



UN expert decries 'unacceptable' number of child victims of abuse in Benin

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A United Nations independent expert today urged the Government of Benin to make child protection a priority in its agenda, following a visit to the country which revealed that violence and exploitation of children is of serious concern.

"It is unacceptable that so many - too many - children in Benin are victims of violence, abuse or exploitation on the pretext of traditions, customs or poverty," said Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, Najat Maalla M'jid.

"The phenomenon of 'vidomegon' children, which was traditionally a practice of foster placement, has been diverted for the purpose of exploitation and profits. Numerous children are victims of sale or trafficking, labour or sexual exploitation, mainly in markets, quarries or fields."

Ms. Maalla M'jid expressed alarm at the high number of child victims of multiple forms of violence and abuse: infanticide of children considered to be 'sorcerers', female genital mutilations, abductions for placement in 'voodoo convents', forced marriages, corporal punishment and rapes.

"Although the real scale of these phenomena remains difficult to determine due to the low reporting rates and amicable settlements, there is clearly an alarming number of incidents of violence and economic and/or sexual exploitation suffered in particular by girls," she stressed.

"Schools are supposed to be an environment where children can feel safe - not places where girls are abused with total impunity," she said.

During her 10-day mission in Benin, Ms. Maalla M'jid met with various State and local authorities, UN entities, the diplomatic community and civil society representatives. She visited programmes

devoted to child protection in Cotonou, Abomey-Calavi, Porto Novo, Abomey-Calavi, Comè, Lokossa and Applahoué. She also met child victims and youth organizations.

Although Benin has a relatively complete legal framework regarding child protection, it suffers from a lack of implementation. This is partly due to a lack of access to justice mechanisms, and to corruption and impunity. Amicable settlements at the community level occur at the expenses of the child's best interest and the child's voice is rarely, if ever, taken into account.

Ms. Maalla M'jid insisted on the necessity to switch from a "project logic" to a comprehensive child protection strategy. She recommended creating local protection mechanisms that are easily accessible to all children, with adequate human and financial resources. She also encouraged the international community to support the establishment of this strategy to effectively combat all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation of children.