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AFGHANISTAN: Fears over child recruitment, abuse by pro-government militias



Photo: [Masoomi/IRIN](#)

Little has been done to stop the use of children by armed groups

KABUL, 20 January 2011 (IRIN) - Pro-government militias in parts of Afghanistan are believed to be recruiting underage boys and sometimes sexually abusing them in an environment of criminal impunity, local people and human rights organizations say.

In a bid to counter the intensifying insurgency, the Afghan government and US/NATO forces have been setting up [controversial community-based militias](#), such as the Afghan Local Police, in insecure provinces. To date, thousands of men have been recruited to such bodies in Kunduz, Baghlan and Kandahar provinces, says the Interior Ministry.

"The militias and commanders are hiring young, underage boys in their ranks for different illicit purposes," said Haji Abdul Rahim, a tribal elder in the southern province of Kandahar.

Another elderly man, Khan Mohammad, accused pro-government militias of kidnapping teenage boys primarily for sexual exploitation.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also said it had received reports of child recruitment by pro-government militias in some provinces.

"We're seriously concerned about this," said Hussein Nasrat, a child rights officer at AIHRC, adding that his organization was investigating the issue.

"The use and abuse of children by local armed groups is very worrying because they [pro-government militias] fall beyond the formal, legal and disciplinary structures within which the police and army operate," he said.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said it had not received "confirmed information" on the issue, but that it was concerned about the "association of children with such forces" due to their community-based status.

NGOs have demanded that the government and US/NATO forces [stop using local militias](#) and instead devote greater resources to developing a more professional and accountable police and army.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, meanwhile, has said the [proliferation of armed actors](#) impedes and threatens humanitarian work in Afghanistan.

Child soldiers

Children are recruited and used for military purposes by the Afghan national police, as well as the following anti-government groups: Haqqani network, Hezb-i-Islamic, Taliban, Tora Bora Front and the Jamat Sunat al-Dawa Salafia, the UN Secretary-General said in a report in April 2010.

Internally displaced and isolated children in conflict-affected areas are particularly at risk of recruitment by non-state armed groups, Radhika Coomaraswamy, a special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, said in a [February 2010 country mission report](#).

"The recruitment and use of children by both [anti-government] armed groups and national security forces was documented throughout the country by the UN Country Task Force on children in armed conflict between 2008 and 2010," UNICEF's country office told IRIN.

In addition to recruiting children as foot soldiers, the Taliban and other insurgent groups are accused of using children as suicide bombers, and

"The use and abuse of children by local armed groups is very worrying because they [pro-government militias] fall beyond the formal, legal and disciplinary structures within which

forcing them to plant improvised explosives.

“Armed opposition groups continue to perpetrate grave violations against children in the context of the armed conflict,” said UNICEF, adding that the fragmentation of armed opposition groups was jeopardizing dialogue with them on the issue of child soldiers.

**the police and army
operate**

Poverty and unemployment are believed to be pushing children into joining armed groups. Extremely low levels of birth registration and weak identity documents are also contributing to the problem, UNICEF said.

Sexual abuse

War-related sexual violence is another issue which needs tackling, human rights organizations say.

Children, particularly boys, are sexually abused by different armed groups and ‘baccha baazi’ (meaning “boy play”, a paedophilic practice) has been reported among armed forces across the country.

Despite assurances by the government that child sexual abuse will be tackled and perpetrators punished, little has been done thus far, according to AIHRC.

“This is most probably due to the social stigma attached to the issue as well as the inability of the government to fully control armed group leaders who may be perpetrating such acts,” Coomaraswamy said in her report.

As a result, cases of the sexual abuse and exploitation of children have rarely been tackled due to impunity and the weak rule of law, AIHRC said.

Children are also killed, wounded, detained, displaced and denied access to essential health and education services by the warring parties, human rights organizations say.

In the first half of 2010, 176 children were killed and 389 wounded in the conflict - up 55 percent on the same period in 2009, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [reported](#).

Backed by the UN and other international actors, the Afghan government says it is committed to tackling all the problems which adversely affect children in the context of war. However, human rights bodies such as AIHRC accuse the government of promising much but delivering little.

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Theme(s): [Children](#), [Governance](#), [Human Rights](#), [Conflict](#),

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