**Children's rights**

**Oh, and Somalia too**

May 5th 2002

From The Economist print edition

**America's almost solitary refusal to do the decent thing**

BEING a child can be no fun these days. According to UNICEF, 1.4m children under 15 are living with HIV, and 13m have been orphaned by AIDS. Between 1990 and 2000, conflict killed 2m children. Over 100m of primary age do not attend school, while 149m are malnourished. At the 1990 world summit for children, national leaders pledged to improve matters. On May 8th-10th, the UN general assembly will hold a special session on children to discuss what still needs to be done. The United States, as ever, is not in the mood to give the UN an easy ride.

Besides the now familiar bickering over family planning and abortion, discussions ahead of the session are snagging on the 1989 UN convention for the rights of the child. The convention—which sets standards for health care, education, social services and so on—is supported by all but two countries, the United States and Somalia. The Clinton administration signed the document in 1995, but it was never sent to Congress for ratification. And American negotiators have no intention of letting the rest of the world use the convention as a centrepiece for the special session.

Why the fuss? To begin with, convention members are not supposed to execute children. In America, however, 23 states allow the death penalty for people who were under 18 at the time of their crimes. Since 1985, 18 child offenders have been executed—half of them in Texas—and another 84 were on death row in November 2001. If it ratified the convention, America would be under pressure to give up this practice.

Another issue is whether children should be listened to. The treaty's opponents—who found a vocal advocate in Jesse Helms, the senior senator from North Carolina—maintain that the convention, which argues that children's views should be taken into account, undermines parental authority. Some have nightmarish visions of ungrateful brats suing their parents and of UN bureaucrats, in effect, taking over family life.

According to Howard Davidson of the American Bar Association, this is nonsense. The convention, he says, offers no basis for legal action, and children from the 191 countries that are part of the convention are not dragging their parents to court. In any case, adds Jo Becker of Human Rights Watch, the treaty, while outlining children's rights, clearly promotes the central role of parents and families.

Deep hostility to the UN in general also shapes America's attitude. According to Janice Crouse from Concerned Women for America, a conservative women's group, the international body is meddling far too much. Ms Crouse points out that American children are already protected by American laws, which are fine, and that the convention would only undercut national sovereignty.

Lawmakers, however, may feel differently. The convention's associated protocols—which condemn the use of child soldiers as well as child prostitution and pornography—are likely to be ratified by the Senate in the next few weeks. In the meantime, however, the convention itself is still sitting in the White House. It took over 30 years for the United States to ratify the genocide convention. Will children have to wait that long?
Children have often been the unwitting victims of battle but a new report suggests they are playing an increasingly active role in wars around the world. The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) has published a report entitled Children In Conflict: A Child Rights Emergency, to highlight the plight of hundreds of thousands of youngsters around the world. It says children in 28 war-torn countries, especially in Africa, have been propelled into the front line. Children under the age of 18 are often pressured into joining rebel groups or irregular army units.

Precocious machismo

They often volunteer out of a precocious sense of machismo or because it is the only way to get food or money. Sometimes their motive is simply revenge but often they are pushed into taking up arms against their will. Over the last decade, two million children have died as a result of armed conflict and six million have been crippled, blinded or brain damaged. In Rwanda more than 2,000 minors and adolescents are in custody accused of taking part in atrocities. In Angola 8,000 children under the age of five have had limbs amputated, mainly due to anti-personnel landmines. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has had a significant psychological impact on children; 55% of children in Sarajevo have been shot at and 75% of those in Mostar have had their homes attacked.

Minimum soldiering age

Unicef wants every nation to sign the Optional Protocol on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which would raise the minimum soldiering age worldwide from 15 to 18. A British Ministry of Defence spokesman said the UK was in negotiations about signing the protocol. He said they might accept restrictions on under-18s in frontline combat but not an outright recruitment ban. Most Nato countries have conscription and do not recruit under-18s. Unicef is also calling for action to reunite refugee families and wants western countries to provide counselling for traumatised children on top of ordinary emergency aid.

The organisation is also calling for sanctions, such as those on Iraq, to be analysed to discover the impact on children. It wants action to protect relief workers in war zones and prosecute those "using rape as a weapon of war". The author of the report, Maggie Black, found armed conflicts could increase child death rates by up to 24 times.

Survival strategy

Unicef has just begun a counselling programme in Kosovo for Albanian children traumatised by the exhumation of their relatives' bodies. Landmines are killing 800 children every month around the world but in El Salvador Unicef's landmines awareness programme has reduced casualties to nil. Children inevitably miss out on their education as a result of conflicts which damage their schools and drive away teachers.

