of user fees for a student per year is 300 Afgs (2 percent of per capita income), these fees do not include household expenditures for school uniforms, books, transportation costs, shoes, stationery, and a midday meal, which considerably add to the burden on households with children in school.²⁸ Schools often levy these informal user fees to keep operating, especially when money that is expected from the government for salaries does not reach the teachers.²⁹

Right to Health

There is limited access to quality health care throughout the country. For every 1,000 Afghan children born, 165 die within the first year, and one quarter of all Afghan children die before their fifth birthdays – the vast majority from preventable diseases.³⁰

UNICEF estimates that during 2006, “nearly 900 children under age five died every day.”³¹ The burden of disease primarily comes from infection, particularly among children. Diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, and vaccine preventable illnesses account for nearly 60 percent of all child deaths. The high rates of infectious disease reflect poor personal hygiene, limited access to clean water, inappropriate sanitation, and low levels of parental education. Tuberculosis (TB) accounts for an estimated 15,000 deaths each year – 70 percent of all detected cases are found in women.³²

HIV and AIDS is increasingly of considerable concern in Afghanistan due to a number of key factors that contribute to increasing HIV infection rates could lead to an HIV epidemic. Factors include low levels of knowledge and awareness, high levels of stigma, increasing number of injecting drug users specifically among young workers in the poppy industry, absence of harm reduction programs and internally displaced populations. Whilst official figures of people living with HIV according to the Ministry of Public Health is 435 cases, it is estimated that the non-registered figures are considerably

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ UNICEF. “Rebuilding Hope in Afghanistan.” The United Nations Children’s Fund, New York. November 2003.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ From Save the Children’s Website: <http://www.savethechildren.org/countries/asia/afghanistan.html>. Afghanistan Profile. (Accessed October 2007).

³¹ UNICEF. “Child Alert Afghanistan: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War.” 2007. UNICEF.

³² WHO. “World Health Organization Report 2007: Global TB Control.” Country Profile – Afghanistan. Website: <http://www.who.int/countries/afg/en/> (Accessed October 2007).

higher. Currently there are only 12 hospitals around the country that run adequate blood screening tests.³³

Children who live on the streets of Afghanistan are at grave risk and are exceptionally vulnerable to malnutrition and infectious diseases. Over 50 percent of Afghan children throughout the country have stunted growth patterns.³⁴ Infant malnutrition and the poor nutritional status of women are major contributors to high early death rates. It is estimated that 1600 to 2200 deaths occur per 100,000 live births, with nearly 7 percent of mothers dying during childbirth.³⁵

Insufficient training and lack of physical infrastructure impairs the accessibility and the quality of health care services. There is a large gap between health care facilities that are available to the urban and rural populations of Afghanistan. Remote areas are hard to service because of the lack of roads, electricity, and skillfully trained health workers. Preventative health measures are weak due to poor information and substandard levels of hygiene and nutritional practices. These constraints similarly reduce the effectiveness of the health care system in controlling communicable diseases.³⁶

Recommendations:

- 1) World Vision recommends that the Government of Afghanistan create the necessary institutional mechanisms to translate formal human rights commitments, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child, into appropriate action.
- 2) Education for all children and youth is the most critical foundation for Afghanistan's future. Special emphasis should be placed on establishing and reestablishing schools throughout Afghanistan so that every boy and girl, including those with disabilities, have access to quality and inclusive education.
- 3) Urgent and firm enforcement measures must be taken to stop the growing sexual exploitation of children and their trafficking. This includes “selling” girls from poor families through early marriage, or condoning child marriage of boys and girls. Afghanistan has committed to protect children’s rights and as such, violations must not be tolerated on the grounds of traditional practice.
- 4) To slow down and eventually reduce HIV infection rates in Afghanistan, the government must enhance access to quality health facilities that offer contextualised but comprehensive HIV services, including universal access to Anti-Retroviral Treatment, which is not only an important care intervention but a highly cost effective HIV prevention intervention.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ UNICEF. “Rebuilding Hope in Afghanistan.” The United Nations Children’s Fund, New York. November 2003.

³⁶ The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. “Afghanistan National Development Strategy: An Interim Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction.”

5) With reference to the major human rights abuses, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed during Afghanistan's wars, World Vision calls upon the Government of Afghanistan to create mechanisms to hold persons responsible to account. Justice for victims of past abuses should be prioritized and acknowledgment of their suffering recorded. This would send a strong message to the youth of Afghanistan who must build confidence in their country's capacity for rule of law.