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Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, is the third report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Covering the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020, the report is focused on grave violations against children and provides information on perpetrators, where available, and the context in which the violations occurred.

In the report, the Secretary-General presents the trends and patterns of grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict and provides details on the progress made in addressing such violations, including through action plan implementation.

Lastly, the report provides recommendations for ending and preventing grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic and improving the protection of children.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, covering the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020, is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict. It includes information regarding trends and patterns of grave violations against children committed by parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as regarding progress on and challenges to dialogue with the parties listed in the annexes to my report on children and armed conflict (A/74/845-S/2020/525) since the previous report (S/2018/969) and the conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, adopted in July 2019 (S/AC.51/2019/1). The information presented herein was documented and verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic, supported by a subregional approach of data gathering in refugee settings and remote verification of incidents. Where possible, parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations are identified, including the seven listed parties.

2. The protracted and high-intensity nature of the conflict and access restrictions continued to pose considerable challenges for the verification of grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic. From March 2020, restrictions related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic further exacerbated existing challenges. Therefore, the information contained herein does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed in the Syrian Arab Republic during the reporting period.

II. Overview of political and security developments

3. The beginning of the reporting period was marked by a significant military escalation in the south-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic, with air strikes and artillery shelling accompanied by a ground offensive by government and pro-government forces, which resulted in deaths, injuries and the displacement of civilians, including many women and children. By late July 2018, government forces had taken control of the vast majority of the south-west, although active hostilities, including air strikes, continued in the Yarmouk basin area, with a focus on areas under the control of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, a group affiliated with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) agreed to reconciliation terms whereby, inter alia, government forces withdrew from reconciled towns, and opposition fighters and families refusing reconciliation were evacuated to the north-western area of the country. The situation in the south remained volatile, with attacks by unidentified perpetrators on government forces checkpoints, government institutions and reconciled individuals, and counter-attacks as part of government military operations.

4. In a letter addressed to the President of the Security Council and to me dated 20 January 2018 (S/2018/53), the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations stated that Turkey had "initiated a military operation on 20 January 2018 ... aimed at ensuring [the country's] border security". In the second half of 2018, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the international counter-ISIL coalition, focused their military operations in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate, in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. By March 2019, SDF and the international counter-ISIL coalition announced the capture of Baghuz, the last ISIL stronghold in the country, during which thousands of women and children escaped the area and were moved to the Hawl camp, Hasakah Governorate. Tensions increased in August 2019 as Turkey announced the establishment of a 30-km-deep safe zone in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, along the border with Turkey.

In early October 2019, the United States of America started withdrawing forces from the border areas in the north of the Syrian Arab Republic. On 9 October, Turkey, with the support of non-State armed groups, launched Operation Peace Spring between Tall Abyad and Ra's al-Ayn. A military understanding between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and SDF, dated 13 October 2019, led to the deployment of government forces along the Operation Peace Spring frontline and part of the border with Turkey. A joint statement by Turkey and the United States regarding the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, dated 17 October 2019, resulted in a pause in fighting. A memorandum of understanding between Turkey and the Russian Federation, dated 22 October 2019, also established parameters between various parties throughout areas of the north-east.

5. Following a significant military escalation in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic in September 2018, Turkey and the Russian Federation agreed to establish a demilitarized zone in the Idlib de-escalation area. The beginning of 2019 was characterized by infighting among armed groups that occurred in and around Idlib.¹ In April 2019, government and pro-government forces intensified military operations in northern Hama, Idlib and south-western Aleppo, with counter-attacks by armed groups on government-held areas. In late 2019, hostilities escalated with sustained attacks and massive population displacement. On 5 March 2020, the Russian Federation and Turkey agreed upon an additional protocol to the Memorandum on the Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area, after which the situation in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic remained relatively calm, with nearly 1 million people remained displaced.

III. Grave violations committed against children

6. The United Nations verified 4,724 grave violations against children, affecting at least 4,474 children in the reporting period. They were attributed to over 32 parties to the conflict, including Security Council-designated terrorist groups.² In addition, the United Nations performed late verification of 1,218 violations that had occurred before the reporting period. The ongoing conflict, severely deteriorating economic situation and COVID-19 pandemic increased the vulnerabilities of children to grave violations.

