

Pity the children

David Southall calls on the United Nations to establish an international police force to protect the youngest victims of war

On 30 July three doctors were called to the village of Ribane, 30km from Pristina, a town in eastern Kosovo. More than 100 civilians had reached this village from the forest of Berisha, into which they had been driven from their homes by military attacks.

These people were attempting to live in one house. All were women and children. Three of the children were suffering frequent seizures. Their medicines to prevent fits had been lost during displacement from their homes. There were two new-born babies who had been born in the forest and who were still wrapped in their mothers' shirts. While attending to a woman who had been severely wounded, a nine-year-old girl named Hana called to the doctors. Terrified, and in a state of shock, the little girl couldn't speak clearly and she refused to look the doctors in the face.

"I saw his brain in the grass..." she kept repeating. "They set my home on fire. I can't go back there... I'll never see my father any more. I'll never have a home. I just want to die. My brother is missing. I want to die."

It is to protect children like this nine year old that the United Nations must set up an International Child Protection Force (ICPF), an apolitical international armed body dedicated to children in war zones.

War crimes are no different from any other violent crime. In many countries police officers play an invaluable role in protecting children from abuse in the home; an international police force could adopt a similar approach to crimes committed as part of armed conflict.

The force, whose brief would be based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, would have to be guaranteed access to all areas of the country affected by the conflict and allowed to protect all children – regardless of their ethnic, religious or political affiliation. The force must also be allowed a military response when a school, a hospital or a family house in a village is targeted or

used to launch offensives. And it must be allowed to transfer medicines, food, clean water and sanitation systems through the front lines of conflict and protect humanitarian aid workers.

The need for such a force has never been greater. During armed conflicts over the past ten years, two million children have been killed and four million seriously injured. Many more have been orphaned, traumatised and made homeless.

Children are not infrequently tortured during armed conflict. This can occur as part of collective punishment or specific punishment of parents. Sexual abuse is also widespread, particularly in "ethnic" conflicts, where it may form part of a deliberate policy. The consequences of sexual abuse are well documented and include death, HIV infection, other sexually transmitted diseases, suicide, abortion without anaesthesia or antisepsis, genital injuries which may lead to permanent infertility, and the ultimate insult, rejection by the community.

Young children who survive direct injury but end up displaced by conflict often succumb to malnutrition, gastroenteritis, acute respiratory infection, malaria and measles. Children in such circumstances also suffer from psychological trauma and from partially treated wounds.

What are the potential pitfalls with this approach? The first relates to the question of sovereignty. States could argue

that it is their responsibility to protect their own children. In an armed conflict within states, the UN Security Council would have to grant a mandate to the child protection force to intervene.

A second issue is that local militia might base themselves within schools, hospitals and private homes in order to launch their own offensives. A first task of the protection force would therefore be to locate itself within some of the places where numbers of children congregate, thereby preventing such incursions. This would be particularly important in camps for refugees and internally displaced people. Such places would have to be demilitarised, except for arms carried by the protection force.

Third, this would be dangerous work and it is likely that members of the protection force would be targeted by some of the warring factions bent on terrorism as a means to drive out families and take land or resources for themselves.

Finally, the protection force would need to confront the issue of child soldiers. Children make excellent soldiers: they are small, inconspicuous, expendable, easily indoctrinated and terrorised into acts of extreme conflict. They can manage lightweight assault weapons, such as the AK-47 – a cheap (£4 each) and ubiquitous (there are 55 million worldwide) rifle. It is estimated that there are 200,000 child soldiers under 16 involved in conflicts around the world. Many have been kidnapped or sold to

armed factions by starving families. The protection force would have to determine whether these child soldiers had been forced to participate in conflict, and whether to attempt to liberate them.

An International Child Protection Force would serve to limit the impact of armed conflict; with enough support worldwide it might also help to prevent it.

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