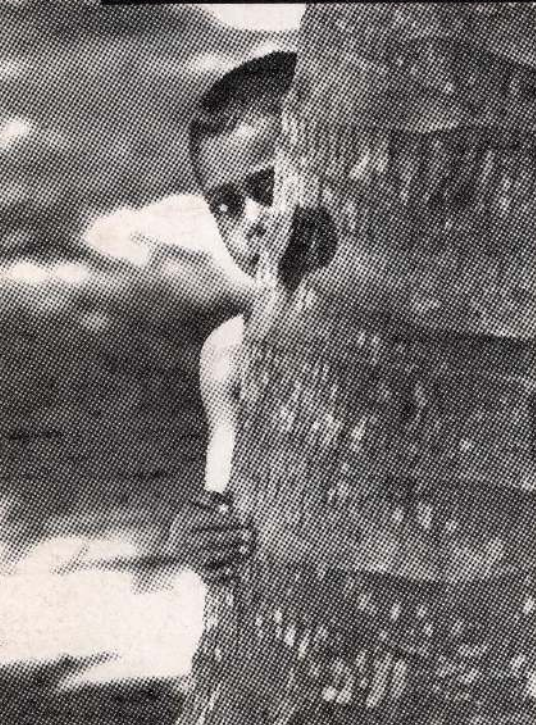




Children: Zones of Peace



**Donated in memory of
Mr. Arumugam Shanmuganathan &
Mrs. Parameswary Shanmuganathan
of Pitta Kotte, Sri Lanka.**

Children: Zones of Peace

A Call for Action

**Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Children
Affected by Armed Conflict in
Sri Lanka**

A Summary

May 1998

Who has prepared this *“Call for Action”* ?

This document represents the joint product of many people who, like you, are concerned about the impact of conflict on the children of Sri Lanka. So far, this *“call for action”* has taken five months to develop, and has involved over 80 consultation meetings with some 250 people in Colombo and all the main areas of the North and East affected by conflict. Consultations have included cabinet ministers, leaders of political parties, government officials at central and local levels, leaders and local clerics of the four major religions, leading academics, local and international NGOs, and local and community leaders.

The overall process has been guided by an informal “contact group” of 14 agencies and individuals representing humanitarian and child-related professions. Participation in this group is drawn from key government and UN agencies, Sri Lankan and international NGOs, and prominent individuals.

The process is still under way, the intention being to consult a diverse group of opinions at all levels of society, and get as wide a degree of ownership of the document as possible. The process has confirmed that, however divergent people’s views are on other issues, there is remarkable convergence of views on the issues of children affected by conflict.

This document is a summary version which has been prepared especially for the first public presentation of the *“call for action”* on the occasion of the visit to Sri Lanka of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on Children and Armed Conflict, Mr Olara Otunnu. The main document is still being developed as the consultations proceed.

Children as Zones of Peace

The concluding paragraph of a recent UN Report on the impact of armed conflict on children begins “*Let us claim children as ‘zones of peace’ ...*”. This document responds to this call, and further defines the concept of “children as zones of peace” as follows:

- *Children have the right to be protected from the effects of conflict*
- *Children have the right not to be used in conflict in any way*
- *Children have the right to be helped to recover from the effects of conflict*

This is not a new concept in Sri Lanka – the practice of observing “days of tranquillity” in conflict areas to allow the mass immunization of all children against polio demonstrates the principle that children should indeed be “zones of peace”. This “*call for action*” calls for this concept to be applied to the wide range of activities which need to be undertaken collectively and individually by all of us who are concerned about the present plight and future prospects of Sri Lanka’s children.

The Effects of Conflict on Children

Wars and conflicts violate every right of a child – the right to be with family and community, the right to be nurtured and protected, the right to develop a unique personality, the right to health, the right to education, sometimes even the right to life. Approximately 900,000 children in the North and East of Sri Lanka are directly affected by the current conflict. In addition, millions of children in the rest of the country are indirectly affected. An estimated 380,000 children have been displaced, many of them repeatedly, and currently up to 250,000 children remain displaced. In many areas, health services and schools have been severely disrupted. The incidence of communicable diseases, particularly malaria, is higher

in the North and East than in other parts of the country. With disease, displacement and the disruption of normal food supplies, comes malnutrition. Even where schools exist, they are overcrowded and understaffed, and non-attendance may be up to 40% of children enrolled. Thousands of children have lost one or both parents, many have witnessed acts of violence, and almost all have experienced fear and uncertainty. The Government and humanitarian agencies provide food and relief supplies to the displaced, but their delivery is often subject to delays or curtailment due to security considerations and logistic constraints. In many areas, children have known nothing but a world in conflict, and have grown up in an atmosphere where ethnic stereotyping and militancy prevail. Many have had to become active participants in the conflict. Girls and women have been abused and many, in their desperation, have had to succumb to sexual pressures to obtain privileges or favours. Landmines and unexploded ordnance claim several civilian victims every month, the majority of whom are children.

