

The Life of Children After the War on Terror

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Abstract:

This paper provides reflection of the negative impacts of the so called war against terrorism on the daily lives of children in Pakistan. It is an attempt to depict the general vulnerabilities of children as a result of armed conflict or displacement alongwith the biggest ever challenge faced by humanitarian community to respond. Radicalized or indoctrinated children, especially the suicide bombers or child soldiers are the biggest problem at the moment. No proper research is found on this subject. There is zero capacity to deprogramme such children in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Terrorism, Vulnerability, Internally Displaced Person, Psychosocial, Separated and Unaccompanied Children, Suicide Bombers, Referral Mechanism, UNCRC, Miscreants.

Introduction:

In recent decades the globe has witnessed a significant increase in armed conflicts, whether they are internal in a country or between two or more countries. This has also led to a significant long term unstable post conflict situation. Post conflict situation often results in more killings of the innocent civilians, total or partial destruction of social institutes, psychological terror, forced migration, starvation and destruction of schools .The third world countries are amongst the most affected communities by these warefares. Amongst these children and adolescents are the most affected. According to UN estimates, some 20 million people have been killed in over 150 conflicts till 2002 (Jo Boyden, et.al, 2002). More of half of the since displaced people are children or under 18. There are direct and indirect impact of conflicts on children of these displacements. Some are very easy to be observed and measured such as injuries, dislocations, separation from family, deaths etc, but there are many which are not that easy to be measured or observed such as economic impoverishment, hazardous labour, participation in war directly as soldiers etc, early marriage, increased drop out from schools, no opportunity to health facility and malnutrition, to name a few. Armed conflict puts challenges to the rights of children which are laid in Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), thus putting greater responsibility on international community to ensure less or no violation of these rights of children. Millions of children are caught in conflicts in which they are targeted directly or indirectly. The indirect victims still suffer from effects of sexual violence or other multiple deprivations.

It has been found from various reports and events that emergencies whether man made or natural, potentially risk the lives of millions of people around the world, pushing them from normal routine lives to that of the life of an Internally Displaced Person (IDP). It is estimated that out of the approximate 24.5 million conflict-related internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world, about 50% are children. Moreover it is estimated that between 250,000 and 300,000 children are associated with government armed forces or armed opposition groups in at least 13 countries of the world (Save the Children, 2007). Whether internally displaced or a refugee; whether a victim of war, civil unrest or natural disaster; be in an urban, rural or semi-rural setting, a child's vulnerability to abuse during a crisis is very high. Families suffer multiple and severe disruptions: losing their homes and livelihoods, and often losing their autonomy and dignity when trying to obtain humanitarian relief and protection. With an uncertain future, repeated emotional stress and only minimal access to education, children are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, physical harm, separation from their families, psychosocial distress, gender-based violence, economic exploitation, recruitment into armed groups, and other forms of harm.

Statement of the Problem

The events of 9/11 have greatly affected the mode of the world politics. Consequently, the focus of attention is diverted to Afghanistan and to the tribal belt of Pakistan. After the US attacks on Afghanistan, thousands of Afghan refugees migrated to Pakistan and get settled in the nearest tribal belt. The US forces along with NATO first attacked Afghanistan, and later on the focus shifted to the tribal areas of Pakistan. It was claimed that a number of Taliban and their supporters have got shelter in this region. To combat with this situation an operation was launched in South Waziristan which gradually spread to Bajawar and Mohmand agencies as well as to Malakand Agency. Due to these operations, millions of people migrated from their ancestral villages to Peshawar and other cities of the Frontier Province and it was the largest ever internal displacement of people in the history.

