

Pakistan lagging in protecting child rights: UN

■ UNCRC calls for review of Hudood Ordinances ■ Demands laws to stop sexual abuse, honour crimes

By Waqar Gillani

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LAHORE: Pakistan's record in protecting children's rights is unsatisfactory and the government should make urgent arrangements to address the growing problem, according to a report by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Pakistan.

In its second report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the UN committee urges the government to review the Hudood and Zina ordinances, make laws to stop sexual abuse and exploitation of children and prepare a three-year programme to meet CRC requirements.

Pakistan has signed and ratified the CRC.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has published a booklet on the UNCRC observations and recommendations. The booklet, titled 'Rights of Pakistani Children - The Task Ahead'.

"The UNCRC has a right to question the people at the helm on their continued failure to secure children's rights and has a right to monitor the state's efforts to fulfil its obligations in the CRC," the HRC report says. The UNCRC praises some steps taken by Pakistan since 1997 when it ratified the CRC and adopted the International Labour Organisation Convention of 1982 on the worst forms of child labour, such as the formulation of a revised national

plan of action and a code of ethics for the media on reporting of children's issues; introducing an ordinance in 2002 for the prevention and control of human trafficking and an ordinance for the protection of breastfeeding and child nutrition; and the Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1995 and the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance of 2000.

The UN committee's report says all organisations working for children's rights should monitor the government's efforts to implement the CRC.

Recommendations: The committee said Pakistan should ensure the CRC provisions are enforced in the Northern Area and the tribal areas. The Hudood Ordinances should be made compatible with the CRC. The government should ensure that there is no discrimination for crimes of honour and that these are promptly prosecuted.

The UNCRC suggested that Section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code be repealed, all forms of corporal punishment be prohibited, sentences of whipping be abolished, the minimum age for criminal responsibility be raised to an internationally acceptable level, a minimum age for employment in accordance with international standards be introduced and efforts to eradicate child labour be increased.

The UNCRC demanded the implementation of ILO Convention 138 and 182, establishment of a com-

prehensive child labour monitoring system, ratification of the optional protocols to the CRC on the sale of children, child abuse and child pornography and the involvement of children in armed conflict.

The report also asked the government to ensure free primary education, abolish the age limit that prohibits access to primary education after age 12, allocate adequate resources to improve the quality and access to education, remove disparities in access to education, introduce and systemise human rights education in schools, and eliminate corporal punishment in schools. The UNCRC said the government should ensure the protection of children from maltreatment in madrassas, strengthen the reform of madrassas, and ensure that children under 15 are not involved in hostilities and are not recruited forcibly.

The committee said the government should ensure that the principle of the best interests of the child is appropriately integrated in all legislation, and judicial and administrative decisions and that customary laws do not obstruct the general principle. The government should address the committee's previous recommendations that had not been implemented and review the existing laws and regulations to implement the CRC, said the report. The report said that the government should strengthen cooperation with non-government organisations in the long-term.

The government also needed to do more to prevent early or forced marriages. Serious efforts should be made to ensure that all children, particularly minority children and special children, enjoyed all rights given in the CRC. The committee demanded that the government investigate the nature and extent of violence against children through a child sensitive judicial procedure, add a definition of torture to the Constitution and ratify the Convention Against Torture, assess the scope and causes of child abuse and neglect, gather data on child abuse and neglect and provide services for the physical and psychological rehabilitation to victims. The government should also clearly define sexual abuse in laws.

The report stated that the government should ensure that cases of runaway children were registered and investigated and national and regional strategies on prevention and suppression of sexual exploitation and trafficking are prepared. The UNCRC expected that Pakistan would improve its reporting record and submit its third and fourth reports in one consolidated report by December 11, 2007. It observed that the agenda before Pakistan was quite difficult. "The first thing expected from the government is to prioritise its tasks and the adoption of a 3-year crash programme," said the report.