

**Address by Lt. General Romeo Dallaire, Founder of the Romeo Dallaire
Child Soldiers Initiative**

**The International Criminal Court (ICC), Office of the Prosecutor's
Launch of the Policy on Children**

16th November 2016, the Hague

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, and Chief Prosecutor Bensouda, I thank you for this profound opportunity to address you on such an historic occasion – the launch of the Policy on Children. A great advocate of children's rights, President Nelson Mandela once stated: *"There can be no keener reflection of a society, than in how it treats its children."*

Children are rarely given visibility or voice in matters that affect their wellbeing. We are unfortunately living in an era in which children are being used and abused in armed conflicts to fight adult wars. Children are caught in conflicts that violate their basic rights in a multitude of ways, from forcible displacement, to enduring sexual violence, to denial

of humanitarian space, to attacks on schools, to being maimed and killed as well as being recruited and used as soldiers. The complexity of these wars requires shifts in how we address their root causes as well as their impacts. This is why I founded the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, which aims to progressively eliminate the use of children as weapons of war. Our work is prevention focused and addresses critical gaps in the holistic approach to child protection by working from a security sector perspective that prioritizes the need to see the prevention of the use of children as weapons of war in order to improve child protection and to prevent conflict overall. Our approach recognizes that long-term shifts in practices and policy must be accompanied by tangible solutions and partnerships.

Two years ago when we were approached by the Chief Prosecutor to assist her efforts to end impunity for those who commit the worst human rights violations against children globally, we recognised this was a critical piece to achieving effective prevention and response to

the plight of children affected by war. Over the past two years, through this collaboration, we have helped to conduct series of roundtables around the world with children and youth who have been directly affected by war from Somalia, to Sierra Leone, to the DRC, and Colombia and even amongst young people in Canada, to provide insights to the Office of The Prosecutor. As a result, key findings from the roundtables have helped to shape the policy that has been launched today.

We see this partnership providing a key bridge to those who may not otherwise be willing to listen to messages that focus on children or international legal norms. As we conduct advocacy and training efforts amongst police, military and prison personnel globally on how to improve their interactions with children in armed conflict, the signalling of the importance placed upon the protection of children by the ICC and the Office of the Prosecutor and the repercussions to those who fail to respect children's rights is a critical message the Dallaire Initiative

will continue to highlight. Our proven ability to get the security sector actors to change their attitudes and behaviours with respect to children in armed conflict can provide inroads to dialogue that will help to translate the new policy's intentions into practical application.

Protecting children should be a priority for anyone engaged in the efforts to attain peace and security. It is no longer acceptable to relegate these issues to the bottom of the larger agenda, they must be front and centre to create a Child Rights Upfront approach. Let us start here and now to echo this message far beyond this room – for the children that are affected now and for the generations to come.

I thank the Office of the Prosecutor staff, as well as my Dallaire Initiative staff, for working so diligently towards this momentous occasion. Thank you again for this opportunity to be heard by all of you and for your commitment to children.