

Juba, South Sudan, February 8 (Infosplusgabon) - Some 300 child soldiers, including 87 girls, were formally released by armed groups in South Sudan, the United Nations mission in the country reported on Wednesday, calling on all stakeholders to support the young people on the journey back to their communities and help them build a future for themselves.

“Children should not be carrying guns and killing each other. They should be playing, learning, having fun with friends, protected and cherished by the adults around them,” said David Shearer, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan, welcoming the release.

Undertaken in Yambio (south-western South Sudan), it is the first such release in over a year and marks the first phase of the overall programme which will see more than 700 children return back to their communities, a UN statement said.

“They will have endured suffering, including sexual abuse. It is vital that they receive the support they need to re-join their communities and that they are welcomed home by family and friends without any sense of stigma,” added Mr. Shearer

At a formal ceremony, the children were disarmed and were provided with civilian clothes as

well as medical screenings. In the days to come, agencies, such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and local partners will provide them with counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration programme.

According to UNICEF, the children with relatives in the area will be reunited with their families, while others will be placed in interim care centres until their families can be traced. They will also be provided with three months' worth of food assistance and with vocational training and age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centres to help reach their full potential.

"Not all children are forcibly recruited. Many joined armed groups because they feel they had no other option," said Mahimbo Mdoe, the head of UNICEF programmes in South Sudan.

"Our priority for this group – and for children across South Sudan – is to provide the support they need so they are able to see a more promising future."

Together with UNICEF, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and other UN agencies have been working to bring the release to light.

Given the volatile security situation, the UN Mission deployed peacekeeping troops to escort religious leaders into remote bush areas to make contact and negotiate with the armed groups. It also sent engineers to repair a road between Yambio and a vocational training centre nearby to make sure that the young people can travel safely for training programmes.

Noting in particular, the work of the religious leaders, Mr. Shearer added: “I would like to pay particular credit to religious leaders who travelled into conflict zones and risked their own lives to bring these children to safety.”

However, in spite of this release, some 19,000 children continue to be used by armed forces and groups more than four years after conflict erupted in December 2013. Release efforts have also been also complicated by fighting as the one witnessed in the region in July 2016 that stalled the momentum.

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