

Clipping #3 – DiSec Topic A

Day of African Child spotlights continental children's many emergencies

UNNews Centre, 16 June 2005 – On the Day of the African Child today, marking the South African apartheid Government's shooting of children marching for improved education in 1976, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) highlighted the deprivation still suffered by African children as funding lags far behind need.

"The worst funding gaps affect countries that are recovering from or in the midst of civil conflict. None of these countries are in the headlines, but their situations are dire and require urgent attention," Dan Toole, UNICEF's Director of Emergency Programmes, said. "In every one of these countries women and children suffer first and suffer the longest."

In addition, some countries in East Africa have suffered from years of drought and crop failure, leading to under-nourishment in children, UNICEF said.

The five countries with the least funded recurring emergencies are Angola, with 14 per cent of need funded, Liberia (18 per cent), Burundi (19 per cent), Guinea (20 per cent) and Eritrea (24 per cent), it said.

Although rich in natural resources, Angola, in the aftermath of a 27-year civil war, has the third worst child mortality rate in the world and almost one-third of its children are malnourished, UNICEF said.

After 15 years of civil conflict in Liberia, over 11,800 child soldiers have been disarmed in the last two years, "but there is a chronic shortfall in funds to effectively reintegrate them to society. The most acute need in money for schooling," UNICEF said.

The half a million Liberian children who missed years of schooling need accelerated learning programmes, it added.

The eight-year conflict in Burundi entailed recruiting child soldiers. Now malnutrition among children hovers above 50 per cent and only half the country's children are enrolled in school, UNICEF said.

Guinea is suffering from the spill-over effects of armed conflicts in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, forcing large numbers of Guineans to flee their homes for under-resourced camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).

Five years of widespread drought and crop failures in Eritrea have left 2.3 million people in need of food aid, including 300,000 pregnant women and children. "Natural disasters tend to be better-funded than countries undermined by long standing civil unrest, but the exception to this rule is Eritrea," Mr. Toole said.

Ethiopia, similarly hit by drought, has so far only reached 32 per cent of its target for this year, UNICEF said.

Despite making headlines around the world for the almost 2 million people who have fled to IDP camps offering little protection from further attack and who have missed two successive planting seasons, Sudan's Darfur crisis has only reached 30 per cent of its emergency target for this year, it added.

Other African countries that have failed to garner 50 per cent of the target for emergency funding this year are Central African Republic (17 per cent), Congo-Brazzaville (7), Côte d'Ivoire (18), Malawi (0), Uganda (48) and Tanzania (16), UNICEF said.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict (CAAC), Olara Otunnu, said that at a special Day of the African Child meeting on Saturday of the UN African Mothers Association (UNAMA) he particularly addressed the children of African diplomats and UN employees, telling them that everywhere he had travelled across the continent, parents wanted peace and education for their children.

He challenged the children to use their privileged status in the United States to educate themselves as extensively as possible, to learn subjects of which African children on the continent often only dreamed, and to become ambassadors for the continent, answering questions about any culture and any country.

Only a few hands went up when he asked how many could speak their parents' languages, Mr. Otunnu said. He advised the children to take seriously their parents' appeals to learn those languages, in addition to the national official languages, so as not to be excluded from their own societies when they returned home.

UN mission in Afghanistan welcomes handing up of weapons by electoral candidates

UNNews Centre, 21 June 2005 – The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has welcomed the news that several candidates are handing up their weapons so as to qualify under electoral law to run for seats in the lower house of the National Assembly, called the Wolesi Jirga, and in the provincial councils.

The electoral law forbids people who command or belong to armed groups from running for public office because the majority of Afghans feel that broad disarmament is needed to ensure the fairness of the election and to prevent a return to violence in the country, UNAMA said yesterday.

"UNAMA therefore joins the government and the electoral authorities in appealing to all those candidates that are still in possession of weapons and ammunition to cooperate with the security agencies by voluntarily handing over their weapons at the designated collection point in each province," it said.

The Government of Afghanistan launched the new phase in the overall disarmament campaign on Sunday of last week, with the support of the UN and international forces, UNAMA said.

World must do more to protect civilians in armed conflict, Security Council told

UNNews Centre, 21 June 2005 – There is little hope of stopping the deliberate targeting of civilians and relief workers in armed conflict without the political will to tackle impunity, provide reliable crisis funding and devise better ways to report rights violations, the United Nations Emergency Coordinator said today.