Martin Bell, the MP and former war correspondent, says: "In my experience of these collapsed states there are loads of children wandering around without parents. "We need to create zones of peace where children can be protected from the ravages of war."
The government has been criticised for not doing enough to ensure that young people can have their say on issues which affect them. The criticism, from the charity Article XII which is run by children for children, comes as ministers publish a report setting out their efforts to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article XII promotes the rights of young people as set out in the Convention which gives it its name. In recent months the group has been talking to hundreds of children across the UK, gathering evidence for the United Nations about how they feel they are treated. "A lot of young people get a say on whether they have peas or carrots," says 14-year-old Francine Cole, "but not on the big issues which affect them in the future".

Anna Fisher, 12, agrees. "We talked to young people in schools, hospitals, youth clubs, all over. No-one was convinced that the government is doing enough." The last time that a UN committee examined the UK's progress in this area it identified serious concerns. Under the Convention, adopted ten years ago, the government is required to protect and promote children's rights.

Five years ago the then government was told more work was needed to tackle a number of issues including violence against children, poverty and growing inequality. Those in power, the committee claimed, were failing to acknowledge that children had a right to be consulted on issues which affect them.

The Health Minister John Hutton sets out the present government's efforts to address those concerns in Friday's report. The minister denies it is simply a list of good intentions. "We're improving services to children right across the board" he says.

Plans to overhaul the care system to make it more responsive to children's needs and to try to reduce the risk of abuse are evidence, he believes, of the government's determination to learn from mistakes made in the past. "It's important that we listen to children when we're formulating policy," he argues "to try to prevent the mistakes in the past, and we are doing that." The report outlines a range of initiatives the government has undertaken in the past two years.

'Sure Start' is a programme to provide support for 'under-3's' and their families in deprived areas, while 'Welfare to Work' is designed to reduce inequality. A ten year strategy for tackling drugs has been launched, and the government has begun a major programme to try to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies. But campaigners believe the government needs to do much more. The charity 'Save the Children' has also consulted young people in preparing its response to the government's report. It's disappointed that ministers still refuse to apply the Convention universally.

Policy adviser Madeleine Tearse deplores the fact that some young people are still detained in adult jails, and that asylum seekers and refugees are excluded from the protections offered by the convention. "Save the Children is particularly concerned about vulnerable young people such as asylum seeking children and gypsies," she says. "Their rights remain neglected, nearly a decade after the convention came into force in the UK'. The government's report will be sent to Geneva in the coming months, along with the evidence collected by groups such as Article XII and Save the Children. Five years ago ministers and officials were reported to be somewhat shocked by the robust criticisms of the UN committee. This time they'll be hoping their efforts will be received more favourably.
Australian laws 'violate children's rights'

Human rights groups in Australia want United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to intervene against laws requiring a mandatory jail sentence for minor offences in some parts of the country. Mr Annan is due to visit Australia on Friday.

Australia's human rights commission said the laws in the Northern Territory and Western Australia breached UN convention because they allow children to be put in prison. "The Human Rights Commission strongly urges the federal government to legislate so that these offensive laws are annulled," said commission president Alice Tay. Last week, a 15-year-old aboriginal boy jailed for stealing pens and paint hanged himself in a detention centre near Darwin. And on Wednesday, James Wurrarama, a 21-year-old aborigine, was sent to prison for a year for stealing a box of biscuits.

'Strong views'

Mr Annan is scheduled to meet the Northern Territory's chief minister, Dennis Burke, on Friday, and Prime Minister John Howard next week. A UN spokesman said the secretary-general was likely to raise the issue of mandatory sentencing while in Australia. "The secretary-general is known as a very strong advocate for human rights and has spoken very forcefully against violations of human rights," he said. "He won't shy away from giving his views."

Serial law-breaker

But Mr Burke - and the premier of Western Australia, Richard Court - warned Canberra to keep out of their affairs. Mr Burke told the BBC that Wurrarama had been breaking the law since 1995, and deserved the sentence he had received. "Since 1997, when the mandatory sentencing laws were brought in, he's been to the court on three convictions of property offences, and if you're up for the third time you'll go to jail for 12 months."

The Law Council of Australia, the UN children's fund (Unicef) and Amnesty International have also argued against the legislation, saying it breaks a number of international human rights conventions.
Iraq's children suffer as war looms

**War and sanctions have created a vulnerable population**

By Caroline Hawley
BBC Baghdad correspondent

The 1991 Gulf War has never really ended for most Iraqis, as the threat of another confrontation looms. Children fall sick due to inadequate water and sanitation systems. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), one in eight Iraqi children still do not make it to the age of five. The terrible toll of 12 years of sanctions can be seen in the hospital wards. Beds hold the tiny bodies of children like five-month-old Milad Hanoun, who has had acute diarrhoea for days.

In a country with no proper economy, the vast majority of Iraqi families rely on government food rations to survive - and some have to sell them to meet other basic needs. Unicef says the situation had been getting progressively better since the UN's oil-for-food programme was introduced. However, it and other aid agencies are now warning that war could wipe out recent gains and cause massive new suffering. "There's been a steady improvement in malnutrition levels since 1997," says Carel de Rooy, the Unicef representative in Baghdad. "But that is very tenuous. Malnutrition could revert to drastic levels if food distribution, which is undertaken flawlessly in this country, were to be interrupted."

