



Security Council

Distr.: General
11 November 2020

Original: English

Children and armed conflict in Mali

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the third report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali. It covers the period from 1 July 2017 to 31 March 2020 and the information provided focuses on the six grave violations committed against children, the perpetrators thereof and the context in which the violations took place.

The report focuses on the central and northern regions of Mali and sets out the trends and patterns of grave violations against children by all parties to the conflict. Details of progress made in addressing grave violations against children are also provided.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations to end and prevent grave violations against children in Mali and improve the protection of children.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, is the third report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. It covers the period from 1 July 2017 to 31 March 2020 and describes trends and patterns of grave violations against children that have occurred since the previous report ([S/2018/136](#)) and the progress made in ending and preventing such violations, in follow-up to the recommendations contained in the previous report and to the conclusions of the Working Group ([S/AC.51/2018/1/Rev.1](#)). The violations presented herein have been verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in Mali, which is co-chaired by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations are identified. The ability to verify information was at times hampered by insecurity or access restrictions. Therefore, the information contained herein does not represent the full scale of violations committed in Mali during the reporting period.

2. The report is focused on trends of violations in central and northern regions of Mali perpetrated by all parties to conflict, including armed groups that have formed since the previous report of the Secretary-General. In the annexes to the most recent report on children and armed conflict ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)), Ansar Eddine, Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and Mouvement pour l'unification et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) were listed for the recruitment and use of children and for perpetrating rape and other forms of sexual violence against children. Platform, including affiliated groups, was listed for the recruitment and use of children.

II. Overview of the political and security situation

3. Presidential elections that resulted in the re-election of the then-sitting President were held on 29 July 2018 and legislative elections were held on 29 March 2020. The reporting period witnessed the signature of the Pact for Peace in Mali between the Government of Mali and the United Nations in October 2018, representing a renewed momentum to pursue and accelerate a more inclusive peace process. The inclusive national dialogue was held from October to December 2019, with sessions at the local, district and regional levels with representatives of political parties and civil society, including women and youth groups and the diaspora. Since the end of the reporting period and beyond the scope of this report, the situation deteriorated significantly and culminated in a coup d'état, on 18 August 2020. At the time of preparing the present report, in September 2020, a transitional Government had been appointed (see [S/2020/952](#)).

4. Progress regarding the extension of state authority in the north, the cantonment of combatants and the integration of armed groups into national security mechanisms, as provided for under the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015, remained slow. Nevertheless, there were noteworthy developments regarding justice and the rule of law. The National Accord Act (Loi d'entente nationale) was promulgated in July 2019, outlining measures aimed at fostering reconciliation following the crisis of 2012. The measures include the cessation of prosecution against those who may have committed crimes but have expressed repentance, the compensation of victims and the reintegration into society of those who have renounced violence. The scope of the law excludes war crimes, crimes against humanity, rape and crimes that are not subject to a statute of limitations. The law

extending the jurisdiction of the Specialized Judicial Unit to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime¹ to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, which will provide the basis for the Unit to prosecute perpetrators of large-scale attacks on civilians, was promulgated in July 2019. As at 5 September 2019, the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission had received 16,000 testimonies, of which 660 came from children. In December 2019, a first public pilot hearing focused on violence against children, among other issues, was held and will inform five more hearings scheduled for 2020 and 2021.

5. Progress was made with regard to the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme required by the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, with pre-screening prior to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of over 74,000 former combatants in Gao, Ménaka, Mopti, Kidal and Timbuktu Regions. An accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and integration process for combatants in the framework of the Operational Coordination Mechanism² was launched in November 2018 by the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and the Commission on Integration, as called for in the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation. As of 7 May 2020, 1,189 military personnel were deployed to northern Mali as part of the reconstituted units of the national armed forces. A total of 1,330 former armed groups combatants were integrated into the Malian Defence and Security Forces.

6. The security situation in central and northern Mali remained volatile and in 2019 the parliament adopted a bill extending for one year the nationwide state of emergency in place since November 2015. The period was marked by anti-terrorist operations by national and international forces, confrontations between armed groups and their respective communities, as well as carjackings and targeted killings across the country. Attacks and threats of attacks against hospitals, schools and protected personnel and an increase in the number of closed schools, abductions, armed banditry and ambushes continued to affect children. Furthermore, central Mali was caught in a spiral of violence and retaliation due to growing intercommunal conflict exacerbated by the presence of armed groups, including those designated by the United Nations as terrorists. The area witnessed violent attacks against the civilian population, causing killings and mass displacement and negatively affecting children's lives and welfare. For instance, in March 2019, the attack on Ogossogou village, in Mopti Region, by Dozo traditional hunters resulted in at least 85 children being killed. Large numbers of smaller scale attacks against villages, including retaliatory acts, also continued. Since February 2018, in an attempt to mitigate against security threats, the Government restricted the circulation of motorcycles and pick-up vehicles in cercles of Mopti, Ségou and Timbuktu Regions.

7. Armed attacks became more sophisticated, increasingly frequent and well-coordinated, employing tactics such as suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, remote-controlled explosive devices and indirect fire. The lack of control by armed groups signatories to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation over some of the areas in which they operate gave way to a substantial increase in the activities of groups designated by the United Nations as terrorists, such as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM),³ targeting national forces, MINUSMA forces and

¹ Decree No. 2015-0723 on the organization and working methods of the Specialized Judicial Unit dealing with counter-terrorism and transnational organized crime was adopted on 9 November 2015.