Conflict has already shattered the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in Sri Lanka. Disruption of the social infrastructure and primary relationships that are fundamental to a child's physical, emotional, moral, cognitive, social and spiritual development have serious implications, not only for the individual child, but for society as a whole.

The Right to Childhood

Yet, there is an even greater violation – *the loss of childhood itself*. Childhood is that period of our development before the responsibilities and worries of adulthood are thrust upon us. The experiences of childhood are often the defining factors in our adult nature. The child growing up in a conflict-affected environment has little time for carefree play and childhood pursuits, for friendships and solitude. The child all too soon becomes a little adult, with all the fears, worries, frustrations and prejudices of adulthood. These

may even tend to extremism, because the child lacks the alternative experiences and maturity that enables most adults to rationalise. When today's children become tomorrow's adults, the loss of a normal childhood may make it even harder for them to address the roots of conflict.

Contributing to Peace

This "*call for action*" calls for activities to protect and restore those hundreds of thousands of "childhoods" that are currently being lost. By adhering to the principles of "*children as zones of peace*" every day of our public and private lives, we will not only be protecting the right to childhood, but we will also be laying the building blocks for the only achievement that will ultimately protect our children – peace itself.

Children's Issues as Instruments of War

The principle that *children have the right not to be used in conflict in any way* not only applies to the direct involvement of children in the conflict, but also to the use of children's issues principally as a vehicle for denunciation of opponents. Such actions only tend to perpetuate conflict and the sufferings of children. In the words of the UN Report:

"...the impact of armed conflict on children is an area in which everyone shares responsibility and a degree of blame".

This "*call for action*" carefully avoids reference to any specific party to the conflict for any infringement of child rights. Likewise, *all parties adhering to this principle should refrain from using issues of children for propaganda purposes*. Rather, all parties are urged to consider what they can do within their own sphere of control and influence, to help children.

This requires the message of "*children as zones of peace*" to be taken to all parties by those who are not party to the conflict, who will also need to monitor adherence to these principles.

The Machel Report – a Common Basis for Action

Following UN General Assembly Resolution 48/157 of December 1993, Ms Graca Machel was appointed by the UN Secretary-General to undertake a study on the impact of armed conflicts on children. The *Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, often referred to as the Machel Report, was submitted to the fifty-first regular session of the United Nations General Assembly in November 1996.

The report comprehensively reviews the many ways in which children are affected by conflict and makes recommendations to improve their protection and care. As a global report endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations, calling upon governments, non-state parties, civil society and the international community, it provides *a common basis for action*. The underlying commitment to *all* children also reinforces its potential to contribute towards peace.

The ten key recommendations of the Machel Report cover peace and security, the monitoring and reporting of violations of child rights, health and psycho-social well-being, education, the needs of adolescents, gender-based violence, the needs of internally displaced children, child soldiers and landmines.

A Call for Action – Applying the Machel Report in Sri Lanka

This “*call for action*” transforms the Machel Report into a set of principles and recommended activities in the specific context of Sri Lanka. It calls on *all* of us to take action in line with these principles and to contribute to them in the best way that we can.

Each of us has a role to play, whether we are armed or civilian, partial or impartial, leader or follower, government or opposition,

public servant or private citizen, professional or artisan, man or woman, boy or girl. And we need to play this role not only in the performance of our duties, but also in our families and communities. To the question “what do you want me to do?”, this “*call for action*” replies “read this, and decide how best you can fulfill your responsibilities to protect the rights of children affected by conflict.”

This “*call for action*” is made on behalf of all children affected by conflict, including those far from the “front line” and those affected by all conflicts, past and present.

Specific Areas for Action

This “*call for action*” calls for activities in the following areas specified in the Machel Report. Specific activities are described in annex 1.