**Poor education**

Last week, seven aid agencies operating in Iraq appealed to the British Government "not merely to take effective steps to avoid exacerbating the current humanitarian crisis but to seek ways to improve the humanitarian situation, while pursuing a diplomatic solution to the current crisis." The future of ordinary Iraqis is a major concern for aid workers. It warned: "Years of war and sanctions have already created an extremely vulnerable population whose ability to cope with any additional hardship is very limited." Children have been hardest hit, with a whole generation now growing up with their future blighted by sanctions. Take Iraq's collapsing education system. One in four Iraqi children now drop out of school. At the "Age of Prosperity" school in the poor Shia suburb of Saddam City, on the edge of Baghdad, it is not hard to see why. Children with no text books cram into classrooms with broken, boarded-up windows.

**Rehabilitation needed**

There is no running water in the school, no toilets and no electricity. "We don't even have the very basics," says hard-pressed teacher Leila Mizal, who earns less than $5 a month. "If something breaks we can't fix it. We do what we can but these are no conditions in which to teach." They are also no conditions in which to learn. "[At least] 8,000 schools need rehabilitation," says Mr de Rooy, of Unicef. "But that is not possible because there is no cash component to the oil-for-food programme. "Iraqi children's right to a quality education is being violated, and that's a concern for the future of the whole country."

As fears of a new war grow, the future of ordinary Iraqis is now a major concern for aid workers. They say that renewed confrontation "risks deepening and extending the current humanitarian crisis, creating large numbers of civilian casualties and extending human suffering".
Jordan has been tackling the issue of child abuse. Under the direction of Queen Rania it has opened the first centre for abused children in the Arab world. This month, Jordan's queen sponsored a conference on the subject, the largest of its kind in the region. Her activities are drawing the attention of Arab social workers eager to deal with the problem. In Jordan's traditional and family centred society, the issue is only just starting to be talked about openly.

Feeling special

Jordan's new centre for abused children does its best to make youngsters feel special. There is a party today for Lana. The eight-year-old girl has not had many in her short life.

It's a new subject that's being talked about now, and people are not so comfortable yet with it; we've come a long way in a short time, I think it will be much more easily spoken about soon. But thanks to the therapy and counselling she and her family received at the centre, her homecoming will be a happy one. The centre's clinical psychologist, Rajha Nasser, says Jordan's programme against child abuse is a groundbreaking project. "It's a new subject that's being talked about now, and people are not so comfortable yet with it; we've come a long way in a short time, I think it will be much more easily spoken about soon," Ms Nasser says.

New strategy

At the conference sponsored by Queen Rania, they are talking about the subject openly. She is using her influence to highlight the sensitive issue. Delegates met to draw up a strategy to combat violence against children in the Arab world. In a traditional society, religious leaders may be the best advocates of children's rights. Conference organiser Manal al-Sharif says one approach that might work in Jordan's conservative culture is support from religious figures. "The public listen to religious people; when they say verses from the Koran that says you are not permitted to hit your child or carry out an act of violence against them... so they are convinced by the religious figure speaking about this issue, because religion and tradition are tied together," Ms Sharif says.

Abandoned

The testimony of abuse victims at the conference, such as Fawaz Remah, should help get the message across. He is a 17-year-old Palestinian who was abandoned by his uncle while living in Saudi Arabia at the age of 13 and forced to fend for himself. He found some work to survive, but police put him in jail when they discovered he had no papers. "One of the guards was looking for a fight. I tried to avoid him but he and his friends hit me hard. They dragged me over the pavement, tied my arms and legs, and slashed me with a knife," Fawaz says. He was eventually deported to Jordan. But he now has no country and no family now.

Traditional society

Families are key in this traditional society, and the refuge for abused children works with many different relatives to try and solve problems of abuse. The centre carries out home visits to help monitor the situation of children who are believed to be at risk. I tagged along on one of these visits. Outside a tiny home, two little boys dig eagerly through a box of food in the courtyard, oblivious to the call to prayer from a nearby mosque. Psychologist Rajha Nasser came to see how they were doing and brought the goodies with her. The boys were beaten by their father, but with the help they and their parents receive, life is getting better. "The boys used to fight and repeat their father's bad words. Now they know right from wrong. The people at the centre also helped me and my husband," the boys' mother, Ra'idah, says.
Learning about rights

At a community centre, teenage girls gather to learn about their rights and how to respond to violence. Some parents also need to learn the difference between abuse and discipline. Education and prevention are at the heart of the safety programme. It prepares girls like Heba Mustafa to tackle the social reasons for abuse. "Our society sometimes denies girls the right to leave school to get married or help at home if the economic situation is bad. But I feel confident because I'm learning how to solve problems in a proper manner," Heba says. Ultimately this is a pioneering attempt to solve problems that have been hidden for a long time and it aims to strengthen both families and the whole of society.