² Composed of members of the Malian Defence and Security Forces and armed groups signatories to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, it is responsible for the progressive redeployment of the national armed forces in northern Mali, the coordination of mixed patrols and for securing cantonment sites and protecting interim authorities.

³ English translation: Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, coalition of groups designated as terrorists including Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Eddine, Front de libération du Macina (FLM), and Al-Mourabitoun.

international forces, as well as civilians. Groups designated as terrorists expanded their influence in many regions and some acted as the main security providers, thus yielding various levels of acceptance from local communities.

8. Humanitarian access in northern and central Mali became increasingly challenging owing to criminality, the activities of armed groups and military operations. The number of security incidents affecting humanitarians, mostly banditry-related, remained high. The humanitarian situation was marked by a sharp increase in the number of internally displaced persons in central and northern Mali. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the number of persons displaced has more than doubled since 2019, with 250,998 internally displaced persons registered in April 2020 and Mopti Region hosting the largest displaced population (102,481). By the end of the reporting period, a total of 4.3 million people, 77 per cent of whom were women and children, were in need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.1 million people compared with 2019. By the end of March 2020, all schools had closed nationwide owing to the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

III. Parties to the conflict in Mali

9. Since the previous report, new and splinter armed groups have emerged, and some increased their violent activities, particularly in central Mali. The self-declared self-defence group Dan Na Ambassagou⁴ (DNA) was created in November 2016 in Mopti Region with the aim of filling the void, in the absence of state authorities, to protect Dogon country and its population. The group is well structured and organized into different wings, including a political wing and a military-like hierarchy, with a structure including company and battalion commanders. DNA was officially dissolved by the Government on 24 March 2019 but remains active. Massacres in Fulani villages in Mopti Region were attributed to DNA during 2019 and 2020. Other groups of local hunters referred to as Dozo, and composed of different ethnicities, but mainly Bambara and Dogon, are also present in areas near Douentza, Djenné, and Ségou in Mopti Region. These groups do not have the same military organization as DNA.

10. A leadership crisis within the Platform coalition resulted in its division, with the emergence of two opposing factions in 2019. One is led by Harouna Toureh (Coordination des mouvements et forces patriotiques de résistance/CMFPR-I) and supported by Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad-Plateforme (MAA-Platform)) and Abballah Ag Hamzatta (Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA)). The second faction is led by Fahad Ag Almahmoud (GATIA) and supported by Moulaye Ahmed Ould Moulaye (MAA-Platform) and Alassane Djitteye (CMFPR-I). The latter died on 5 May 2020 and his replacement is still unknown.

11. The Coordination des mouvements de l'inclusivité (CMI) was formed in early 2020 with the aim of establishing a coalition⁵ of armed groups that are not part of either Platform or Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA). CMI is composed of Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad, Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad of the Chamanamas (MSA-Chamanamas); the Congrès pour la

⁴ Known as the hunters who "trust/confide in God" or "put their trust in God", in Dogon language.

⁵ The Coordination des mouvements de l'inclusivité (CMI) is not considered a third coalition group (in addition to Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad CMA and Platform) by the Agreement Monitoring Committee (Comité de suivi de l'Accord), which is the monitoring structure of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation.

justice dans l'Azawad (CJA), the Front populaire de l'Azawad of Jimmy the Rebel, and CMFPR-III under the leadership of prosecutor Mahamane Alassane Maiga.

IV. Grave violations against children

12. During the reporting period, the country task force verified 1,764 grave violations affecting 1,092 children (251 girls, 811 boys, 30 sex unknown), including some children who were victims of multiple violations. This represents a sharp increase compared with the previous report, which covered a longer period of three and a half years and during which 740 grave violations affecting 507 children were verified. All categories of violations increased throughout the reporting period, except for rape and other forms of sexual violence, which is however estimated to be highly underreported. Of concern, the recruitment and use and killing and maiming of children peaked in 2019. This upsurge can be explained by the increase in conflict, particularly in the central regions, where a drastic deterioration in the security and humanitarian situation was witnessed following the escalation of intercommunal violence, including between the Dogon and Fulani communities, and the presence of armed groups, including those designated by the United Nations as terrorists. Another worrisome trend was represented by the sharp increase in the number of verified attacks on schools and hospitals, which more than tripled since the previous report. The safe access of humanitarian actors to conflict-affected populations, including children, as well as the detention of children for their alleged association with armed groups, were also issues of great concern for the protection of children.

13. In the majority of verified violations (52 per cent), it was not possible to attribute responsibility to a particular party to the conflict, while most of the remaining cases were attributed to armed groups (44 per cent). Government security forces were responsible for 52 grave violations, representing almost 3 per cent of the total. Overall, Mopti Region was the most affected, recording the highest number of grave violations (666), followed by Gao (394), Kidal (251), Timbuktu (185), Ménaka (138) and other regions.