At the core of the challenge is the changing nature of warfare: increasingly, civilians – including humanitarian workers – often are not just random, incidental victims of conflict, but targets of it, Jan Egeland told reporters after he briefed the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Indeed, with the numbers of killings, rapes and kidnappings on the rise, it's "far more dangerous today to be a civilian than a soldier," he said.

Adopting a presidential statement at the end of the meeting, the Council, expressing its "grave concern" about the limited progress on the ground to ensure the effective civilian protection, invited

the Secretary-General to recommend in his next report ways to better address persisting and emerging challenges in the evolving peacekeeping environment.

"Upon receipt of the report, the Council expresses its intention to take further action to strengthen and enhance the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including, if necessary, a possible resolution in this regard," the statement said.

During his briefing, Mr Egeland said that brutal and indiscriminate tactics of terror continue to be deliberately employed in the world's most protracted protection crises. He listed a raft of alarming trends, from the unchallenged use of sexual violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the re-recruitment of child soldiers in Liberia, to the massive forced displacement in Colombia and the rise of sectarian violence in Iraq.

"Imagine the quality of life for those that are caught in these cycles of violence living in constant terror," Mr. Egeland said. "This has an enduring impact on individuals and tears the very fabric of society. Such endemic violence cannot continue. We have a responsibility to find better solutions to these intractable situations."

To better protect civilians, address displacement and the needs of children, and end sexual violence, he said the world must fight impunity by supporting the International Criminal Court and strengthening national judicial systems; include the protection of civilians in all peacekeeping mandates; strengthen engagement with regional and intergovernmental organizations; and improve humanitarian funding.

Mr. Egeland told reporters that the situation of civilians caught in the crossfire in conflicts around the world was "bleak." He also highlighted the increasing dangers faced by humanitarian workers, saying that 12 colleagues had been lost in Afghanistan since his last briefing to the Council in December, and at least five had been killed in Sudan's troubled Darfur region. Scores more have been kidnapped or detained. "This has to stop," he said.

Child's view of Burma's civil war

The Christian Science Monitor, 22 June 2005 – In a jungle encampment, 9-year-old Saw and his 12-year-old brother, Paw, were trained to kill. They learned to plant land mines, reload rifles, and carefully fill homemade grenades. The brothers were forced to fight alongside as many as 70,000 other children in Burma, the Southeast Asian country also known as Myanmar, which is thought to have one of the largest number of child soldiers in the world.

Last September, Saw and Paw managed to escape through the jungle to a temporary orphanage on the Thai side of the border. They live with hundreds of other children, orphans of the 50-plus years of civil war between the Burmese military government and an ethnic tribe of 5 million people called the Karen.

In the noisy orphanage, surrounded by rambling slums, children elbow around low wooden tables for lunch. Saw and Paw scoop handfuls of rice and cabbage into their mouths. Rarely smiling, they keep their heads low and move carefully among the throngs of kids scrambling to wash plates under a running tap.

The orphanage sits on the outskirts of the Thai border city Mae Sot. It is meant to house 80 children, but almost 300 live here, and more arrive at its rusted roadside gate each day.

Origins of the guerrilla war

The civil war in eastern Burma began in 1948 as a Karen war of independence. In 1988, after a violent pro-democracy uprising, thousands of students from across Burma joined the renowned

Karen fighters in the hopes of taking down the Burmese regime. Now the Karen say they are fighting for "freedom and democracy," not just for their people, but for the whole of Burma.

But the struggle has devolved into a war of self-preservation for the Karen, fought guerrilla-style in the thick jungles. Every month reports trickle out of Burmese troops descending on tribal Karen villages. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Burmese soldiers burn down schools and churches, publicly rape women, and force men into wooden stocks or shoot them on sight. For years, children from the region have been fleeing east toward the relative safety of Thailand.

'They caught us'

On the uneven wooden steps of the orphanage, Saw and Paw tell their story in Karen, interpreted by Kwa Lwinn, a teacher who fled from the Burmese army 10 years ago, when he was 14.

"We lived with our family - mother, father, and baby sister - in our village," Saw says. He is less guarded than his older brother and does most of the talking. "The soldiers came and started to attack. They burned our school, our rice barn, our church, and our house. Our baby sister died when they threw a mortar into our house." The homemade grenades of the Burmese army can destroy a bamboo hut like a sledge hammer on a teacup, leaving bits of bamboo embedded in the arms and legs of many orphans here. "The army shot at girls and women; we tried to run away, but they caught us."

