

ASIA PACIFIC

Afghans Plan to Stop Recruiting Children as Police

By ROD NORDLAND JAN. 29, 2011

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan is expected to sign a formal agreement with the United Nations on Sunday to stop the recruitment of children into its police forces and ban the common practice of boys being used as sex slaves by military commanders, according to Afghan and United Nations officials.

The effort by Afghanistan's international backers to rapidly expand the country's police and military forces has had the unintended consequence of drawing many under-age boys into service, the officials conceded.

Stung by Afghanistan's inclusion on the United Nations' blacklist of countries where child soldiers are commonly used, like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, government leaders are expected to sign an undertaking with Radhika Coomaraswamy, the secretary general's special representative for children and armed conflict, during her visit to Kabul on Sunday, the officials said.

With the agreement on an action plan to combat the problem, the government will for the first time officially acknowledge the problem of child sex slaves. As part of the Afghan tradition of *bacha bazi*, literally "boy play," boys as young as 9 are dressed as girls and trained to dance for male audiences, then prostituted in an auction to the highest bidder. Many powerful men, particularly commanders in the military and the police, keep such boys, often dressed in uniforms, as constant companions for sexual purposes.

United Nations officials say they believe that there are hundreds of cases of under-age boys in the police, “mostly because of falsification of papers, also bribes, and there’s been a big push to get the numbers up,” one official said.

Afghanistan hopes that its participation in the action plan will lead to the removal of the Afghan National Police from the list of organizations condemned by the United Nations for using children in armed conflict. The others in Afghanistan also include the Taliban, the Haqqani network and the Islamic Party, insurgent groups that often use children to hide bombs, and in some cases to act as suicide bombers.

In all, 13 countries are on the United Nations list of those with “grave violations against children in armed conflict.” In most of those countries, however, the organizations responsible are rebels and insurgents, rather than the national police or military.

NATO officials have been aware of the recruitment problem for some time, and the former military commander, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, issued an order in 2010 warning troops to be on the lookout for under-age recruits. NATO trainers hope to add an additional 23,000 police officers by next October, part of a planned 42 percent increase in the country’s security forces by 2012.

Asked about the military’s policy regarding commanders who abuse children, a spokesman for the NATO-led military alliance, Lt. Col. John L. Dorrian, said that if any members of the military encountered such abuse they would be obliged to report it. But in the past year, he said, he was not aware of any such reports.

The custom, at least 300 years old in Central Asia, remains notoriously widespread in parts of Afghanistan. The former governor of Kandahar Province, Gul Agha Shirzai, an ex-warlord and close ally of the Americans who is now the governor of Nangarhar Province, has been seen at many public events with teenaged boys or young men with heavy makeup, although a spokesman for his office has denied that they were bacha bazi.

“The practice of bacha bazi and sexual abuse against boys is also a matter of

concern,” Ms. Coomaraswamy said in a report to the Security Council last April. “The general climate of impunity, and the vacuum in rule of law, has adversely affected the reporting of sexual violence and abuse against children.”

Ms. Coomaraswamy found a strong ally in Afghanistan at the influential Ulema Council, the highest religious body in the country, which condemns both the recruitment of children and their sexual abuse as un-Islamic. The head of the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, also lobbied officials about it, after receiving 4,000 petitions condemning the lack of efforts to end child sexual abuse in the security forces, officials said.

The practice of bacha bazi is known throughout Afghanistan but is particularly notorious in Kandahar. The Taliban originally came to prominence in Kandahar when they intervened in a fight between two pedophile warlords over the possession of a coveted dancing boy. The Taliban also oppose the practice, and banned it when they were in power.

“While in many areas of southern Afghanistan such treatment of boys appears to be shrouded in some sense of secrecy, in Kandahar it constitutes an openly celebrated cultural tradition,” a Pentagon consultant wrote in a report on Pashtun sexuality prepared for British and American troops in 2009.

Asila Wardak, the head of human rights issues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one of the authors of the plan agreed to with the United Nations, said President Hamid Karzai had ordered his government to tackle the issue because he was disturbed to see “Afghanistan put on the black list of the U.N.”

“There are a lot of measures to combat the sexual abuse of children,” she said, including specific provision for the prosecution of commanders found complicit. The problem of bacha bazi, she said, “has existed since time I can remember, but this is the first time the government is taking practical steps against it.”

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