



**Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary General
on Violence against Children**

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Side Event

Violence Against Children Accused of Witchcraft

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Distinguished Guests, Dear Friends,

I am delighted to be associated with this important meeting on violence against children accused of witchcraft.

The growing reality of children being accused of witchcraft reveals a serious pattern of discrimination, social exclusion, violence, abandonment and sometimes even murder of innocent children. Vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, children with albinism, children without parental care as well as specially gifted children, are often the target of witchcraft accusations. Beyond branding a child as a witch, in itself a form of psychological violence, these accusations often lead to physical attacks against these children and other extreme human rights violations.

In some cases, traditional healers and local religious leaders condone witchcraft accusations, as it can serve as a lucrative business venture for them. Uninformed parents and families who believe, or have been led to believe, that their child is a witch often seek assistance to exorcise the “evil” spirit. Rituals are largely surrounded by secrecy and kept within the privacy of the household; aggravated by fear and superstition, they tend to remain hidden and persist.

In addition to social and cultural beliefs, political, social and economic factors play a role in this phenomenon. Misfortune and unexpected bad luck, sudden and incurable disease and death, often fuel the belief in witchcraft and that the child is to blame – generally targeting the most vulnerable and marginalized children. This in turn leads to the abuse and neglect that accused children face. Overall, “to be labelled a witch...is tantamount to being declared liable to be killed with impunity”.

As a result of all these factors, incidences of violence against children accused of witchcraft are rarely reported. They remain concealed and associated with a culture of impunity and tolerance of violence, with no opportunity for redress for child victims.

A few months ago, I met with young people from several West African countries to discuss children’s protection from harmful practices. They all voiced a deep concern at the high incidence of violence associated with witchcraft accusations, highlighting the deep isolation and loneliness of child victims, and the stigma, fear and ostracism surrounding their lives.

The plight of these children was dramatically captured by a drawing which pictured a little boy with albinism tied to a tree, very far away from the village, being attacked by a lion... It is an image I keep vividly in my mind.

Dear Friends,

The belief in witchcraft cuts across all social lines. It is a belief held by urban and rural populations, as well as by traditional and local religious groups. In today’s globalizing world, reports of witchcraft incidents are gaining increasing visibility across regions. Either in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Asia, in the Pacific and beyond, this phenomenon is systematically associated with serious acts of violence, starvation, abandonment and death.

In recent years, many countries have adopted significant legislative measures to prevent and address child witchcraft accusations. In many cases, the practice has been criminalized and protective measures have been adopted to safeguard children’s safety and human rights. These are developments we need to welcome. Yet, there is no time for complacency and we cannot afford to have children “legally protected on paper, but unprotected in reality”.

In countries with a plural legal system, potential tensions between statutory legislation and customary and religious laws can present significant challenges to implementation. To overcome such conflicts, it is important for national legislation to recognize the primacy of international human rights standards and for legal provisions to be fully in line with relevant treaties and norms.

But in addition, it is important to recognize that legislation does not have the magic power of changing superstition and deeply rooted beliefs. For this reason, additional measures need to be in place. Let me highlight some of them:

- a) **Supporting the protective role of the family:** Parents, as well as members of the extended family, need to be involved and supported in

discussions and in initiatives aiming at the protection of children's rights and promoting the abandonment of harmful practices. To address the social and economic drivers of this phenomenon, children and their families should benefit from basic social services of quality to ensure children's development, wellbeing and effective protection. These measures will be critical to avoid the abandonment of children accused of witchcraft and placing them in situations of risk.

b) Empowering children: Rather than being stigmatized and ostracized, children need to be supported to become the first line of protection and participate as influential actors in the process of social change that may lead to the abandonment of this practice. Awareness raising, information and education are crucial to provide children with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to enable them to prevent and address violence and discrimination.

c) Engaging strategic stakeholders: The involvement of political, religious, traditional and tribal leaders, as well as of community organizations is crucial in violence prevention and in the protection of children against witchcraft accusations. Wide and inclusive social mobilization efforts, including through drama, dance and songs, are in fact urgent to overcome fear and influence change in attitudes and behavior, to prevent child abandonment and ostracism, as well as to support the lasting abandonment of this harmful practice and safeguard the protection of children at all times.

d) Enacting a clear legal ban against all forms of violence against children: National legislation should include a clear and comprehensive prohibition of all manifestations of violence and harmful practices, supported by detailed provisions in relevant laws to secure the effective protection of children accused of witchcraft, and to provide for means of redress and accountability. Clear provisions on reporting, investigation and prosecution of incidents of violence against children are essential to fight impunity. These measures need in addition to be supported by information campaigns and other awareness raising initiatives to make the provisions of the law known and to encourage effective implementation.

e) Ensuring the recovery and reintegration of child victims: Even when protective laws are in place, implementation remains a challenge in the face of traditional attitudes and deep-rooted social conventions. It is therefore also crucial to provide for shelters to ensure the safety of children at risk, and to promote the physical and psychological recovery and reintegration of child victims in an environment that fosters their health, self-respect and dignity and supports the development of their full potential in life.

f) Lastly, promoting research and consolidating data will be indispensable to break the invisibility and secrecy of these practices, to inform the development of laws, policies and interventions, and very especially to protect children at risk.

Dear Friends

As we have seen from positive experiences around the world, these strategic recommendations can help prevent and promote the abandonment of these serious practices.

Let us therefore keep this topic high in the agenda and join hands to transform them into tangible action.