- To assist *internally displaced and unaccompanied children*, especially to prevent family separation.
- To sustain or restore *access to food, basic health services, water supply and sanitation* for children and women affected by conflict.
- To sustain and restore access *to education*.
- To *assist children psychologically affected by conflict*, from the extremes of loss of a family member and direct experience of violence, to the lower levels of stress and anxiety experienced by almost all children.
- To ensure unimpeded *access to humanitarian supplies and services* for children and women affected by conflict.
- To ensure that *no child under age 18 years is recruited for armed combat or related activities* to demobilize any already recruited and to rehabilitate them into society.

- To *prevent gender-based violence*.
- To mitigate and ultimately *eliminate the risk of landmines* injuring civilians, especially children, and provide for physical rehabilitation for injured children.
- To promote the process of *bringing national laws in line with international conventions* related to children, women and human rights, and to support the application of those laws.
- To conduct *communication and advocacy campaigns* and other activities to support the concept of “*children as zones of peace*”, and its associated principles and best practices.
- To *strengthen and/or establish permanent institutions and structures* within Government and civil society *to bring about the progressive realisation of children s rights*.

Conclusion

The following is the text of the final paragraph of the Machel report:

Let us claim children as “zones of peace”. In this way, humankind will finally declare that childhood is inviolate and that all children must be spared the pernicious effects of armed conflict. Children present us with a uniquely compelling motivation for mobilization. Universal concern for children presents new opportunities to confront the problems that cause their suffering. By focusing on children, politicians, Governments, the military and non-State entities will begin to recognize how much they destroy through armed conflict and, therefore, how little they gain. Let us take this opportunity to recapture our instinct to nourish and protect children. Let us transform our moral outrage into concrete action. Our children have a right to peace. Peace is every child’s right.

Principles and Best Practices to Achieve Children as Zones of Peace

Internally Displaced Children

Principle:

- *Ensure that children are evacuated with the family unit intact. Subsequent separation of children from families should be avoided to the extent possible.*

Best practices:

1. Ensure the identification a) of families with children and b) of unaccompanied children at centres for displaced people, and give priority to their survival and protection needs.
2. Identify and address as a priority the special needs of infants, pre-school children, pregnant and lactating mothers, and female or child-headed families.
3. Provide a “family relief package” to newly displaced families, including essential shelter material, sleeping mats, cooking and other household utensils.
4. Take special measures to protect unaccompanied children against sexual violence, discrimination in distribution of relief, and recruitment into armed forces.
5. Family tracing programmes to reunite unaccompanied children with their families.
6. Provide temporary alternative care for unaccompanied children until a family-based solution is found.
7. Take special measures to restore lost identity documents (birth certificates, ID cards, etc) of children.
8. At time of resettlement to place of origin or new home, provide a “family resettlement package”, including assistance for building/re-building house and latrine, essential household utensils and implements for food production, and economic activities.
9. At time of resettlement, provide a “community resettlement package”, addressing repair of basic infrastructure, access roads, bridges, water supply, etc.
10. Give priority to internally displaced children in all other activities described under sections on health, nutrition, education and psychosocial recovery.

Health and Nutrition

Principles:

- *Ensure a basic minimum of preventive and curative health care, with priority for children, pregnant and lactating mothers.*
- *As "normal" services are unlikely in times of conflict, innovative and flexible solutions are needed.*

Best practices:

1. Maintain and rehabilitate basic preventive health systems and services, safe water supply and sanitation, including reproductive health, safe motherhood, the promotion of breastfeeding and immunization.
2. Maintain and rehabilitate basic curative services, with emphasis on the major health problems being experienced by children and women.
3. Treat and rehabilitate injured children, particularly the victims of landmines.
4. Monitor health and nutrition indicators, and survey the needs of conflict-affected populations.
5. Train established and emergency cadres of health personnel and volunteers, adapted where necessary to overcome unusual circumstances.
6. Ensure basic support for the functioning of health personnel in conflict-affected areas.
7. Advocate to all parties to avoid damage to health institutions and protect the health system from the effects of conflict.
8. Promote "days of tranquillity" and "corridors of peace" through which all parties to conflict allow the delivery of essential health services.
9. Provide timely and equitable food relief to families unable to produce or purchase adequate food, especially food appropriate for young children of weaning age.
10. Ensure access to agricultural and fishing inputs, including implements and seeds and methods of pest control.