As the boys talk, other children begin to crowd around, nodding and fidgeting.

Saw, Paw, and four other captured boys were led in chains to a Burmese army base camp. As they filed through the jungle in silence, they say two boys had to walk in front - as if they were human minesweepers. "At night we would sleep on the rocks.... There was always a soldier with a gun pointed at us," Saw says.

Burmese soldiers made them sing propaganda songs, taught them to use rifles, and forced them to assist on daily raids of Karen villages.

Cease-fires and sanctions

The civil war in eastern Burma is one of the longest running in the world. In colonial times, British rulers favored the Karen minority. Some British officers are said to have promised the Karen an independent state in exchange for their help in fighting the Japanese in World War II, historians say.

But in 1948, the British handed over power to the Burmans - longtime enemies of the Karen. Now, local humanitarian relief organizations say that every year between 3,000 and 10,000 Karen are killed in the fighting. The Karen do fight back, but their ragtag army of 7,000 is grossly underequipped compared with Burma's army, 350,000 strong.

Last year, the Karen National Union made a verbal cease-fire agreement with Burma's army. But human rights groups based in Mae Sot report that there have been more than 200 attacks on Karen villages in the past year.

Burma's army has battled other rebel groups as well, eventually reaching official cease-fire agreements with many of them. The government insists that the country must be united to prosper.

But the United States and many European nations have imposed strict sanctions on the Burmese regime and downgraded diplomatic relations. In December the British House of Lords confirmed that two humanitarian teams found evidence of genocide against the Karen.

Sen. Mitch McConnell (R) of Kentucky describes the war as the "gratuitous use of military force against ethnic minorities." In a speech on the Senate floor, Senator McConnell said "the evidence is overwhelming that the junta exploits children as young as 11 years old in pursuit of greater coercive military power."

The jungle's underground railroad

"We wanted to run away, but other children who were caught running were killed," Saw continues. Early one morning, with no explanation, the soldiers released Saw and Paw on the roadside. They didn't know how to find their family, who had gone into hiding in the jungle - as have about 700,000 other Karen. But via an improvised network of Karen women, akin to an underground railroad, the boys were escorted to the Thai border and given directions to the orphanage.

"We get children all the time. Morning, afternoon, evening - they come by foot, by boat. Word of this orphanage is beginning to travel in the Karen area," says headmistress Paw-Ray. The orphanage is called Ksaw Thoo Lei (pronounced Shaw-Too-Lay), the Karen name for the land they believe is rightfully theirs inside Burma. It means "land without evil."

Fifteen-year-old Mae's story is typical: "My mother stepped on a land mine. She died," she says. "The Burmese army burned down our fields. Our father was too poor to care for the children."

Mae trekked for four days to Thailand last spring, the dry season when most of the children arrive here. Along the way, she met other children - some orphaned, some injured by land mines. At the border, they hid for two days and built a boat to cross the river. "We want to be someone whose life has meaning," Mae says.

In the kindergarten room, 3- and 4-year-olds recite Karen poetry. Later, the toddlers wash their clothes at a spigot behind their bamboo dorm.

After lunch, an adolescent girl missing an eye sweeps out the kitchen. Younger children pile sacks of rice against a wall. Teenagers on crutches play soccer on a rutted, dusty field. These children say they fled their villages with only the clothes they wore and a day's worth of rice, often carrying siblings on their backs.

Child soldiers

Karen troops trek through the eastern mountains equipped with grenades and rusted rifles, tracking down Burmese soldiers. The odds are long, but the Karen fighters are more familiar with harsh jungle landscape, more adept at primitive living, and fiercely protective of their homeland. Karen patriotism is celebrated in song and lore, studied in Karen schools, and reiterated each time a mother or teacher is killed by the Burmese army.

Human rights groups say that Burma's army has been the worst offender in terms of forcing children to become soldiers. But they have faulted some opposition groups for this as well. Some estimates put the number of child soldiers in opposition groups at about 7,000, compared with an estimate of 70,000 in the national army, according to a report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

The armed wing of the Karen National Union has set 18 as the minimum age for recruitment, but it has been known to accept younger volunteers. In 2002, Human Rights Watch estimated that this group had up to 500 child soldiers.

For now, the children at the orphanage are safe, but their future is uncertain. They are not allowed to take jobs in Thailand. "They will live their life as non-citizens, essentially nonpersons," says Elizabeth Kirton, head of the United Nations office in Mae Sot.

Many children who cross the border are trafficked into prostitution or are forced to turn wages over to "agents" who place them in shadowy jobs.