A. Recruitment and use

14. The country task force verified 516 cases of the recruitment and use of children, affecting a total of 513 children (60 girls, 453 boys), between the ages of 9 and 17. Three boys were recruited twice (once by GATIA and once by MNLA). The number of cases represents almost a twofold increase compared with the previous report (283). Cases were attributed to the Malian armed forces (45) and armed groups (468). Signatory armed groups and their splinter groups were the main perpetrators, accounting for more than two thirds of cases of recruitment and use (376). A total of 202 children were recruited by CMA (MNLA (132), the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad-CMA (MAA-CMA) (35), the Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) (34), and an unidentified member of CMA (1)), followed by Platform (151) (GATIA (58), Ganda Lassal Izo (41), Ganda Koy (19), MAA-Platform (10), Ganda Izo (8), the Front de libération des régions du Nord (5), and unidentified members of Platform (10)). Splinter groups of Platform and CMA recruited and used 23 children (CMFPR-II (15), an undetermined branch of CMFPR (I or II) (3), CJA (3) and Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) (2)). Armed groups designated as terrorists were responsible for 39 cases: JNIM (34) (Front de libération du Macina (FLM) (27), Ansar Eddine (4), Al-Mourabitoun (1) and other JNIM elements (2)), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (1), MUJAO (1) and unidentified armed groups (3). Other perpetrators were Dozo traditional hunters (4), DNA (2) and

unidentified armed groups (47). The Malian armed forces were responsible for the recruitment and use of 45 children, all boys.

15. The verified cases of recruitment occurred between 2014 and 2020, with all cases verified during the reporting period. The most affected region was Kidal, with 197 verified cases, followed by Gao (189), Ménaka (52), Mopti (41), Timbuktu and Ségou (12 each). It was verified that 10 children were recruited in two neighbouring countries. Children received military training and were used as combatants. Others were used in support roles, such as domestic workers, couriers, cooks, drivers, guards, patrollers and for manning checkpoints.

16. For the first time since 2014, 45 children, all boys, were verified as associated with the Malian armed forces in Gao Region in 2019 (24) and in 2020 (21). All between the ages of 9 and 16, the boys were used as domestic workers and couriers. Following advocacy, including by the country task force, all the boys were released to their families during the first quarter of 2020 and have been receiving reintegration support from UNICEF partners.

17. A trend of constant increase was observed in the number of cases of the recruitment and use of children since the previous report. The number of violations peaked in 2019, when 215 cases were verified, following on from 114 cases in 2018 and 25 between July and December 2017. Numbers remained high in the first quarter of 2020, with 159 children verified as having been recruited and used. Child recruitment was largely based on community-level recruitment and in many instances, families encouraged children to join the groups. In addition, children and young persons left out of school and without occupation sought enrolment as a way of earning money. With the closure of hundreds of schools in northern and central Mali and the lack of opportunities for livelihoods or prospects of a better future, many children saw few alternatives to joining armed groups.

18. During the reporting period, 60 girls between the ages of 11 and 14 were recruited and used by armed groups, representing more than 11 per cent of the children recruited and used, almost double the number verified in the previous report. At least 29 girls were sexually abused during their association with armed groups. The other girls were used as cooks and to fetch firewood. The country task force received allegations indicating that an unspecified number of girls received military training to be ready for combat. The gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and increased access to services and programmes for survivors of sexual violence may create opportunities to better identify girls associated with armed groups.

Deprivation of liberty of children for alleged association with armed groups

19. A total of 94 boys between the ages of 12 and 17 were captured by the Malian Defence and Security Forces (38), Operation Barkhane (36), in joint operations of the Malian armed forces and Barkhane forces (14) or were apprehended by GATIA, MSA and joint GATIA/MSA forces (1 each) and by MINUSMA (3) for their alleged association with armed groups. Among those captured were 10 boys captured and handed over in 2019 by Barkhane forces, who had identified them as adults, to the anti-terrorism prosecutor in Bamako. The boys were captured in 2017 (7), 2018 (31) and 2019 (56). Of the total, 79 boys were handed over to national child protection actors following periods of detention by national authorities of up to one year. At the time of writing, 15 boys remained detained by the Government because they are considered to be adults. The release of children from government detention was hampered by the lack of valid civil documentation to prove their age. The country task force advocated with Malian authorities for the adoption of alternative age assessment procedures in order to prevent further delays.

20. Children reported poor conditions in government detention facilities and, in some cases, ill-treatment during their arrest and detention by the Malian Defence and Security Forces, particularly in Mopti and Gao. For instance, a 12-year-old boy arrested on 12 December 2018 by the national armed forces in Mopti Region was subjected to serious physical violence by those forces and was denied medical care, which led to the amputation of his right arm and two fingers of his left arm. Another boy, aged 16, who was arrested on 8 July 2018 in Gao Region by the national armed forces and was held in life-threatening conditions, was denied medical treatment during his detention, which lasted one month. He was eventually provided with medical care only following active advocacy by the country task force. The country task force advocated with relevant authorities for the opening of investigations into the cases of ill-treatment.

