

STATE PARTY EXAMINATION OF SINGAPORE'S INITIAL REPORT ON THE OPTIONAL PROTOCOL ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

67TH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

1-19 SEPTEMBER 2014

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Singapore ratified the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) on 23 September 2003. On 11 December 2008 the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) examined the initial periodic report Singapore. Singapore has made a declaration upon ratification of OPAC which outlines their national age for enlistment and safeguards for ensuring enlistment is voluntary.

Opening Comments

The Head of the State party delegation, Ms. LOW Yen Ling, from the Ministry of Social and Family Development as well as Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, was accompanied by representatives from the Ministries of Health, Defence, and from the Permanent Mission to Geneva. She stated that the State party's vision on children's rights included ensuring that the best interest of the child was a paramount consideration in national policies and that that family was the cornerstone of the country. Ms. Yen Ling then outlined that the National Conscription System was introduced in 1967 for defence purposes. According with this, every male citizen or permanent resident had compulsory enlistment at 18 with possibility of deferral, in line with the standards of OPAC. However, a programme called the Voluntary Early Enlistment Scheme (VEES) allowed 16.5 year olds to enlist earlier.

The country Rapporteur, Mr. Gusto, welcomed the delegation and hoped that there would be a constructive dialogue on their first report of OPAC.

General Measures of Implementation

Dissemination and training

The Committee noted the State report included information on awareness raising campaigns, and asked for more information, including on civil society involvement. The delegation informed that since ratification, the State had disseminated information on OPAC by several methods, including media campaigns via radio and the government's gazette. Furthermore, men who were required to serve received information on OPAC when they turned 16.5 years old. Furthermore, the State disseminated books and leaflets to inform parents, teachers, and children on the CRC and the OPAC. The State had no current curriculum in schools integrating the OPAC, but the government would explore the possibility of developing one.

Information relating to non-state actors

The Committee asked what kind of protection children who were recruited in the State party by non-state actors to participate in hostilities abroad received. The delegation replied that there had been no instances of this to date, however, it noted that it relied on network of support systems to identify and address children at risk.

The Committee asked if there was a specific provision in the criminal code regarding irregular conscription of boys under the age of 18 by non-state actors. The Committee further expressed its concerns that the recruitment of children was not punished properly under law. The delegation responded that chapter 1, section 5 of the Internal Security Act stated that anyone who organises or trains armed forces or for the use of force, will be subject to criminal penalties including jail time. The Committee further asked if VEES participants were ever used as part of UN peacekeeping missions. The delegation responded that no VEES enlistees had been involved in peacekeeping operations, nor would they be permitted to.

Prevention

The Committee expressed concern that the Ministry of Defence was acting as official complaints mechanism for the National Military Service. It asked if there were considerations to change this and establish an independent and impartial mechanism. The delegation responded that an independent group ran hotlines and that the status of the enlistee would not be affected by submitting a complaint. There were several options in which to report, including telephone, website, emails. Recruits were permitted to bring their own hand phones into camps, and there were phones available in barracks. They were given their own personal time each evening, which gave time to utilise the mechanism. The Committee asked what training was given to the complaint mechanism's personnel and how many complaints were filed on average. The delegation responded that there was no complaints given on OPAC related subjects to date. Both civilian and military personnel work in the complaint mechanism.

Prohibition and related matters

The Committee noted that there were low enrolment numbers in VEES and asked for specific figures. It also asked if VEES enlistees could leave the armed forces, and if so, how many requests to leave were generally received. The Committee moved on asking at what age youth enrolled in VEES would actually begin training, after they had gone through the check and

balance system. The delegation responded that there were less than 10 VEES enlistees each year, and that VEES was only for youth keen to finish their service. VEES recruits would be able to drop out at request, but there had been no requests to date. Applicants were subject to comprehensive checks, screening and interviews, with the entire process taking about 9 months. The delegation informed that by the time recruits began their service, they had obtained 17 or 17.5 years of age.

Protection

The Committee further asked if corporal punishment was legal within the military legal system, and specifically if it could be used towards VEES recruits. The delegation provided that corporal punishment was currently legal, but was used sparingly. Additionally, the permission of the Ministry of Defence was needed before punishment was carried out. The delegation stated they would be willing to discuss making corporal punishment legal only for those over 18.

International assistance and Cooperation

Refugee and Asylum seeking children

The Committee questioned the lack of rules and mechanisms to identify refugee children and asylum seekers that had been involved in armed conflicts. The Committee further asked about cases of *refoulement* and whether the State would consider ratifying the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. The delegation responded that the State party respected the principle of *non-refoulement*. Since the State could not offer asylum, the Ministry of Home Affairs would facilitate these children into a third country and the Minister of Social Development would ensure their well-being while in the State. However, the delegation noted that there had been no instances where a former child soldier had been identified in Singapore.

Extradition and Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction

The Committee asked if the State party could extradite to countries that were not part of the Commonwealth. The delegation responded that currently the State only practiced extradition to countries from the Commonwealth or countries with which it had unilateral extradition agreements. The Committee further asked why extraterritorial jurisdiction was limited to the Geneva Conventions. The delegation explained that with the Geneva Conventions it could address a significant number of issues. The Committee asked about the State's policy in relation to extradition for crimes under the OPAC. The delegation responded that there was no specific policy, but it would be dependent on domestic legislation and on specific case facts.

Provision of Weapons

The Committee noted that the State manufactured weapons and guns, and asked what regulations existed and if this was a State run or private industry. The delegation replied that all private and State actors willing to export arms needed to obtain a permit from the State. The Committee further asked what sanctions were placed on those who violated this regulation. The delegation said that sanctions would vary from a fine between 100,000 and 200,000 Fijian dollars to 2-3 years of imprisonment.

Concluding remarks

Ms. LOW Yen Ling reiterated that the State was fully committed to fulfilling its obligations under the OPAC. She stated that the government believed that children were the future and they would make every effort to protect them. Additionally, the State would continue to make all necessary improvements to ensure that welfare and the best interests of children were protected.

The country Rapporteur, Mr. Gusto, thanked the delegation for the interactive dialogue and for providing detailed information and clarifications on the implementation of the OPAC.