Education

Principles:

- *Support for education should be a priority component of all humanitarian assistance.*
- *Education is both a basic right and an essential component of normality for the child.*

Best practices:

1. Maintain and rehabilitate education systems.
2. Facilitate alternative systems and structures for education on a temporary basis where necessary, involving the community as far as possible.

3. Train "teacher volunteers" to help out where trained teachers are inadequate.
4. Ensure children have access to school even when their identification has been lost.
5. Ensure all children have free uniforms, immediately replace uniforms lost in displacement; ensure no discrimination against children temporarily without a uniform.
6. Ensure access to schoolbooks, and provide other educational inputs as required.
7. Train and provide materials for teachers, especially in "catch-up" approaches (remedial teaching) for children whose schooling has been interrupted.
8. Train teachers to recognize and respond to stress in children.
9. Train and provide materials for teachers to include "new" material such as child rights, landmine awareness, etc.
10. Train and provide materials for teachers to hold classes in "education for peace" and "education for conflict resolution".
11. Develop "child-to-child" peace-related activities, such as exchange visits, sports, drama, poetry and essay competitions, "pen-pal" schemes, ethnically mixed pre-schools, etc.
12. Take special measures to include adolescents in the above where applicable.
13. Support for pre-schools, especially for play and other stress-reducing approaches.
14. Promote "days of tranquillity" and "corridors of peace" to permit children and adolescents to enrol in school, take examinations, etc.

Promotion of psycho-social recovery and social reintegration

Principles:

- *The best place for the child is with the family and community. Approaches which are based on family, community, local culture and traditions are the most successful.*
- *Institutionalisation of children into "homes" benefits only a few, and should therefore be reserved for the worst affected children while attempts to find a family or community-based solution continue.*
- *Programmes should focus on restoring as much of a sense of normality for the child as possible. Programmes based mainly on counselling can only serve a few as they are heavily dependent on skills and trained personnel which are rarely available.*

Best practices:

1. Revive the pre-existing social care systems.
2. Integrate psychosocial recovery considerations into all programmes.

3. Foster natural healing processes through re-establishing normality as soon as possible, such as participation in school, family duties, community duties, play and sports.
4. Ensure a special focus on adolescents, involving them in community-based relief and rehabilitation activities.
5. Encourage appropriate employment opportunities for school-leavers.
6. Support counselling for acutely traumatised children and adolescents where feasible.

Access to Humanitarian Supplies

Principles:

- *The passage and distribution of humanitarian supplies should be allowed unhindered, and should be actively facilitated.*
- *Where security considerations might appear to conflict with the above principle, appropriate decisions should be taken at a level which is competent to assess the humanitarian implications.*
- *Humanitarian supplies should only be used for the humanitarian purpose intended.*

Best practices:

1. Review humanitarian items exempt from any embargo.
2. Oversee and facilitate their free and speedy delivery where needed.
3. Streamline mechanisms for the speedy issuing of permits and for considering the representations of humanitarian agencies.
4. Monitor the impact on vulnerable groups of constraints to free access to and speedy delivery of humanitarian supplies.
5. Train staff involved in ensuring the free passage and the prompt and equitable distribution of humanitarian supplies.

Child Soldiers

Principles:

- *In accordance with the Children's Charter of Sri Lanka, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child who has not attained the age of eighteen years should not take a direct part in hostilities.*
- *A child who has not attained the age of eighteen years should not be recruited for purposes of combat or selected activities.*

Best practices:

1. Advocate with those engaged in recruitment and the general public for adherence to eighteen years as the minimum age of recruitment.

2. Where a combatant is suspected to be below the minimum age, permit legitimate enquiries by authorities and other bodies with a mandate for human and child rights.
3. Develop mechanisms and skills for staff of IDP centres, schools, clinics, etc., to identify, assist and refer children showing signs of trauma from their participation as combatants.
4. Give priority to former child combatants to be reunited with their families and to return to school as soon as possible.
5. Families of former child soldiers to be given a “peace package” of implements, seeds, utensils, material for school uniform and other items for the child’s welfare and reintegration into society.
6. Advocate for any resolution of the conflict to include specific measures for any child combatants to be demobilized and rehabilitated into society.