B. Killing and maiming

21. A total of 495 children (135 girls, 331 boys, 29 sex unknown) between the ages of a few months and 17 years old were killed (306) and maimed (189), representing a sharp increase compared with the previous report (146 child casualties). Violations were attributed to groups of Dozo traditional hunters, mainly from the Dogon ethnic group (122), other Dozo traditional hunters, for whom ethnic affiliation could not be clearly established (59), Fulani armed elements (44), FLM (10), JNIM (4), CMA (3), CMFPR-II and DNA (2 each) and MSA (1). Other child casualties were attributed to the Malian Defence and Security Forces (4), Barkhane forces (2) and four children were maimed during clashes between an unidentified armed group and Barkhane forces. The remaining child casualties (238) could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator. Among those unattributed casualties, 148 occurred as a result of crossfire and attacks against civilians by armed elements that could not be identified and 90 were caused by unattributed incidents of explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices.

22. The highest number of verified child casualties occurred in 2019 (296), a sharp increase compared with 129 verified during 2018 and 23 between July and December 2017, while 47 children were verified as having been killed and maimed during the first quarter of 2020. Mopti Region was the most affected (376, or 76 per cent) followed by Gao (69), Timbuktu (23), Kidal (17), Ménaka (8) and Ségou (2). Most children (400) were killed and maimed during attacks against civilians or when caught in direct hostilities between parties to conflict, during rocket attacks and crossfire. The remaining 95 children were killed or maimed as a result of the use of improvised explosive devices and the explosion of explosive remnants of war, including hand grenades.

23. The lack of state authority and security forces in parts of the northern and central regions created a vacuum in which civilians continued to face heightened security threats. During the period under review, the leading causes of the killing and maiming of children were crossfire and armed confrontations, with an increasing number of children affected. For example, from July to December 2017, 13 out of a total of 23 child casualties occurred in such contexts and the numbers increased steadily from 89 out of 129, in 2018, to 260 out of 296, in 2019. From January to March 2020, there were 47 child casualties, 38 of whom were caused by armed confrontations and attacks on civilians.

24. Of the 95 children killed and maimed in incidents involving improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, 10 casualties occurred during the last six months of 2017, 40 in 2018, 36 in 2019, and 9 children were injured during the first quarter of 2020. Most of the incidents (90) were unattributed, except one incident attributed to FLM, in which two boys were killed, and one other incident

attributed to JNIM. In the latter, three boys were maimed when the civilian bus they were travelling in hit an improvised explosive device. Both incidents occurred in Mopti Region.

25. In Mopti Region, children continued to bear the brunt of the violence and intercommunal conflict between the Dogon and Fulani communities, exacerbated by the presence of armed groups, including those designated by the United Nations as terrorists. The attack on Ogossogou, a Fulani village, on 23 March 2019 by Dozo traditional hunters resulted in the killing of 85 children, among other individuals. The village was attacked again on 14 February 2020 by armed individuals alleged to be from the Dogon community, resulting in five children being killed. In addition, the attackers also burned playing areas and games that had been donated. Similarly, an attack on Sobane Da village by Fulani armed elements on 9 June 2019 claimed the lives of more than 35 Dogon civilians, including 22 children. From January to March 2020, the country task force documented 11 attacks, consisting of attacks on Dogon villages by alleged armed Fulani elements and attacks on Fulani villages by alleged armed Dogon elements. Those attacks resulted in 14 children being killed, four children being maimed and six children being abducted from both Dogon and Fulani villages.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

26. The country task force verified that 74 children, all girls between the ages of 11 and 17, were subjected to sexual violence including rape (41), sexual harassment (20), forced marriage (7) and attempted rape (6), compared with 95 child survivors verified in the previous report. Violations occurred in the regions of Gao (24), Ménaka (22) Mopti (17) and Timbuktu (11). As incidents of conflict-related sexual violence against children continued to be highly underreported, the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher. Most verified cases could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator (51), while remaining cases were attributed to GATIA (11), MNLA (9), undetermined elements of either CMFPR-I or CMFPR-II, MSA and the Malian Defence and Security Forces (1 each). The highest number of verified cases was recorded during the first three months of 2020 (25), while in previous years, numbers remained constant with 10 cases verified between July and December 2017, 20 in 2018 and 19 in 2019.

27. Among the 74 girls, 20 girls between the ages of 11 and 14 were subjected to sexual harassment during their association with GATIA (10), MNLA (9) and MSA (1), between 2017 and 2020, in Ménaka Commune, Cercle and Region. Sexual violence also occurred during attacks against villages. For instance, in 2019, a 15-year-old internally displaced girl was abducted and raped in Goundam Cercle, Mopti Region, by unidentified armed individuals when they attacked her village. The survivor, abducted along with an unspecified number of other girls, was released a few hours later and received medical care. In January 2020, four girls were abducted and forcibly married to unidentified armed elements in a village south of Gourma Rharous in Timbuktu Region. The area where the incident occurred is under JNIM and ISGS influence, whose elements reportedly exert a strong pressure on the local population through targeted killings, death threats and abductions, and who promote forced and early marriage.

28. As indicated in the previous report, the monitoring and reporting of instances of rape and other forms of sexual violence in Mali was severely limited owing to several factors, including the prevailing insecurity, the fear of reprisals, the lack of protection for survivors and witnesses, impunity, stigma, limited access to justice and sociocultural barriers. Furthermore, owing to the lack of adequately trained staff,

funding constraints and a limited number of service providers in certain areas, the availability of assistance for survivors was hampered considerably.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

29. A total of 216 attacks against schools (169) and hospitals (47) were verified during the reporting period, representing more than a threefold increase compared with the previous report (62 attacks). The education and health systems remained deeply affected by conflict, intercommunal violence and overall insecurity, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of their fundamental rights to education and basic health care. Schools and hospitals were attacked, destroyed, burned, looted by armed groups or used for military purposes, and education and health personnel were threatened and killed.

