



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 13: Protecting Children from War

From the AP Editorial Desk

It's hard to argue with a call to "protect children from war." But is this directive – one of 10 that UNICEF is asking all people to 'Say Yes' to – appropriate for the broad spectrum of civil society actors who constitute the "Global Movement for Children?"

In India, the question takes on a profound significance. Here, a government working to prevent the Balkanization of the country by separatist militias, strictly controls information and access to the country's troubled northern states of Jammu & Kashmir, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Add to this a fragile peace along the nuclear-charged Indo-Pak border and you have what former U.S. President Bill Clinton calls "the most dangerous place on Earth."

And with America's so-called "war against terrorism" now in full force in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan, the local, regional, and global stakes of controlling conflicts, clashes and consciousness in India, are higher than they've ever been.



These days, there are no peace marches through Srinagar, the capital of Indian-controlled Kashmir. There are no sit-ins in Manipur. There are no hunger strikes in Nagaland. And in the western state of Gujarat – which has experienced some of the worst violence between Muslims and Hindus in decades – there has been insufficient outrage over the massacres of hundreds of innocents under the watch of the ruling government Bharatiya Janata Party. In each of these conflict zones, perhaps the greatest tragedy has been the crippling of civil society.

It would be a mistake to announce the end of the peace movement in the country, but it would also be a mistake to overlook the difficulties of mobilizing anyone but the government to ensure that the ravages of war don't make victims of the youngest.

Not surprisingly, UNICEF's India country office does not support any programming that directly addresses the issue of children and armed conflict. Savita Naqvi-Varde, Communications Chief for the country office, says some studies have been commissioned and discussions are ongoing in an effort to build "a knowledge base to better understand the situation."

But with daily killings in Kashmir and young lives wasting away from neglect and fear in northeastern states such as Manipur and Nagaland, what's there to understand? How long can children in these most troubled areas wait? And what can a call to everyday citizens to protect children from war possibly mean in situations of conflict such as those in India?

UNICEF offers one alternative in Nagaland. They call their program "Imagine Nagaland" and it's an attempt to foster a culture of peace and freedom through a series of inter-generational workshops – the first ever in the state.

Nagaland is comprised of sixteen major tribes and many more sub-tribes, all of which differ along cultural and linguistic lines. Eighty percent of the state is Christian. A Tibetan-Burmese tribe called Naga is its primary inhabitant. Nagas have resisted incorporation into India on the grounds that they share no cultural or ethnic similarities with people from the rest of the country. Though Nagaland became an Indian state in 1963, violent clashes between militias and the Indian army have shown no signs of letting up. At one point the Indian army stationed 100,000 soldiers, or one-third of its entire reserve, to stand guard over a population of 300,000. A fragile ceasefire was announced in 1998.

The "Imagine Nagaland" initiative has enrolled local community leaders to interview workshop participants on the basis of four different phases of personal and social development: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. So far, more than one thousand interviews have been conducted as part of the Discovery phase. Another twenty thousand interviews have yet to be completed. Each of the interviews is intended to spur six additional interviews that will extend the conversation about the region's future into the most remote pockets of the state and bring everyone into the dialogue.

Workshops have encouraged discussion around five themes: Unity & Peace; Ecology & Development; Education & Employment; Equitable Development; Strengthening the Rule of Law. One-third of the participants have been young people. They participated side by side with high and low-level government officials, business leaders, teachers, church leaders and activists.

"O' future Nagas, let's stop this evil. Let there be peace again. Stop the gun culture, it's not ours. For we cannot survive in this pool of hatred, conflict and corruption." These were the words of one young participant in the workshops that began in April 2001. Over and over, similar sentiments poured forth in the workshops and through the individual interviews with these "dream makers." Education and gender discrimination were two of the priority issues for young participants. Others focused on protecting the environment from the devastation of war and still others called for economic revitalization especially in the form of increased tourism to this lush, green, and beautiful section of India. By the close of the first day of meetings young people had produced a wide range of poems, paintings, and slogans to dispel any notions that war was preferable to peace.

But, of course, the separatist violence and state control that have plagued this state since Independence, continue. What effect, if any, the "Imagine Nagaland" initiative will eventually have in the territory is unclear, to say the least. Nevertheless, it is a welcome start in re-engaging

civil society in a part of a country in a part of a country where so much is at stake in situations of conflict and armed insurgency.

Ultimately, however, Nagaland is one of India's smallest states. In the charged and fragile military climate of Kashmir, hope at the community level seems to be rapidly disappearing. There, in a place that some still call a valley of paradise, even UNICEF finds it hard to consider what ordinary citizens and committed activists could do to protect children – and others – from war.