"I crossed into Thailand at 16," says 21-year-old Lylia. "An agent promised to get me a job but sold me to a restaurant in southern Thailand." Lylia says she has been deported to Burma six times and has endured rape and torture by Burmese soldiers across the border. Her children are hiding in Thailand, and she's avoided going to see them because she's afraid they'll be caught.

Dreaming of victory

In the evening at Ksaw Thoo Lei, the children gather their clothes from the clothesline and fold them under their blankets. Mr. Kwa plays a guitar and young boys scramble to their places on the floor. As brothers Saw and Paw bed down, Kwa asks them what they will dream about. "I dream of being a soldier for the Karen army," Paw says. "I want to be a general for the Karen," echoes Saw.

G8 arms exports fuel poverty, say campaigners

Reuters, 22 June 2005 - The G8 group of industrialised nations is undermining its commitment to reduce global poverty by exporting arms to the world's poorest and most conflict-ridden countries, a report said on Wednesday.

The research, published by campaign groups on the eve of a G8 foreign ministers meeting in London, says the Group includes the world's five biggest arms exporters and accounts for 84 percent of global arms exports.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has pledged to tackle African poverty during Britain's presidency of the G8 this year but campaigners say G8 countries' actions do not match the rhetoric.

"How can G8 commitments to end poverty and injustice be taken seriously if some of the governments are undermining peace and stability by approving arms transfers to repressive regimes, regions of extreme conflict or countries who can ill afford them," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

The report accuses the G8 of exporting weapons to Sudan, Myanmar, the Republic of Congo, Colombia and the Philippines.

Amnesty, aid agency Oxfam and the International Action Network on Small Arms, which jointly released the report, want a global arms trade treaty to curb the sale of conventional weapons which they say kill a person every minute.

Britain, which lobby groups say is the world's second biggest arms exporter, backs the idea of a treaty and Foreign Minister Jack Straw will put it to foreign ministers at Thursday's meeting which he is hosting.

"The idea is in its early stages ... it will get an early airing on Thursday and I am not sure how it will go," said a senior British official.

Campaigners acknowledge it will be difficult to convince the United States, the world's biggest arms exporter, but say Cambodia, Costa Rica, Finland, Ghana, Iceland, Kenya, Mali, New Zealand, Senegal and Tanzania back the idea.

Worldwide arms deliveries were worth about \$28.7 billion in 2003, according to the report.

G8 nations apart from the United States and Britain include Italy, France, Japan, Germany, Canada and Russia.

UN highlights Brazil gun crisis

BBC News, 27 June 2005 - More than 500,000 people have been killed by firearms in Brazil between 1979 and 2003, according to a new report by the United Nations. The study found that there were more gun-related killings in Brazil than in most war zones.

Guns are the single biggest cause of death among young people in the Latin American nation, the organisation says. The UN has urged lawmakers to approve plans for a referendum in October on whether to ban the sale of firearms.

Disarmament gains

The UN and disarmament groups are using shocking statistics to put pressure on Brazil's parliamentarians. The report's headline figure is that more than half a million Brazilians died from gun-inflicted injuries in the past 24 years. That is more than four times the number of deaths recorded in the Arab-Israeli conflict during the past 50 years. Nearly half of those who died in Brazil were aged between 15 and 24.

The government wants to stage a referendum on whether to ban the sale of guns. For the poll to go ahead in October, lawmakers must approve the plan by the end of this month. In the face of heavy lobbying by Brazil's arms industry, a parliamentary vote on the matter has been postponed several times.

More positively, the government argues there is a public mood for change. Recent legislation puts strict limits on the number of people authorised to carry guns. Over the past year, more than 300,000 weapons have been handed into the police in return for cash as part of a pioneering disarmament scheme.

UN refugee agency fears for Darfur children

Reuters, 27 June 2005 - The world was not paying enough attention to the plight of children in Sudan's west Darfur, where many were forced to join armed groups or were separated from their families, the U.N. refugee agency said on Monday.

"The whole issue of child protection is one that deserves more focus," said Erika Feller, director of international protection at the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

She said that international awareness was high about the continuing problems of sexual violence and rape facing women and female children amongst the refugee populations forced to flee violence in the vast western region of Sudan.

But less was known about the other dangers facing children.

"I met mothers who told me that their children had been abducted and that they had not seen them for months," she told a news conference following her return from the region.

"Others told me of forced recruitment ... about problems associated with the traumas of children who had lost their families," she added.