30. A total of 169 attacks against schools were verified in Mopti (93), Timbuktu (33), Koulikoro (21), Gao (9), Ménaka (8) and Ségou (5) Regions. The majority could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator (154), while the remaining cases were attributed to JNIM (8), FLM (3), ISGS, DNA, Fulani and Dozo armed elements (1 each). There was a surge in attacks in 2018 (81) compared with the last six months of 2017 (19), before decreasing to 55 in 2019 and 14 during the first quarter of 2020.

31. Attacks against schools included verbal and written threats against school personnel (45 per cent), the destruction and burning of facilities and equipment (35 per cent), incidents of the killing of education personnel (8 per cent) or of assault perpetrated against them (4 per cent), as well as incidents of looting and abduction (4 per cent each). For instance, in 2017, one elementary school in Mopti Region was attacked by six unidentified armed elements who beat teachers, stole motorcycles and telephones, ransacked school equipment and subsequently forced the teachers to close the school. In 2018, 20 schools in Koulikoro Region closed following threats directed at them by unidentified armed elements who visited the schools and ordered the teachers to close them, affecting the education of at least 2,351 students.

32. Since 2017, the insecurity related to attacks and threats of attacks on schools and education personnel led to the withdrawal of teachers in the central and northern regions and further hampered access to education for children. Alarming developments were observed in Timbuktu and Mopti Regions in 2019 and 2020, with the burning of schools, the killing of school directors and threats demanding the closure of secular schools and the opening of Qur'anic schools. The closure of schools continued to increase throughout the reporting period as the conflict intensified. While 500 schools were closed at the end of 2017, as at March 2020, a total of 1,261 schools remained closed in Mopti, Gao, Ménaka, Kidal, Ségou, Koulikoro and Timbuktu Regions, affecting the education of at least 378,300 children. By mid-March 2020, all schools had closed nationwide owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

33. The use of schools for military purposes by armed forces and groups resulted in the disruption of classes. The country task force verified the military use of 20 schools during 2017 (12) and 2019 (8) by the Malian armed forces (4), CMA (4), Platform (2), Dozo traditional hunters, HCUA, during joint operations by CJA and MNLA, and by MAA-Platform (1 each) and by unidentified armed groups (6) in Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu and Mopti Regions. At the time of writing, one school continued to be used by the Malian armed forces in Gao Region despite sustained advocacy by the country task force.

34. A total of 47 attacks against hospitals and protected personnel were verified in Mopti (20), Timbuktu (13), Gao (13) and Ménaka (1) Regions, mostly perpetrated by unidentified armed groups (41), followed by alleged Dozo armed elements (2), DNA, alleged armed Fulani elements, CMA and ISGS (1 each). Seven attacks were verified

between July and December 2017, followed by a sharp increase in 2018 (21), while 14 were verified in 2019 and five during the first quarter of 2020.

35. Incidents of attacks on hospitals involved threats and the abduction of protected personnel, the carjacking of health centre vehicles and ambulances, attacks on medical convoys, intrusion into premises, attempted robberies, attacks and the setting ablaze of health centres, the looting of medicines and the killing of patients inside a hospital. In 2017, Timbuktu regional hospital was targeted twice. It was targeted the first time on 25 July, when unidentified armed elements carjacked the hospital's ambulance, which was transporting a patient. The patient was left on the side of the road with the driver and medical personnel. In a second instance, on 16 August, two unidentified armed individuals threatened the hospital duty nurse during an attempt to retrieve the bodies of armed group members killed during an attack on MINUSMA headquarters in Timbuktu. In January 2018, an ambulance transporting a patient and a team conducting a vaccination campaign were carjacked by unidentified armed elements in Timbuktu Region. In May 2019, two alleged Dozo traditional hunters entered Bankass hospital in Mopti Region and killed two wounded Fulani patients. Both assailants were arrested.

E. Abduction

36. The country task force verified the abduction of 38 children (10 girls, 27 boys, 1 sex unknown) between the ages of 6 and 17 by unidentified armed perpetrators (25), Dogon traditional hunters (7), Fulani armed elements and FLM (2 each), ISGS and GATIA (1 each). The total represents an increase compared with the previous report (12 children) and can be explained by growing insecurity and the intensification of armed groups' activities. A steady increase of abductions of children was also observed throughout the reporting period, with no verified cases in 2017, 9 in 2018, 17 in 2019 and 12 during the first three months of 2020. Mopti was the most affected region (20 cases), followed by Timbuktu (13), Gao (3) and Ménaka and Ségou (1 each) Regions.