Protection and Recovery from Sexual Exploitation and Gender-Based Violence

Principles:

- *Even in times of conflict, suspected perpetrators of sexual exploitation and violence should be subject to the full force of the law.*
- *Victims of sexual exploitation and violence should be guaranteed anonymity and be assisted to recover physically and psychologically.*
- *Prevention measures should be undertaken to reduce the risks of sexual exploitation and violence.*

Best practices:

1. Integrate reproductive health and psychosocial needs of pregnant women and girls into relief and rehabilitation programmes.
2. Ensure the security of vulnerable women and girls in camps and welfare centres.
3. Establish mechanisms to support victims, including counselling and other psychosocial services.
4. Establish clear mechanisms for reporting incidents, including the pursuit of appropriate legal and rehabilitative actions.
5. Train all armed forces, civilian personnel and the public in awareness and practical skills relating to the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.

Landmines

Principles:

- *The ultimate goal remains for all parties to conflict in Sri Lanka to abide by the International Treaty to Ban Anti-Personnel Mines.*
- *In the meantime, parties to the conflict should avoid laying landmines in areas most likely to be frequented at any stage in the future by children and vulnerable groups.*

Best practices:

1. Clear marking of mined areas.
2. Mine clearance operations in areas accessible by civilians.
3. Mine awareness campaigns, especially targeted to women and children.
4. Support for community-based rehabilitation of child victims, both physical and psychosocial.
5. Advocate for areas around schools, playgrounds, wells and other centres of community activity to be protected from mine-laying activity as an interim measure until a total ban is agreed.
6. Advocate to end all use of anti-personnel mines in Sri Lanka.

Legislation and Standards

1. Bring national law in line with international conventions.
2. Provide education in human rights and humanitarian law for personnel in armed forces, security personnel and providers of social services.
3. Establish systems for the reporting and verification of violations of rights, and for the provision of legal assistance.
4. Incorporate rights education in all educational activities.
5. Support civil society and NGOs to disseminate knowledge on rights.
6. Promote commitments by non-state entities on humanitarian and human rights law.

Communication and Advocacy

Principles:

- *Public communication and advocacy are essential components of all activities related to “children as zones of peace”.*
- *Public communication and advocacy should be non-partisan, focusing on raising concern and promoting action, without assigning blame.*
- *Communication and advocacy on specific cases should normally be done directly and discreetly with the party or parties concerned.*

Best practices:

1. Develop a comprehensive communication and advocacy strategy for all the activities described above.
2. Conduct public communication and advocacy activities in support of the specific principles and best practices described above.
3. Conduct public communication and advocacy activities of a more holistic nature, raising general public awareness and concern on the plight of children affected by armed conflict and raising public support for the concept of ***“children as zones of peace”***.
4. Conduct discreet communication and advocacy activities directly with parties concerned where there are specific constraints to upholding the principles or implementing the best practices of ***“children as zones of peace”***.

Institutional Structures and Mechanisms

Principles:

- *Existing structures and mechanisms in government, civil society and among NGOs should be utilised and supported wherever possible. New or parallel structures and mechanisms should only be considered where it is clear that existing arrangements are inadequate.*
- *A representative body should be responsible for the overall promotion and monitoring associated with the concept of ***“children as zones of peace”***.*
- *Such a body should be part of an overall national framework for promoting and monitoring the Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

Proposed activities:

1. *As no overarching national structure or mechanism for the promotion and monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a whole currently exists, the design and establishment of such a structure and its associated mechanisms.*
2. *Design and establish an overarching national structure or mechanism for the promotion and monitoring of the concept of ***“children as zones of peace”*** and its associated principles and best practices.*
3. *Establish information systems covering the Convention on the Rights of the Child in general, and children affected by armed conflict in particular.*

Annex 2

Informal “Contact Group” on Children as Zones of Peace

The participants are members of the following organizations and agencies:

Child Protection Authority

Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies

International Committee of the Red Cross

Lanka Jathika Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya

National Monitoring Committee on the Children’s Charter

Redd Barna

Save the Children Fund (UK)

United Nations Children’s Fund

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

United Nations Population Fund

United Nations Resident Coordinator

University of Colombo, Faculty of Law

World Food Programme

World Health Organization

Children as Zones of Peace:

- *Children have the right to be protected from the effects of conflict*
- *Children have the right not to be used in conflict in any way*
- *Children have the right to be helped to recover from the effects of conflict*

A Call for Action:

- *to fulfill our responsibilities, individually and collectively, to protect the rights of children affected by conflict*