International donors had been generous when it came to providing food or shelter for the some two million people in Darfur forced to flee their homes to escape civil war.

But the UNHCR's protection activities in west Darfur were seriously underfunded, with only some 10 percent raised of the \$31 million sought for 2005, she said.

Without more cash, the UNHCR would be unable to carry out plans to send more staff into outlying areas where their very presence often acted as a deterrent to violence, she added.

Nepal's children forced to fight

The Christian Science Monitor, 28 June 2005 - When Maoist forces broke into the house of farmer Pasang Sherpa in eastern Nepal, they were looking for one thing: an able body. They took Mr. Sherpa's 15-year-old son, Pemba.

Pasang was told that Pemba would be sent to the Dolpa district in far-western Nepal, so that he could serve in the "great people's war." But Pemba never made it to Dolpa. Only two months after his abduction last year, he was killed in his home district in a confrontation with the Army.

"He died without even understanding what Maoism means," says a tearful Pasang. "Pemba was a virtuous boy. He used to help me till land," he adds.

Forced recruitment of children has now become widespread in Nepal's remote hills, with the introduction some months ago of what the Maoists call "Whole-timers," or WTs. In rural regions under the rebel thumb, every family must send one member as a WT to aid the rebels' cause. The job often falls to the most dispensable family member - usually a child.

Both the Maoists and the Army have involved children in their bloody nine-year war. The Maoists, who are trying to overthrow the monarchy, control 75 percent of the country's territory - most everything but cities, towns, and district headquarters. They have set up their own courts and systems of taxation and governance. Over 8,000 children have been orphaned and tens of thousands displaced in a conflict that has claimed over 12,000 lives. The Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) has caused two-thirds of the deaths, according to INSEC, a human rights organization.

Fighting between the Army and rebels exploded over the weekend in western Nepal, reports Agence France-Presse. An Army spokesman claimed that more than 60 insurgents may have been killed in clashes that began when rebels attacked an Army checkpoint.

To escape Maoist atrocities, people with means continue to flee Nepal's hills en masse to the kingdom's relatively safer lowlands and cities, and to neighboring India. This has depleted the recruitment pool of adults for Maoists, making them turn to children.

Child rights organizations here say that it is not only the Maoists who abuse children, however. Many of the children who survive state bullets by surrendering to the RNA are then used as informers or porters by Army units. Army spokesperson Brig. Gen. Dipak Gurung denies the charge. "We hand over children to organizations volunteering to support them," he says.

But Nepal's Army does not have a clean human rights record. Wayward soldiers have raped minors and have shot at school buildings, killing students. Cases of extrajudicial detention of children have also surfaced recently. On March 14, Ram Lal Tharu, 13, was released from the Banke district prison, in western Nepal, after a court issued his release order. Tharu had been arrested on June 25, on charges that he posed a "grave threat" to peace and security.

In a bid to weaken the rebels, the government announced a general amnesty in 2003 to those who surrender. State-owned Nepal Television has been broadcasting interviews of former rebels in

programs designed to persuade disillusioned guerrillas to surrender and to spread an anti-Maoist message in rural Nepal. A significant number of the interviewees are children.

According to one estimate, the number of children under 18 in Nepal's Maoist insurgency makes up 25 to 30 percent of its total strength, and young girls are a significant presence in the ranks. Total rebel numbers are believed to be around 10,000.

"Until some months ago, rebels used children only as messengers, porters, cooks, and cultural troops," says Tarak Dhital, program coordinator of Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN), a nongovernmental organization working for child rights. "More recently, children are being used as soldiers. Most of the Maoist combatants who have surrendered ... are teenagers," he adds.

CWIN estimates that 405 children under 18, including 115 girls, have been killed in the conflict so far. But in a war where keeping count of the dead is difficult, identifying or guessing the age of the dead is a tall order. "There aren't figures out there, says Hrothgar Stibbon of International Committee of Red Cross. "There is only a war."

Children at war, children on the run

The Baltimore Sun, 28 June 2005 - Freddie Deichi speaks in a hoarse murmur when he describes the day he was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal rebel militia of young boys, girls and grown men fighting the government in northern Uganda.

It was two years ago. Freddie was 7 years old at the time. His father, Daniel Wani, his mother, Josephine Abua, and his six siblings had fled to northern Uganda to escape the war in southern Sudan.

