

Bethlehem Declaration: One Million Child Behind Bars

1. We, the participants at the Defence for Children International, International Conference "Kids Behind Bars --A Child Rights Perspective",
2. Gathered here in Bethlehem, Occupied Palestinian Territory in July 2005,
3. Determined to advance the goals of child rights as embodied in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),
4. Recognize that these rights are applicable without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status,
5. Affirming the importance of the principles of justice, humane treatment, due process, rehabilitation and reintegration for children in conflict with the law ,
6. Acknowledge the voices of all children everywhere, particularly those behind bars, and taking note of the diversity of children and our responsibility to ensure that these voices are heard,
7. Recognize that, while the rights of children have advanced in some important respects in the 16 years since the signing of the CRC, the sphere of juvenile justice has remained a marginal point on the international agenda and child prisoners are largely forgotten and out of sight.
8. Also recognize that holding children in prisons and other detention facilities places great strain on their emotional, mental and physical development and also puts them at risk of being denied appropriate health care and education and in the worst cases, becoming victims of physical or mental abuse.
9. Furthermore recognize that this situation is exacerbated by the increasing poverty that is affecting the lives of the majority of the world's people, in particular women and children, with origins in both the national and international domains,
10. Understand that attempts at juvenile justice reform are always difficult because there are so many different bodies involved, each with their own competing perspectives and vested interests
11. Dedicate ourselves unreservedly to addressing these problems and ensuring that the issue of child prisoners is placed firmly on the international agenda in order to ensure the principles of juvenile justice that are embodied in the CRC are extended to every child on the planet.

We reaffirm our commitment to:

12. The equal rights and inherent human dignity of all members of the human family enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments;

13. Strengthen, uphold and promote the principles embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, particularly in regards to the rights of children deprived of their liberty
14. Defend the rights of children as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms;
15. The basic principle that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies
16. Achieve the full and effective implementation of the principles of the CRC in regards to juvenile justice; in particular the principle that the "arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and only then as a measure of last resort for the shortest appropriate period of time.",

We are deeply concerned that:

17. World wide there are an estimated one million minors behind bars on any given day.
18. Many children deprived of their liberty suffer abuses of some sort, whether through the denial of their civil, social and cultural rights, through outright violence and abuse during the detention process, or through discrimination on their release;
19. The basic principles of the child's best interest and detention or imprisonment as a measure of last resort is ignored by many governments around the world,
20. Young people in the juvenile justice system are generally seen as lawbreakers and a threat to the public order, rather than vulnerable children at risk, who require understanding and assistance,
21. Children continue to be detained as political prisoners; particularly from countries and regions such as Angola, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, that suffer from war, civil conflict or military occupation,
22. Children continue to be subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment while in detention.
23. Girl children continue to be detained and imprisoned, denied their specific needs and often subject to sexual abuse and harassment while in detention,
24. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and the USA continue to impose capital punishment and life imprisonment without possibility of release for persons below eighteen years of age,
25. Children behind bars are often denied their basic right to continue education; the right to receive adequate health care and legal assistance.
26. Children in many countries are denied the right to challenge the legality of the deprivation of their liberty before a court or other competent, independent and impartial authority, and to a prompt decision on any such action;

We resolve to:

27. Intensify efforts and actions to achieve the goals of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in regards to children deprived of their right to liberty;
28. Strengthen the appreciation that global poverty and denial of basic human rights is a central causal factor in exacerbating the number of children who come into conflict with the law and that efforts to redress economic inequality must be integral to our juvenile justice advocacy work,
29. Improve the understanding that juvenile justice is deeply interconnected with other issues of social justice and human rights,
30. Take all necessary measures to achieve liberty for children detained as political prisoners or in contravention of the law;
31. Work to achieve international acceptance of a minimum standardized age of criminal responsibility of 15 years
32. Lobby governments to recognize that the short-term protection to society gained by imprisoning children can be achieved in more humane and affordable ways by investing in programs known to reduce crime in the community and by working to develop young people who have been in conflict with the law.;
33. Work to strengthen and develop links, joint efforts and campaigns between child rights advocates on an international level who are active around the issue of juvenile justice;
34. Collaborate closely with UN bodies such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure that the issue of juvenile justice is accorded high priority in all spheres of work
35. Strengthen bodies such as the International Network on Juvenile Justice (INJJ) in support of their efforts to build, develop and improve juvenile justice systems worldwide,
36. Promote efforts to improve the participation of children, particularly those behind bars; in all our advocacy work,