

# **AFRICA: Millions of Children Falling Through the Cracks**

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By Thalif Deen

**UNITED NATIONS, Apr 21 (IPS)** - A significant proportion of the world's 2.2 billion children, many of whom are victims of violence, sexual abuse, labour exploitation and preventable diseases, are from the crisis-plagued African continent.

As the United Nations points out, too many of the world's children, largely African, have been "bought and sold, exploited and abused, harmed and orphaned."

Of the 11 countries where 20 percent or more of children die before the age of five, 10 are in Africa: Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger and Sierra Leone. The only non-African country on that list is Afghanistan.

"The conditions in many African countries, especially for children, are very grave," Dr Mustafa Ali, the Kenya-based secretary-general of the African Council of Religious Leaders, told IPS.

After a recent tour of several African countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, he lamented the fact that "in some countries, it is worsening every day".

The number of children living with HIV/AIDS increased from 1.5 million in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2007. And nearly 90 percent of all HIV-positive children are in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations.

Ali said that "increasing poverty has conspired with unrelenting preventable HIV/AIDS, as well as treatable malaria scourges, to destroy most what was left of the social structures that would traditionally take care of children."

"It is primarily because of poverty that these children would rather go and be enslaved to get food, while others find themselves trafficked -- some against their will -- for promises of a better life," said Dr Ali, who is also the coordinator in Africa for the Tokyo-based Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC).

The U.N. children's agency UNICEF recently warned that about 90,000 children in battle-scarred Somalia could die without immediate supplementary nutrition and therapeutic feeding.

UNICEF's Christian Balslev-Olesen says: "If we cannot maintain the activities that we have been running up to now, you will see a crisis."

The U.N. agency, which has appealed for 10 million dollars for its nutritional, water and sanitation programmes, has warned it may be forced to close down some of its centres in Somalia if adequate funding is not received.

As the fighting continues in Somalia, the U.N. Security Council is discussing a proposal for the creation of a new peacekeeping force for that country.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the U.N. Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, says that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) alone, thousands of children are victims of forced military conscription and sexual violence.

She says the positive news coming out of Africa is that with the conclusion of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the number of child soldiers may have gone down: from about 300,000 to about 250,000.

But according to U.N. estimates, there is still an unacceptable number of children under military conscription -- mostly forced conscription and primarily in Africa.

Asked to what extent African nations themselves could be blamed for the current situation, Ali said that "most leaders and bureaucrats in Africa are responsible for the mess children are in today. They must take responsibility for this."

He said there are others who have directly caused untold suffering to children, and conscripted children to savagery, turning them into war machines.

"They must never be allowed to ever walk free again," he said. "I just came back from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote D'Ivoire where I saw firsthand what the conflict has done to children in these countries."

Charles Taylor (the former president of Liberia, now on trial before the International Criminal Court in the Hague), and all the other warlords, including some who are still ministers and parliamentarians in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, must be held fully accountable for their crimes against children and against humanity, Ali added.

He also stressed that "morally and ethically speaking, countries of the West must stop selling arms to the African countries".

"There can be no justification whatsoever for selling arms to African countries whose population is starving and cannot afford to care for its children," he added.

Asked what role religion and ethics education can play in focusing on the plight of African children, and particularly the Global Network of Religions for Children, he said the GNRC's unique multi-faith approach will go a long way "in educating ourselves on the need to change our own environment and that of the others -- for the better."

He said it is in line with the cherished African traditional philosophy of "ubuntu" -- meaning that "we must take care of each other for all of us to be secure." The massive spiritual, moral and social assets of religions can firmly ensure that most of the problems affecting children can be solved if people just work together, he argued.

Asked if the United Nations and the international community are doing enough to help African children, he said: "The U.N., its agencies and the international community have done extremely very little to alleviate the suffering of these children."

"There is too much waste and bureaucratic processes," Ali charged. "In Africa, you no longer need to hold poverty and development workshops, waste money on expensive researches and enquiries on the levels of poverty." Instead, he said that these funds could be redirected to save African lives, one of which is lost every three seconds because of a preventable or treatable cause.