37. Of the 38 children, 10 were released, 5 were killed following their abduction and the whereabouts of the other 23 children remain unknown. While the purpose of abduction could not always be ascertained, one boy was abducted for the purpose of recruitment, 5 children were killed by their abductors and 5 girls were subjected to sexual violence during their captivity. For instance, a 14-year-old girl was first abducted by a GATIA element before being sexually assaulted.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

38. The country task force verified 425 incidents of the denial of humanitarian access, most of which were attributed to unidentified armed perpetrators (415), followed by GATIA (3), DNA and the Malian Defence and Security Forces (2 each) and FLM, CMA and Dogon traditional hunters (1 each). The number of verified incidents almost doubled compared with the previous report (224). The most affected region was Mopti (99 incidents), followed by Gao (87), Timbuktu (80), Ménaka (46), Kidal (37), Bamako (23) and other regions (53). Incidents included carjacking (35 per cent), physical violence against humanitarian personnel, resulting in abduction and injuries (24 per cent), break-ins into humanitarian premises (15 per cent), the looting of valuables and restrictions on movement, affecting non-governmental organizations and United Nations entities (10 per cent), robberies (9 per cent), the burning of humanitarian cars (3 per cent), threats against and the killing of humanitarian staff (2 per cent each).

39. The majority of violations occurred in 2018 (170), followed by 2019 (129), while 68 incidents were verified between July and December 2017 and 58 in the first quarter of 2020. For instance, in early 2020, five humanitarian personnel were abducted by unidentified armed elements and were later released unharmed.

40. Humanitarian access was temporarily restricted in some areas of the central and northern regions owing to attacks by armed groups, military operations and intercommunal clashes. These constraints on access continued to create challenges for the provision of humanitarian assistance to thousands of children, who were deprived of access to health care, vaccinations and food distribution. In addition, some non-governmental organizations were forced to suspend their humanitarian activities, preventing them from delivering humanitarian assistance to children. For instance, five international non-governmental organizations temporarily suspended their respective humanitarian activities in Ménaka Region from December 2019 to February 2020, as a result of increased criminality and robbery in Ménaka city.

41. Despite those constraints, humanitarian actors were able to continue to deliver aid to the vulnerable population, through dialogue with communities as well as parties to conflict, and by adapting their operations where necessary.

V. Progress in addressing grave violations against children

A. Legislative reform and combating impunity

42. Advocacy continued by the country task force, as well as by the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, during their respective visits to Mali in 2019, for the revision and adoption of the draft national law on child protection. The draft law includes specific provisions on the protection of children affected by armed conflict and criminalizes the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 by armed forces and groups as a war crime. The advocacy is aimed at ensuring the revision of the law to include the criminalization of the recruitment and use of all children below the age of 18, in accordance with international standards. To date, no step has been taken by the Government towards the revision and adoption of the legislation.

43. The country task force provided technical expertise for the validation of a draft law establishing a moratorium on the 30-day deadline for birth registration. Applicable to children born in conflict-affected areas, including sites for internally displaced persons and refugee camps in Mali and in neighbouring countries hosting Malian refugees, the purpose of the legislation is to restore children's fundamental right to an identity and to be registered at birth by annulling the 30-day legal deadline for the registration of children.

44. In its efforts to include children in the transitional justice process and allow them a critical role in processes that seek truth, justice and reconciliation in Mali, the country task force continued to support the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2015, in promoting children's participation in the reconciliation process. Since 2018, an expert appointed by the country task force has supported the Commission in mainstreaming child rights into its work and during training sessions, resulting in the establishment of specific procedures including a checklist for interviewing children. Training and coaching sessions were provided to commissioners and representatives of the Commission on the inclusion of child protection and adolescent participation. In February 2020, the Commission organized a training on child-friendly interviewing techniques and on approaches for assessing the physical and psychological vulnerability of child victims for personnel in charge of taking statements (26) and the investigation unit (9).

45. Little progress was observed with regard to the fight against impunity in terms of the investigation, prosecution and conviction of suspected perpetrators of grave violations against children. Child survivors of sexual violence continued to face difficulties in accessing justice for reasons including the absence of courts in certain areas, understaffing and the poor training of judicial personnel, the lack of medical services, the fear of reprisals and of stigmatization, the absence of protection for victims and witnesses and being forced into amicable settlements.

46. As indicated in the previous report, hundreds of complaints of sexual violence from the 2012–2013 crisis, which were attributed to MNLA, Ansar Eddine and MUJAO, have been submitted since November 2014 before Malian courts by Malian non-governmental organizations on behalf of women and girl survivors of sexual violence between the ages of 9 and 55. Little progress was observed with regard to the prosecution of these cases, as a limited number of victims participated in hearings held by judicial and investigating authorities. The implementation of the Supreme Court's orders of February 2015, which returned jurisdiction for crimes committed during the crisis to tribunals in the north of Mali, has considerably hampered proceedings for these cases, filed as crimes against humanity and war crimes.

47. In 2017, at least two complaints involving cases of sexual violence against adults were transferred to the Specialized Judicial Unit to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime (Pôle judiciaire spécialisé en matière de lutte contre le terrorisme et la criminalité transnationale organisée), established in 2013. The Specialized Judicial Unit has exclusive jurisdiction to investigate crimes of terrorism and serious organized crimes, such as trafficking in persons. Sexual violence cases that could amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide that are currently pending before other tribunals in Bamako and Gao could be transferred to the Unit, whose exclusive jurisdiction was expanded in 2019 to include and investigate these cases.

