

Tuesday, 9 April 2013

## Aid group pleads with U.N. to do more for Syrian children



The aid group Save the Children pleaded with members of the U.N. Security Council on Monday to do more for Syria's children, nearly two million of whom need help because of the country's two-year-old civil war.

The U.N. Security Council has been deadlocked since the start of the conflict, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's close ally Russia –with the aid of China –using its veto power to block any condemnations or attempts to sanction Assad's government.

“From the very beginning of the crisis in Syria, children have been its forgotten victims –facing death, trauma and suffering, and deprived of basic humanitarian aid,” Save the Children said in a report presented to the 15-nation council on Monday.

“Children are increasingly being put directly in harm's way as they are being recruited by armed groups and [government-aligned] forces,” it said. “There have even been reports that children as young as eight have been used as human shields.”

The threat to children begins before they are born, it said. Since hospitals and health workers are being attacked, women are reluctant to go to hospitals. It added that nearly two million Syrian children were in need of aid.

“This means more births are taking place at home, without a skilled birth attendant,” the report said, adding that access to food was also a serious problem for Syrian families.

Save the Children, a U.S.-based non-governmental charity organization, said last month that Syria's children were being shot at, tortured and raped.

Carolyn Miles, president and chief executive officer of Save the Children, told Reuters in an interview that the main message she brought the deadlocked Security Council was that aid access must be improved and pledges of relief funds paid out.

“The pledges for protection of children in Syria remain virtually unfunded,” Miles said, adding that less than three percent of the pledges earmarked for protecting and educating children in Syria had been funded.

Miles' remarks came after the United Nations gave its starkest warning yet on Friday that it would soon run out of cash to cope with the vast influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan and other neighboring countries.

### **Real people are suffering**

Car bombs and attacks on civilians –including children –are commonplace in the Syrian conflict, which the United Nations estimates has killed more than 70,000 people, without so far producing a winner.

Syria's conflict started with peaceful protests against four decades of Assad family rule that were violently suppressed. An armed struggle ensued, forcing more than one million Syrians to flee abroad, and displacing millions more inside the country.

Miles said she had asked the Security Council members to put pressure on all the actors in the conflict –including the Syrian government –to improve humanitarian aid access, an issue that she said has become needlessly politicized.

“There are ways to ensure humanitarian access and that aid gets through,” she said.

Children are facing sexual exploitation, she said, adding that parents said they were marrying girls to protect them.

“We were reminding people [on the Security Council] that this is about real people who are suffering,” Miles said.

Security Council diplomats, whom Miles described as relatively “quiet” during Monday's meeting at the German U.N. mission, did not respond immediately to requests for comment. Miles added that she would keep the pressure on the council.

The Save the Children report urged the Security Council to “unite behind a plan that will bring about an end to the violence and ensure that humanitarian aid reaches children throughout Syria.”

It also urged all parties to the conflict to allow unfettered access to civilians in need of aid. Assad's government, U.N. diplomats say, has balked at the idea of free access for aid workers due to the fears that such corridors could be used to transfer weapons to rebels.

The report also called on Assad's forces and the rebels to stop recruiting children, release any in their ranks and ensure they are returned to their families.

An official from the U.N. children's fund UNICEF was also present at Monday's meeting, but the fund had no comment.