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Somalia: Children facing war crimes

The scale of war crimes affecting Somali children, including the systematic recruitment of child soldiers under 15 by armed Islamist groups, has been exposed in a new report by Amnesty International today.

‘In the line of fire: Somalia’s children under attack’ reveals the full impact on children of the on-going armed conflict. Children in Somalia are being recruited as child soldiers, denied access to education and killed or injured in indiscriminate attacks carried out in densely populated areas.

“Somalia is not only a humanitarian crisis: it is a human rights crisis and a children's crisis,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Africa.

“As a child in Somalia, you risk death all the time: you can be killed, recruited and sent to the frontline, punished by al-Shabab because you are caught listening to music or ‘wearing the wrong clothes’, be forced to fend for yourself because you have lost your parents or even die because you don’t have access to adequate medical care.”

“The humanitarian crisis facing children in Somalia is also the result of al-Shabab denying access to aid in the last couple of years.”

The report analyses more than 200 testimonies from Somali refugees, children and adults, in Kenya and Djibouti. Many cite the recruitment of children by armed groups as one of the reasons for fleeing southern and central Somalia.

Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government is on the UN list of shame as a party recruiting, using, killing and maiming children in armed conflict. It has committed to respect children’s rights but has yet to adopt any concrete measures to end the use of children by forces fighting on its side.

Education has suffered in Somalia because school buildings have been destroyed or damaged during indiscriminate attacks in urban areas. In Mogadishu, many schools have closed down as children and teachers fear being killed and injured on their way to school.

Al-Shabab, the main armed group opposed to the government, has imposed severe restrictions on the right to education, preventing some girls from attending school, banning certain subjects from being taught, or using schools to indoctrinate children into participating in fighting.

Al-Shabab is also using increasingly threatening recruitment methods, luring children with the promise of phones and money or conducting raids on schools or abductions in public areas.

Some children interviewed by Amnesty International witnessed teachers being killed during attacks on schools and reported that some girls were even forced into marriages with fighters.

A 13 year old girl from Mogadishu told Amnesty International:

“Al-Shabab came in one morning... They said to the teachers that all of the children should move out of class. There was a car waiting outside and they forced the children in. One teacher was killed because he refused to obey. He was brave, he was the one who was standing up for the rights of the girls.”

Children have been victims of floggings and witnessed other horrific human rights abuses, including stonings, amputations and killings carried out in public by armed Islamist groups. Children have also seen relatives and friends killed or tortured.

There is a high level of trauma among Somali refugees, including children, as a result of the human rights abuses they experienced or witnessed during the conflict.

The international community must expand specific protection measures for the rising number of Somali children separated from their families, and increase psychosocial support and education programmes for Somali children.

“This is a never-ending conflict, where children are experiencing unimaginable horrors on a daily basis,” said Michelle Kagari. “They risk becoming a lost generation if the world continues to ignore the war crimes affecting so many of them.”