B. Action plans and dialogue with parties to conflict

48. The country task force continued its engagement with parties to conflict to prevent and end grave violations against children. In 2018, CMA, in the framework of the implementation of its 2017 action plan, validated a chronogram of priority activities and finalized the operationalization of a joint inter-organizational coordination mechanism between the United Nations, CMA and the Government, including a core subcommittee in Bamako and five regional subcommittees. Strategic meetings and several workshops were held in Gao, Ménaka, Timbuktu and Kidal between the country task force and 282 CMA members, in order to strengthen and accelerate the implementation of the action plan. The workshops facilitated the development of common regional implementation strategies, taking into consideration local specificities, and galvanized support from government officials and civil society for coordinated actions. An annual plan of activities was adopted in September 2019.

49. Dialogue between Platform and the country task force continued. Three workshops and several meetings were held in Gao, Ménaka, Timbuktu, Kidal and Mopti, with the participation of 107 Platform political and military leaders. The coalition reiterated its commitment, to both the Special Representative and to the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, to adopt an action plan for preventing and ending child recruitment and use. In September 2019, a draft action plan was prepared and the signature thereof is pending. The split within Platform may explain the delay.

50. Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) reiterated its pledge to end and prevent grave violations against children and expressed its willingness to develop an action plan, even though the group is not included in the annexes to the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)).

51. Between November 2018 and October 2019, the country task force, in cooperation with national authorities, conducted the screening of combatants during the accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and integration process in Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu and Mopti Regions, in order to identify any associated children and ensure their immediate separation. No child was released. A few individuals presumed to be children by child protection actors presented birth certificates or identity cards, established a few days prior to the registration of combatants, showing their presumed adult age. The validity of the documents was questioned, and the issue was brought to the attention of senior government officials and armed group leaders. During the process, 1,878 combatants, including 17 women, were sensitized regarding the six grave violations against children.

52. The country task force continued its sustained advocacy for the release of children formerly associated with armed groups and detained by the Malian Defence and Security Forces or held in government detention centres under the orders of prosecutors. The task force called for the implementation of the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups, signed in 2013 by the United Nations and the Government of Mali, which provides that children should be immediately transferred to child protection actors and alternatives to detention should be prioritized. The task force trained magistrates and other judicial actors on the protection of children arrested or captured and detained for alleged association with armed groups.

53. The Special Representative and the country task force continued advocacy with the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel to ensure that the protection of children is kept as a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations and that children associated with armed groups captured during operations are transferred to child protection actors, as required by the Force's human rights and international humanitarian law compliance framework. Child protection principles were integrated into working documents of the Force and modules on the protection of children were included in training sessions for the troops. Child protection focal points within the Force and a child protection adviser were also appointed.

54. Following the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration by the Government on 1 February 2018, a monitoring committee for its implementation, composed of the Government and members of the country task force, was established. The Committee developed a yearly plan of activities and held several meetings, including a community workshop in Mopti in November 2018 on security in schools and on the reopening of schools in the central regions. Priority activities were identified by the Committee, including an ongoing mapping of schools closed owing to direct threats or insecurity.

55. The Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict visited Mali in July 2019 and engaged with the Government, and with signatory armed groups, and met with children affected by conflict, among other members of civil society. She advocated against gaps in the legislative framework and called for the extension of free birth registration beyond the existing limited 30-day period. She offered support to strengthen child protection trainings for the Malian Defence and Security Forces and called upon all relevant parties to fully implement the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups. She also urged the leaders of armed groups to release all children from their ranks and to end grave violations. She called upon CMA to fully implement its 2017 action plan and upon Platform to also adopt an action plan. In Mopti, she encouraged the Fulani and Dogon

communities to help preventing violations by strengthening community mechanisms, with the support of the United Nations. She also advocated the implementation of reintegration programmes throughout the country. During the visit, a Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict was established. Co-chaired by Belgium and the Niger, the Group is focused on raising awareness and advocating with relevant stakeholders for in-country action on issues relating to children and armed conflict.

56. The Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict undertook a visit to Mali in December 2019 and engaged with the Government on opportunities to advance the children and armed conflict agenda. The Working Group members met, among others, with CMA and Platform representatives and urged them to take immediate action to improve the protection of children, including through the adoption of an action plan, in the case of Platform, and the swift implementation of actions plans to prevent and end grave violations against children.

C. Release of children and programmatic response

57. The Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family worked in close collaboration with the country task force and other partners to reinforce community-based mechanisms focused on the prevention of grave violations, and the identification and provision of care to children released from armed forces and groups, as well as to children at risk of violence, including recruitment or re-recruitment.

58. The country task force supported the establishment and the functioning of two new transit and orientation centres for children released from armed forces and armed groups in Kidal and Mopti and continued to support the centres already established in Bamako and Gao. From July 2017 to March 2020, 593 children (49 girls, 544 boys) were provided with care services and psychosocial assistance while in transit centres. Of those beneficiaries, 114 children received holistic care in the second semester of 2017, 75 children in 2018, 249 in 2019 and 155 children in 2020. A total of 382 of the children benefited from socioeconomic reintegration support, including education, vocational training and income-generating activities, which allowed them to return to normal life. The remaining 211 children could not be provided with reintegration services owing to a lack of access to the areas where they were reunited with their families.

