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Latin America meeting on child soldiers highlights the need for the OAS to turn promises into practise

(Asunción) The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) welcomes a declaration on the use of children as soldiers made by the General Assembly of the Organisation of American States at its 32nd session on 2-4 June in Barbados. However, the urgency of the problem affecting children in the region, including direct and indirect participation in armed conflict, forced displacement and the growth of organised armed gangs, requires a more forceful response. The needs of thousands of children currently serving in armed forces and groups in Latin America in particular were highlighted at a regional meeting between UNICEF and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers on 13-14 June. Representatives from Paraguay, Panama, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Venezuela met in Asunción, Paraguay, to discuss the development of a regional strategy to end the use of children as soldiers.

Our children need immediate assistance, including national and regional programmes to prevent their use in armed conflicts, organised gangs, irregular armed forces and paramilitaries, and to prohibit recruitment and military training before the age of 18. Governments should protect and assist displaced children, criminalize recruitment of minors, ensure their demobilisation and reintegration, and respect the right of conscientious objection to military service.

At its 32nd session, the OAS reinforced its June 2000 resolution (Res. 1709), stating, "the particular protection and assistance needs of women and children in situations of armed conflict must be effectively addressed," and welcoming in this regard the adoption, in May 2000, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

The majority of governments in the region have indicated their support for addressing the problem. However to date, only seven of the 34 countries in the region have ratified the Optional Protocol, and even fewer actually implement its provisions. Resolution 1709 stressed the importance of improving security in the Americas. If the region is to be a safe place for children, the use of children as soldiers must stop.

Now is the time to take concrete steps and turn promises into practice. The Coalition urges governments to ratify and implement the Optional Protocol, to support programmes for prevention and assistance, and to establish 18 as the minimum age for recruitment. The OAS should also develop stronger and more systematic mechanisms for governments to report on their implementation and actions in this regard.

Additional Information

OAS Resolution 1904 (AG/RES. 1904, XXXII-O/02) on the promotion and respect of international humanitarian law, states the following:

"CONVINCED that the particular protection and assistance needs of women and children in situations of armed conflict must be effectively addressed, and welcoming in this regard the adoption, in May 2000, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict;

RESOLVES: (...) 6. To urge those member states that have not yet done so to consider becoming Parties to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, which includes the participation of children in hostilities, as well as their recruitment into armed forces and armed groups."

For more information please contact the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Latin America Coalition, (Tel/fax: +595 21 66 16 56), or the International Secretariat (Tel: +44 207 226 0606).

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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