This entire situation led to some serious problems. People who migrated to the cities are living in the shabby makeshift tents with poor facilities. Their lives are exposed to both physical and psychological problems. They find it difficult to make both ends meet. Women and elderly people are suffering from all sorts of diseases, while children are exposed to an undesirable situation and criminal activities. This has aggravated the already worst law and order situation and has further endangered the peace of the cities. These hungry and angry young people are adding to the tension and are the potential threats to the security. They also run a great risk of moral deterioration. Knowing the facts that young minds can be easily shaped and molded, these vulnerable youth have started becoming the part of the armed

conflicts. There are reports of some young people being missing. It has also been reported that various armed groups have influenced and taken them into their folds.

The aftermath of 9/11 has made the peace of the world more fragile, and more and more people, mostly children, are becoming vulnerable as a result of the war against terror. Pakistan being one of the leading front States in the war against terror is facing the same problem and the insurgents have started a full fledged armed fight in the tribal areas which has resulted in the displacement of more than three million (3,000,000) individuals, mostly women and children who have left their areas of origin and are either living in IDP camps or staying with host families.

Impacts of Armed Conflict on Children in Pakistan:

1. Psychological Impact on Children:

The threatening statements of Taliban, roaring of gunships helicopters and mortar guns, public slaughtering and hanging of persons were witnessed by children which created a lot of psychological problem for children of the calm valley of Swat and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The situation got multiple effects when the residents of the areas were forced to flee as the military action was declared against the miscreant. The hardships being faced during the displacements, totally changed the environment of living i.e; from house to communal living in tents, school buildings or with host families, lack of facilities, long queues to get register and receive relief goods, no access to education, harsh weather conditions, which coupled with non availability of electricity, led to severe traumatic symptoms amongst the majority of children. The children suffered from stress display a wide range of symptoms including increased separation, anxiety and developmental delays, sleep disturbances and nightmares, lack of appetite, withdrawn behaviour, lack of interest in play, and, in younger children, learning difficulties. In older children and adolescents, responses to stress can include anxious or aggressive behaviour and depression. Relatively little is known about the psychosocial long-term effects of recent lengthy civil wars. The loss of parents and other close family members leaves a life-long impression and can dramatically alter life pathways. These findings are summarized from the little local research studies and are based on my field observations while I worked as the incharge of rehabilitation and as cluster coordinator for emergency of Save the Children Alliance in the post-operation situation in 2009.

2. Separated/Unaccompanied and Missing Children:

Unaccompanied children are those who are separated from both parents and are not in the care of another adult who, by law or custom, has taken

responsibility to do so. Children are often separated from parents in the chaos of conflict, escape and displacement. Parents or other primary caregivers are the major source of a child's emotional and physical security. For this reason family separation can have a devastating social and psychological impact. Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable and at risk of neglect, violence, military recruitment, sexual assault and other abuses. An essential goal of relief programme is to provide assistance to the families to prevent separations. The first priority of humanitarian organizations working in emergencies should be the identification of these children, providing them shelter and protection and referring to other social services available and then to reunite them with their families.

In the recent IDP crisis, the social set up i.e. joint family and community feeling of the IDPs was a blessing because children were separated by their parents, but none were reported as unaccompanied. However, it was a dilemma that majority of the UN and INGOs were responding at the camps level, whereas 80 percent of the IDPs and children were living with host families, thus the actual magnitude of missing children, separated or unaccompanied children was not clear. Admittedly, the Government, UN agencies and INGOs failed to establish an institutionalized referral mechanism for identification, registration, monitoring and re-unification of the above mentioned category.

3. *Health and Nutrition:*

Thousands of children are killed every year as a direct result of fighting, from knife wounds, bullets, bombs and landmines, but many more die from malnutrition and diseases brought or aggravated by armed conflicts. The interruption of food supplies, the destruction of food crops and agricultural infrastructures, the disintegration of families and communities, the displacement of populations, the destruction of health services and programmes and of water and sanitation systems all take a heavy toll on children. Many die as a direct result of diminished food intake that causes acute and severe malnutrition, while others, compromised by malnutrition, become unable to resist common childhood diseases and infection. Communicable diseases are another major threat to children when they are living in camps, such as diarrhea, skin infections, HVC. The IDPs of the recent crisis suffered most of these health problems and the relief providers noticed many of these illnesses.