A. Recruitment and use

7. The recruitment and use of children continued to be widespread and systematic, with 1,423 verified cases (1,306 boys, 117 girls), comprising 274 in the second half of 2018, 837 in 2019 and 312 in the first half of 2020. Some 1,388 of the children (98 per cent) served in a combat role. At the time of recruitment, 250 children (18 per cent) were under 15 years of age. The recruitment and use of children was verified in 11 out of 14 governorates, with 73 per cent of cases verified in the north-western part

¹ In February 2018, Nur al-Din al-Zanki disintegrated, with some fighters joining Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Others joined Ahrar al-Sham and the Syrian Liberation Front, which joined a larger formation of armed groups called the National Liberation Front in August of the same year. In October 2019, the "Syrian interim government" announced the merger of the National Liberation Front into the Syrian National Army, a loose coalition of armed opposition groups supported by Turkey.

² ISIL and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham have been designated terrorist entities by the Security Council pursuant to resolutions [1267 \(1999\)](#), [1989 \(2011\)](#) and [2253 \(2015\)](#) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities.

of the Syrian Arab Republic (Idlib, Aleppo and Hama) and 26 per cent in the north-eastern part (Raqqah, Hasakah and Dayr al-Zawr).

8. Verified cases were attributed to at least 25 parties, among which were armed groups, pro-government militia and Syrian armed forces, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (507); the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG, 318) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ, 99) under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces; Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (328),³ Ahrar al-Sham (55) and Nur al-Din al-Zanki (11), all nominally operating under the umbrella of the opposition Syrian National Army since October 2019; other SDF components (37); the internal security forces (34); government forces (13);⁴ pro-government militia (10);⁵ ISIL (6); the Afrin Liberation Forces (3);⁶ and unidentified armed groups (2). No new cases were verified for Army of Islam since the issuance of a command order in April 2018 prohibiting all recruitment of those under 18 years of age.

9. A significant increase was observed in the recruitment and use of children by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with 36 per cent of all verified cases. Boys as young as 10 years of age were recruited from 11 different districts in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, highlighting the common practice across areas held by the group. Child recruitment by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham accelerated significantly, from 61 cases in the second half of 2018 to 187 cases in the first half of 2020. In May 2019, for example, two boys who were 16 and 17 years of age joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and served as guards at the Karamah camp in Harim, Idlib, after six weeks of training. They also worked as police officers at the sharia court affiliated with the Syrian Salvation Government.

10. The recruitment and use of large numbers of children was attributed to SDF and its components, as well as the affiliated internal security forces under the authority of the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria, representing 35 per cent of all verified cases. In one example from September 2018, a 16-year-old girl disappeared from her school in Qamishli, Hasakah, and joined YPJ at its base in Antariyah, from where she was deployed to a military training camp in Karbawi for three weeks. However, child recruitment by SDF and the internal security forces decreased significantly over the reporting period, in particular following the signature of a joint action plan with the United Nations in June 2019 to end and prevent child recruitment and use, after which it fell from 216 cases in the first half of 2019 to 41 cases in the first half of 2020. Therefore, 67 per cent of the verified incidents occurred prior to the signing of the action plan. Since its signing, 160 cases have occurred, including 23 children under 15 years of age and 149 children serving in a combat role. Most cases occurred in the Raqqah (42) and Manbij (40) districts.

11. At least 12 Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA, as well as Ahrar al-Sham and Nur al-Din al-Zanki, were responsible for 28 per cent of all verified cases. Numbers remained consistently high, with 91 cases in the second half of 2018, 224 cases in 2019 and 79 cases in the first half of 2020. In one example from July 2018, an 8-year-old boy from Taqad village in Aleppo joined Faylaq al-Sham following the killing of his father. The boy stayed at the military base and carried a weapon. In another instance from February 2020, two boys, 15 and 16 years of age, were recruited by the Mu'tasim Brigade of the armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA in Mare' village in Aleppo and sent to fight in Libya by the Sultan

³ Including Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, Al-Hamzah Brigade, Dir' al-Furat, Faylaq al-Sham, Firqat al-Sahiliyah, Jabhah al-Shamiyah, Jaysh al-Ahrar, Jaysh al-Izza, Jaysh al-Shamal, Mu'tasim Brigade, Samarqand Brigade, and Sultan Murad Brigade.

⁴ Including the Syrian Arab Army and the government police.

⁵ Including Hizbullah and the National Defence Forces/popular committees.

⁶ The Afrin Liberation Forces are a Kurdish armed group created in the aftermath of Operation Olive Branch in 2018.

Murad Division after two weeks of military training. The boys were promised a stipend of \$3,000 and accommodation in Libya.

12. A total of 23 cases of child recruitment and use by government forces (13) and pro-government militia (10) were verified and attributed to government forces in Dar'a (5), Hasakah (4) and Aleppo (4), and to pro-government militia in Damascus. In one incident from February 2019, two 16-year-old boys previously associated with the al-Hamzah Brigade armed opposition group were guarding a government forces checkpoint in Ankhal, Sanamayn in Dar'a Governorate. The boys were recruited again during the "reconciliation agreements" of July 2018 and received a stipend.

