

TESTO 8

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WAR-AFFECTED CHILDREN

September 2000
Winnipeg, Canada

1177/c

The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children

A critical review of progress made and obstacles encountered in increasing protection for war-affected children

By Graça Machel

Wars have always victimised children and other non-combatants, but modern wars are exploiting, maiming and killing children more more systematically than ever. Children today find themselves caught up in complex and confusing conflicts that have multiple causes and that lack clear prospects for resolution. Children are being sucked into seemingly endless endemic struggles for power and resources.

The end of the Cold War promised a cessation of the conflicts fuelled by the superpowers' ideological differences. Instead, wars have raged in virtually every part of the globe, either between or, more typically, within nation States. Though easily dismissed in the media as tribal wars or ethnic hostilities, these conflicts have more recent and multiple roots. Their impact on children has been devastating. Millions of children have been killed as deliberate targets of warfare or drawn in as fighters. And millions more have fallen victim to malnutrition, disease, sexual violence and the depredations of forced flight. Without pretending to limit the discussion, this paper identifies several critical causes:

The fight over natural resources: diamonds have financed long-running wars in Sierra Leone and Angola. In Sudan, oil fuels the civil conflict. And the profits from narcotics are at the heart of struggles in Afghanistan and Colombia. None of these 'economies of war' could flourish without markets in richer countries. Global businesses, some legal, some illegal, have spawned international complicity that makes war not just possible, but highly profitable.

The wars themselves are perpetuated by international weapons sales, especially small arms. Indeed, small arms are now so accessible that the poorest communities can gain access to deadly weapons capable of transforming any local conflict into a bloody slaughter. Constrained by debt and structural adjustment programs, many developing countries have been forced to restructure their economies, cut basic services and reduce the size of the public sector. In so doing, they have often weakened national economies and cleared the stage for other actors bent on power and profit.

Temporary conflicts are particularly lethal for children because they make little distinction between combatants and civilians. In recent decades, the proportion of war victims who are civilians has leaped dramatically, from 5 per cent to over 90 per cent. During the 1990s, more than 2 million children have died as a result of armed conflicts, and more than three times as many have been permanently disabled or seriously injured. Currently, approximately 20 million children have been uprooted from their homes, either as refugees or internally displaced. At any given time, more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 are being used in hostilities as soldiers.

Today's warfare often entails horrific levels of violence and brutality, employing any and all means - from systematic rape, to the destruction of crops and the poisoning of wells, to ethnic cleansing and outright genocide. Combatants appear to abandon all human standards, unleashing ferocious assaults against children and their communities. And children themselves can be drawn in as fighters, caught up in a general maelstrom in which they are not just the targets of warfare but even the perpetrators of atrocities.

International emergency relief for the victims of conflict is inadequate and uneven. And it is well known that children and women suffer the most. Between 1994 and 1999, the United Nations requested \$13.5 billion for emergency relief funding, but received less than \$9 billion. And whereas donor countries provided \$.59 per person each day to assist 3.5 million war-affected people in Kosovo and other areas of southeastern Europe in 1999, for Africa they provided 12 million people in emergencies with only \$.13 per person per day.

Beyond its emergency relief responsibilities, the United Nations has increasingly become involved in efforts at peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building. There have been a number of successes-in El Salvador, Namibia and Nicaragua. But there have also been some tragic failures-in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and, most notably, in Rwanda.

The brutalities routinely committed against children pose a profound challenge to international law. The international community has fashioned impressive instruments to uphold human rights and to prosecute the perpetrators of genocide. However, many countries and armed groups have ignored their responsibilities under these treaties with impunity.