They were living in a refugee camp in the center of another conflict. The area around them was being terrorized by the LRA, led by Joseph Kony, a messianic fanatic who claimed he wanted to rule the land according to the Ten Commandments.

In the process, he and his band were violating most commandments, especially the one on killing. To build their army, they abducted youngsters and taught them to kill at an age when they were most susceptible to indoctrination. The young girls were trained in the same murderous ways, even to return to their villages and beat to death their own parents. The girls also were taken as wives for the older LRA militiamen, forced into submission by the knowledge that they would be beaten to death if they did not submit.

At the height of the LRA's rampage, an estimated 20,000 youngsters were said to have been abducted in this way.

In that context, Freddie Deichi was one of the lucky ones. He escaped.

"They came during the day," he said, speaking through a local interpreter. "My mother was cooking. My father was working in the field.

"My father came and tried to rescue me, but they beat him and he ran to hide in the sorghum field. My mother ran away and they did not try to chase her. They were gathering together the children they had captured. There about 25 of us. Some of us were tied together with ropes.

"We marched a long way to a forest. I was not tied. When they were not looking, I hid in the forest. I walked back. It was a long way. I came to a stream and slept there. In the morning, I walked to the home of my aunt and she took me home."

His parents show no sign of awkwardness as he describes how they appeared to abandon him to his fate. If they had persisted in trying to save the boy, they would certainly have been beaten to death. All they could do was hope he would return.

In January, Sudan's Islamic fundamentalist government signed a peace agreement with the rebels of the south, who are dominated by the Sudan People's Liberation Army. The war lasted more than 20 years in its latest incarnation. Two million people died in the conflict. Four million people, like Daniel Wani and his family, were uprooted from their homes as the government forces, using bombers and tanks, swept through the south, assisted by local militias.

After the peace agreement was signed, Mr. Wani decided to bring his family back to what was left of a collection of mud huts covered with thatched roofs in Kerepo. He did this over several weeks, using only a bicycle to bring back one or two at a time.

Kerepo is near the road that runs north toward Juba. The countryside is littered with the debris of war. Men of the SPLA, carrying automatic weapons, some festooned with bandoleers of shells, patrol the area on foot and in trucks.

Why? Because although the SPLA and Sudan's army aren't fighting anymore, the LRA is here, attacking villages for food and supplies, killing people and abducting youngsters, although not nearly on the scale of a couple of years ago in northern Uganda. They are here because during the north-south war, the Khartoum government supplied them to attack the Sudanese rebels from the south.

Everything is relative, though. "I feel better protected here," says Daniel Wani, standing by a patch of peanuts he has cultivated. "I want to settle down without having to run away again."

Maybe that will happen, if the peace agreement holds, if international donors such as the United States come through with the \$4.5 billion promised to rebuild southern Sudan, if the LRA is driven back into northern Uganda - and if these things happen quickly so the whole place doesn't blow up again.

AFGHANISTAN: UN marks disarmament milestone

IRINNews, 1 Jul 2005 - The disarmament and demobilisation phase of the UN-backed Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme in Afghanistan ended on 30 June, while reintegration of former combatants will take another year, the United Nations announced on Thursday, in the capital, Kabul.

The DDR has processed a total of 61,417 former Afghan militia force (AMF) members of which 52,509 have been assisted with reintegration package so far.

The DDR, which started in November 2003 with Japan as the lead nation and major donor, has so far cost the international community more than US \$100 million and is considered a major step towards restoring national security.

"After today no one will be allowed to use or move weapons other than security organisations or those licensed to do so by the ministry of interior," Adrian Edwards, a spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said.

According to UNAMA, 34,726 light and medium weapons have been collected under the DDR process, of which 14,754 have been handed to the Ministry of Defence (MoD), with the remainder held by the Afghan National Army.

Although Thursday was the final day of disarmament, the DDR, at the request of the ministry of defence, will continue to process AMF units that have already applied for assistance in demobilisation, the spokesman added.

But the success of the DDR is not the end of the process of taking armed men out of Afghan society. The completion of militia disarmament coincides with the launch of a new Afghan government-led security initiative: the disbandment of illegal armed groups - still a huge security headache in many parts of the country.

According to the MoD, there are still at least 1,800 illegal armed groups around the country. Kabul wants their estimated 10,000 members disarmed before parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 September.

Candidates for the 249-seat lower house of parliament are forbidden to belong to armed groups. Election workers in Kabul said that in the last two weeks, several candidates had voluntarily surrendered their arms and decommissioned their private militias in an effort to meet requirements under Afghan election law.