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HUMANITARIAN AID & RELIEF CENTRE

CHILD SOLDIERS VICTIMS, NOT SOLDIERS

KSrelief recently hosted a virtual panel discussion entitled “Child Soldiers: Victims, Not Soldiers”. The purpose of the event was for experts on the topic to address the serious global issue of child recruitment, and to discuss ways to prevent this practice and to rehabilitate and reintegrate recruited children. The panel discussion was held to mark the annual February 12 “International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers” (also known as “Red Hand Day”). The panel discussion was divided into two sessions. The first session aimed to raise awareness about child recruitment and the importance of highlighting this illegal practice, both in the international community and in the media. The goal of the second session was to strengthen cooperation between interested and working parties in protecting children from recruitment, upholding children’s rights, and rehabilitating former child soldiers. High-level participants, representatives from some United Nations and international organizations, and local and international specialists participated in the discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Utilizing International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers as an opportunity to develop awareness of the security, societal, humanitarian and legal repercussions of child recruitment
- Urging the international community to support the recommendations of the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers
- Unifying and directing joint efforts to ensure respect for the international humanitarian law
- Improving aid coordination and coherence by the international community
- Enhancing the participation of all concerned parties in designing, implementing and evaluating programs and policies for responding to child recruitment
- Providing an adequate level of sustainable community-based reintegration
- Focusing on reintegration programs, and expediting reunification of released children with their families, while providing the families with psychological, social and economic support
- Emphasizing the special need to protect girls from the threat of recruitment
- Strengthening the presence of children in peacebuilding dialogues
- Maximizing the use of programs against child recruitment to protect children from all forms of maltreatment or exploitation



KEY SPEAKERS



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CHILD SOLDIERS REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Child recruitment is a grave violation of child rights and international humanitarian law, yet there still remain tens of thousands of child soldiers who are recruited by armed groups in various countries. Children as young as 8 or 9 years of age have been recruited into armed conflicts. Some children are forcibly recruited; they may be abducted, threatened, and forced to join. In many cases, children may choose to join as a result of economic and social pressures, enticed by money and other means. Being poor, displaced, separated from their families, or living in conflict areas can make children particularly vulnerable to being recruited. Armed groups target children because they are easier to manipulate than adults and don't have a highly-developed sense of danger.

In response to this devastating phenomenon, KSrelief implemented the Child Soldiers Rehabilitation Program in Yemen, a qualitative humanitarian project which began in Ma'rib in September of 2017. The program provides a variety of services to former child soldiers and other children severely impacted by the ongoing conflict in Yemen; the program helps these children reintegrate into their home communities by providing them with comprehensive support in a variety of areas.

REHABILITATION IS ACHIEVED THROUGH

OBJECTIVES

- Providing children with psychological and health rehabilitation, as well as social reintegration.
- Enrolling the children in schools to allow them to continue their education.
- Providing the children's families with vocational training and economic empowerment.
- Establishing community committees and training them to raise community awareness about children's rights and protection, and the dangers of child recruitment.



Psychological services



Social services



Health care



Educational support



Sports and arts activities



Theater and cultural events



505

direct beneficiaries



50,000

indirect beneficiaries



FORCED RECRUITMENT...

A JOURNEY OF SUFFERING

Saleh H., a 13-year-old boy, tells the painful story of being forcibly recruited into armed conflict by a militia group in Yemen. His childhood, Saleh says, was stolen from him. He vividly remembers the day he was taken away from his family. He had been living peacefully in a village in the Ma'rib governorate with his mother, father and siblings. On that awful day, he was getting ready to go to school when a militia commander approached his house with twelve other armed men. The commander ordered Saleh to come with them, and asked his father to join his son in the conflict.

"My father said no," Saleh recounts, "and he was trying to protect me. He couldn't convince them, but said he would go with them if they let me stay with my family. They refused. He went running into the house to grab a weapon, but, sadly, he couldn't do anything to stop them. They killed him right in front of all of us, and I was forced to go with the men."

Saleh was deeply saddened that he couldn't say goodbye to his father. After traveling some distance with the men, Saleh arrived at a checkpoint with three other boys. "One of them was my age, and the other two were older," he says. At the checkpoint, he was forced to read propaganda materials and was soon serving grueling twelve-hour shifts (from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) at the checkpoint. He stayed there for five months. He was made to carry a weapon, and did not receive money or any other compensation for all of the months of hard work. He was forced to ingest khat (a leafy plant native to Yemen which is used as a stimulant and has addictive properties) to keep him awake and alert for long periods of time.

He was very frightened, and often unable to sleep, but at the same time, he says, he didn't want to do anything or to go anywhere; he just wanted to stay put. He couldn't remember his mother, but had no idea why. His life was like a living nightmare. He lived through many traumatic events, including the killing and disappearance of other child soldiers, many of whom had become his friends.

One of his cousins, who had been recruited by the Houthis, died in the conflict, so Saleh asked to for a few days' leave. He went to meet his mother, who was waiting for him with his little sister. His mother took him to the KSrelief-supported Child Soldiers Rehabilitation Program in Ma'rib to undergo psychological rehabilitation and heal from his experiences.

"Before I joined this program," Saleh says, "I didn't want to do anything. I only wanted to be alone. I didn't want to be around anyone else. But now, all I think about is playing and enjoying my life. I would never want to go back to the front lines."

After finishing the program, Saleh went back to school to complete his education. The Child Soldiers Rehabilitation Program was created by KSrelief in response to the devastating phenomenon of child recruitment in Yemen. This qualitative humanitarian initiative helps former child soldiers and other children affected by the conflict to reenter society and return to school; it accomplishes these goals by providing psychological and social services for the children and their families to help them recover from the trauma they have experienced as a result of the ongoing conflict in Yemen.



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