59. Insecurity in some of the conflict-affected areas, such as Kidal and Ménaka Regions and some localities of Gao, Mopti and Ségou Regions, made it difficult to provide durable reintegration and monitor the quality of reintegration services provided to children. Another challenge was the inability for some children to return to their communities owing to persistent violence and the nomadic character of their families, especially for those coming from cross-border areas in the Niger and Mauritania. The country task force has been exploring alternative ways such as family care systems, to host and support children whose families could not be found.

60. Some 372 girl survivors of sexual violence received multisectoral assistance through UNICEF partners in Mopti and Gao Regions. In coordination with Malian authorities, the United Nations set up four integrated service centres to support multisectoral services for survivors of gender-based and sexual violence in Bamako, Gao and Mopti.

D. Awareness-raising and mainstreaming of child protection

61. The country task force conducted training and awareness-raising initiatives to end and prevent grave violations against children. Some 337 officers of the Malian

Defence and Security Forces were trained, in Bamako, Gao, Ménaka, and Mopti, on the protection of children in armed conflict, including on the roles of the national armed forces in protecting children. Training sessions were also conducted in favour of 82 representatives of the judiciary, police and gendarmerie, in Bamako and Gao, with a particular focus on the protection of children detained for alleged association with armed groups and their transfer. Furthermore, the country task force trained 30 senior officers of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel on legal instruments related to protecting children in armed conflict, as well as on the Force's role in ensuring the protection of children encountered during military operations.

62. Regular meetings were held between Barkhane forces, the country task force and the National Directorate for the Advancement of Children and Families on the protection of children during military operations and to ensure the swift handover to child protection actors of children captured by Barkhane during their operations.

63. The "Act to Protect Children Affected by Conflict" campaign, launched by my Special Representative at the global level, in New York, in April 2019, and in July 2019, in Bamako, was rolled out by the country task force in collaboration with Malian authorities in Kidal, Mopti and Ménaka Regions. The awareness-raising activities brought together regional authorities, representatives of armed groups, civil society, traditional and religious leaders, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations to catalyse in-country attention and efforts to end the six grave violations, as well as to prevent future violations. In August 2019, UNICEF launched the "Children under attack" initiative, with the objective of raising awareness among international and national partners of grave violations against children in Mali.

VI. Observations and recommendations

64. I am extremely concerned by the sharp increase in the number of verified grave violations committed against children in Mali, in particular the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian access. I urge all parties to conflict in Mali to immediately halt grave violations, release all children in their ranks and abide by international humanitarian and human rights law.

65. I am alarmed by the rise in the number of child casualties and of intercommunal conflict, which takes a heavy toll on children. I urge all parties not to target civilians, including children, and to take all necessary measures to minimize the effect of their operations on civilians, including children.

66. I am concerned by the new cases of recruitment and use of children by the Malian armed forces. I urge the Government to work with the United Nations to review allegations of child recruitment and use by its armed forces and to reinforce effective age assessment procedures within the ongoing reform of the security sector. I encourage the institutionalization of child protection training for the Malian Defence and Security Forces.

67. I welcome the advances in the transitional justice process and the promotion of children's participation therein. I remain concerned, however, by the prevalence of impunity for perpetrators of grave violations against children and urge the authorities to swiftly hold perpetrators accountable. I further encourage the Government to finalize the revision of the draft child protection law, criminalizing the recruitment and use of children, including those between the ages of 15 and 18, and to adopt the draft law establishing a moratorium on the 30-day deadline for birth registration.

68. **Child protection provisions must be fully taken into account by all stakeholders engaged in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation. I further call upon the Government of Mali to ensure that all disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and justice and security sector reforms take into account the specific needs of boys and girls, including through the development of a gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.**
69. **Sexual violence against children must end. In addition to prioritizing accountability, I call upon the Government to ensure that survivors have access to the required services and assistance, as well as to justice.**
70. **The elevated number of incidents of attacks and threats of attacks against schools and related protected personnel remain a grave concern. Armed groups must stop and prevent such attacks and the military use of such facilities.**
71. **I am concerned by the increasing number of incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children and urge all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access by humanitarian actors to children in need.**
72. **I welcome the release from detention by Malian authorities of 79 children and call upon authorities to fully implement the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups and to work with the United Nations to review the cases of children whose age could not be determined and who remained detained for alleged association with armed groups. I further call upon national authorities and international forces to treat those children primarily as victims and I encourage the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel to fully implement the child protection aspects contained in its compliance framework.**
73. **I commend the continued collaboration between CMA and the United Nations to accelerate the implementation by CMA of its action plan. I encourage CMA to swiftly implement the plan and to facilitate United Nations access to the areas under its control for the purpose of delivering assistance to children, monitoring progress in the implementation of the action plan and verifying allegations.**
74. **I welcome steps taken by Platform to adopt an action plan on child recruitment and use. I call upon Platform's leadership to translate its commitments into action by swiftly signing and fully implementing the action plan.**
75. **I urge the donor community, together with the Government of Mali, to increase funding for sustainable, timely and appropriate socioeconomic reintegration for children so as to ensure that every child affected by armed conflict receives appropriate support.**
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