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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Promotion du Développement Economique et Social - PDES, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Warning Situation of Child Soldiers: What Responsibilities does the Host Country have?

Although the recruitment of children is immoral, illegal, and inhumane, rejected by all customs, especially customary international humanitarian law, as well as all international conventions, the leaders of the Polisario Front have been preventing groups of children from completing their studies since the establishment of the camps in Tindouf, Algeria, forcing them into military action. This behavior goes against the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recommends ensuring the education and balanced development of children's personalities. According to testimonies from a group of mothers, children are deprived of early childhood and engaged in arduous military tasks at a very young age, resulting in physical and psychological complications.

The behavior of the Polisario Front represents the political and military exploitation of thousands of children in the camps of Tindouf, and a direct violation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, which states that “armed groups distinct from the armed forces of any State shall in no case recruit or use persons under the age of eighteen years in hostilities.” Children in these camps are involved in Polisario war propaganda, imbued with ideas advocating war and encouraging the use of weapons. They are also engaged in military exercises and acts of vandalism and intimidation or used as human shields. In this context, we have witnessed the escalation that the Guarguarat border post has experienced over a three-week period, after the Polisario organization changed the status quo at this crossing, disregarding calls from the UN for a swift resolution of violations of Military Agreement No. 1 attached to the 1991 ceasefire agreement.

On this occasion, illegal acts were recorded in which the lives of civilians, including children, were endangered and involved in acts of intimidation, vandalism, and provocation towards the users of this international passage. These acts represent a violation by the Polisario Front of international conventions, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Until now, the Polisario Front persists in creating a climate of tension inside the Tindouf camps through propaganda and fake news, and playing on emotions and sensitivities by praising military exploits and encouraging the carrying of weapons, even among children.

Today, the Polisario continues its exploitation of children without shame, ignoring the abnormal situation that goes against the principles of children's rights and relevant international conventions. This raises legitimate questions about the difference between terrorist groups and the Polisario Front, which recently boasted about the “nurseries of its ideology” by parading children in military demonstrations to promote its return to arms.

Regardless of how children are recruited and the roles assigned to them, “child soldiers” or rather “children associated with armed forces and groups” continue to be subjected to serious violations of their physical and psychological health. They are vulnerable to various risks, including sexual violence. We are facing a phenomenon that qualifies as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court adopted in 1998, which considers it inhumane and a war crime, regardless of whether recruitment is voluntary or compulsory. Unfortunately, this inhumane situation faced by children in the camps of Tindouf is accompanied by international indifference, with little mention of this group when discussing the horror of child exploitation in conflict zones, except for national reports that have attempted to draw attention to these illegal and immoral practices, in an environment of near-absence of international monitoring mechanisms.

The host country of the Tindouf camps, Algeria, has also engaged in war propaganda through its media, involving children in the military activities of the Polisario Front, in total disregard of its legal and moral responsibility for the violations that occur on its territory. Algeria is the authority responsible for investigating all violations committed there in fulfillment of its relevant international obligations.

Algeria deliberately ignores the fact that it is inhumane to allow children to participate in wars and endanger their lives, instead of protecting them and providing them with services related to their health, physical, and psychological well-being. Children should be involved in constructive activities, such as education and training.

OBSERVATOIRE INTERNATIONAL POUR LA PAIX, LA DÉMOCRATIE ET LES DROITS DE L'HOMME, GENÈVE IOPDHR-GENEVA-NGO, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

(2) The Paris Principles insist that children are not soldiers but children, stressing the importance of the precision due on the term used, which is "children associated with armed forces and armed groups", Paris Principles with on the following link:
<https://www.unicef.org/mali/Media/1561/file/parisprinciples.pdf>