4. *Early Marriages:*

Due to so many social and psychological pressures on the lives of the conflict ridden people/internally displaced persons, parents are compelled to make their children marry, especially girls, at an early age which is a clear violation of

the rights of children as envisaged in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Early Marriages Restraint Act 1929. The major hurdle in monitoring such violations is that majority of these cases go unregistered, and there is a potential risk that such young girls are used for prostitution or being married for having bride price. Whereas the Humanitarian community finds it difficult to address these issues as this is taken very personal and a culturally approved practice. Therefore, any action against such violations is considered an interference in their traditions. Here is an example from my personal experience:

“While heading the Child Protection Sub-Cluster back in November 2008, it was brought to the discussion that a girl aging 16 years was going to be married to a 60 years old person from Afghanistan in Sheikh Yasin Camp of Mardan. Every effort was made to restrain the marriage but due to the above mentioned factors and self interview of the girl, that she is marrying at her own will, no convention could restrain her from doing so.”

5. Education:

Schools were targeted during the war against terrorism. Taliban were more against girl's education so their mere targets were girl schools, destroying them permanently or at least partially. Approximately 264 schools were destroyed. In rural areas, the school buildings were the only substantial permanent structure, making it highly susceptible to shelling and hideouts for army and armed opposition. Local teachers were also the prime targets of Taliban. The destruction of educational infrastructures is one of the greatest developmental setbacks for countries affected by conflict and same is with Pakistan, where literacy rate is already very low and even lower for female. Years of lost schooling and vocational skills will take equivalent years to replace. Even where services are maintained, education will remain of lower quality. Funds will be short and the supply of materials will be slow or erratic. In addition, fear and disruption make it difficult to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and the morale of both the teachers and pupils is likely to be low.

This is an alarming situation leading to two other potential forms of child protection issues i.e. economic exploitation of children and increased trend of enrolment in madrassas, which are alleged to be nurseries for child soldiers and suicide bombers in the name of Islam.

6. Child Soldiers/Suicide bombers:

As a result of armed conflict, the greatest challenge is seen as the association of children with warring factions. These children are normally known as child

Soldiers, not necessarily active combatants but could be found in different roles such as cooks, helpers, spies, runners etc. Children are preferred to be used or recruited as child soldiers because of a number of reasons, including obedience, unaware of the purpose for which they have been brainwashed, etc.

In 2001 the International Labour Organization and Quaker United Nations Office Geneva started a global research on child soldiers and it was found that the children of the adjacent tribal areas bordering Afghanistan were once mobilized to fight against the Northern Alliance. However, exactly within a short span of only one decade, the miscreants mobilized the community of Swat and FATA, to associate their children in their fight against the State, which, in their opinion, is supporting western particularly the US interests.

The state of child soldiers became the worst ever global problem, whereby children were trained and used as suicide bombers. These children/ suicide bombers are recruited in many different ways. Some are conscripted, others are press-ganged or kidnapped and still others are forced to join armed groups to defend their families. The situation is more alarming as there are proper institutes or nurseries where these suicide bombers are trained and produced. Pakistan's top Taliban leader is buying children as young as 7 to serve as suicide bombers, in the growing spate of attacks against Pakistani, Afghan and U.S. targets.

Different sources quote that the going price for child bombers was \$7,000 to \$14,000 - huge sums in Pakistan, where per-capita income is about \$2,600 a year (Carter, 2009). Suicide bombings have become frequent in Pakistan in the past year, including high-profile attacks on hotels frequented by Westerners, as well as on Pakistani police and military installations. The indicators described by Naushad (2009) in his article on suicide bombers are clearly indicative of the situation that these child soldiers are mostly drop outs, unemployed and religiously radicalized (See *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, Vol.1 Number 1, April, 2009).

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