

Clinton signs United Nations agreements to protect children

By Lani Russell Lewter

At the United Nations recently, President Clinton has signed two historic agreements advancing international efforts to protect children around the world. The United States signed United Nations protocols one of which prohibits the forcible recruitment of children for use in armed conflict and the other helps protect children from slavery, prostitution and pornography.

United Nations observers report in Angola more than 10,000 children have been forced to fight as soldiers. Observers also report that in Columbia, the armed forces enlist children; that in Sierra Leone, children comprise almost one half of the Revolutionary United Front Forces; and that in Burma, thousands of children serve as combatants.

"The United States is one of the first countries to sign these two protocols," UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette said at the signing. "It is our hope that in due time, the United States will also be able to ratify these protocols and, of course, ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These instruments stand to gain immeasurably with the participation of your country, which has played such a crucial role throughout the history of the United Nations in widening and strengthening our human rights framework," she added.

The Clinton-Gore Administration says it intends to submit both protocols to the United States Senate for ratification later this month. The two protocols were adopted by the UN General Assembly earlier this spring following several years of negotiations.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict calls for an end to forced recruitment of children into armed conflict, gives governments additional tools to pressure violators and promotes rehabilitation to help reintegrate child soldiers into civilian life.



At the United Nations, President Clinton signs international agreements designed to protect children. Looking on is Ms. Louise Frechette, Deputy Secretary-General. To the right of the DSG stands Richard Holbrooke, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Photo by Lani Russell Lewter (c)

The protocol bars compulsory recruitment below the age of 18. It also requires United Nations member states raise the current 15 year-old standard and declare what age they plan to adopt. Nations that recruit youth below the age of 18 are required to describe the steps they will take to ensure protection of under 18-year old enlistees.

Reportedly, the U.S. Departments of State and Defense were deeply involved in the international negotiations leading to the adoption of the protocol which would require the United States to take all feasible measures to ensure that 17-year-olds do not take a direct part in hostilities.

The White House reports that William Cohen, Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the chiefs of the various branches of the Armed Forces carefully considered whether the country could undertake such an obligation. They concluded that the United States could and fully protect U.S. military recruitment and readiness requirements.

The U.S. government no longer forces its 18-year-old men to perform military duty. It does require American (and non-American) men to register with the United States Selective Service System (also called the draft board) once they reach the age of 18 as

part of its military readiness plan. Failure to register is a felony and can result in forfeiture of valuable government benefits including student loans/grants, professional licenses and more. Failure to register may also impact on immigration applications.

Currently the U.S. military depends on volunteers to man its armed forces and accepts volunteers at age 17. Parental consent and proof of age are required. ROTC programs and military schools remain unaffected. African Americans and other non-white volunteers comprise a large percentage of the U.S. military.

In addition to signing the Optional Protocol on the Rights of Children in Armed Conflict, President Clinton also signed the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. The second agreement helps strengthen law enforcement action against those who commit sexual abuse against children.

The protocol for the first time defines the terms "sale of Children", "Child prostitution" and Child pornography" in an international agreement and require that these abuses be treated as criminal acts. It also establishes stronger, clearer grounds for jurisdiction and extradition to "better" ensure prosecution of offenders regardless of where they are found.

President Clinton and U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke sat with Ambassador Patricia Durrant, Jamaica's Ambassador to the UN and President of the Security Council and the other members of the Security Council.

United States elected officials sat on the opposite side of the aisle. Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (Manhattan), Congressman Gregory Meeks (Queens) and Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas were on hand to support the effort to protect children. First Lady and New York Senate candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton was represented by Melanne Vermeer, assistant to the president and chief of staff for the Office of the First Lady.

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