13. Verified cases served to confirm that factors in the recruitment of children included: financial incentives; revenge for the death of relatives; the affiliation of fathers, brothers and uncles; social status and community pressure; access to services and goods; the fear of arrest and detention by controlling or opposing belligerents; and the urge to protect their communities. Children also switched affiliation after an opposing party gained control of an area, signifying the absence of a strong ideological allegiance. Despite a complex security environment, 398 children who informally disengaged or were formally demobilized from parties to the conflict received support to return to civilian life.

Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed groups

14. The United Nations verified that 258 children, (256 boys, 2 girls) including one infant with her underage mother, were deprived of liberty in at least seven known facilities because of their alleged association with opposing parties to the conflict by SDF (185) and the internal security forces (61), government forces (8), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2) and Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (2). Most incidents were verified in Hasakah (211), Raqqah (28) and Aleppo (9). In at least 156 cases, the deprivation of liberty was aggravated by ill-treatment.

15. Regarding SDF, the United Nations verified the deprivation of liberty of at least 150 boys as young as 9 years of age for alleged association with ISIL, in Ghwayran military detention facility, Hasakah. The boys were of Syrian and of at least 22 other nationalities and had been held since at least March 2019, in overcrowded conditions, with limited or no medical services, unable to contact relatives and deprived of due process or prospects for durable solutions. Boys were held separately from adults but in part of a larger complex housing thousands of adults alleged to be ISIL fighters. In another example from August 2019, a 16-year-old boy was arrested by government forces in Hama city on suspicion of association with Syrian armed opposition groups. The family was informed of his detention over the telephone by officials demanding \$7,000 for his release. In February 2019, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham arrested a 16-year-old boy and his father in Idlib city for suspected association with government forces. The boy was imprisoned for three months and released, while his father remained in detention.

16. By June 2020, around 65,400 persons, 94 per cent of whom were women and children, were also being held in the Hawl and Rawj camps in the north-eastern region of the Syrian Arab Republic. Most had been detained since the military operations against ISIL by SDF and the international counter-ISIL coalition culminating in the re-taking of the last ISIL stronghold in Baghuz, Dayr al-Zawr, in March 2019, and were suspected of having family ties with former ISIL fighters. In addition to almost 32,000 Iraqis and 27,000 Syrians, around 11,000 foreign women and children of an estimated 60 nationalities also live in the Hawl camp. More than 50 per cent of the foreign children were under the age of 5, with 90 per cent under the age of 12. In the Hawl camp alone, there were reports of at least 960 unaccompanied and separated

children. By June 2020, 791 children from 22 countries had reportedly been repatriated, 26 per cent through Damascus, with the facilitation of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, and the remainder through informal routes. Obstacles to repatriations include limited political will and a lack of public acceptance in countries of origin, the fact that northern and eastern parts of the Syrian Arab Republic have been controlled by a non-State armed group, and unresolved questions around procedures and routes for repatriations.

B. Killing and maiming

17. The United Nations verified the killing of 1,557 children (847 boys, 356 girls, 354 sex unconfirmed) and the maiming of 1,160 children (754 boys, 211 girls, 195 sex unconfirmed), amounting to 2,717 child casualties. Incidents were verified in 12 out of 14 governorates, but most occurred in Idlib (1,152), Aleppo (632) and Dayr al-Zawr (220). Of the child casualties, 72 per cent occurred in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic. The prevalence of child casualties remained high, with 585 in the second half of 2018, 1,460 in 2019 and 672 in the first half of 2020. At least 1,216 children who were killed or maimed were under 12 years of age.

18. Some 1,273 child casualties were attributed to government (71) and pro-government forces (1,202), including government and pro-government air forces (911). Other casualties were attributed to ISIL (85), the Afrin Liberation Forces (45), joint operations of Syrian armed opposition groups and Turkish armed forces (69), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (38), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (22),⁷ other SDF components (15), the international counter-ISIL coalition (15), YPG/YPJ under the SDF umbrella (12), the internal security forces (1) and unidentified perpetrators (1,142).

19. Of the verified child casualties, 963 (36 per cent) were caused by air strikes, of which 895 cases (93 per cent) occurred in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic. The United Nations verified 45 high-casualty air strikes in which five or more children were killed in a single event, all but 2 of which were attributed to government and pro-government air forces, including 14 incidents in which at least 10 children were killed in a single event. For example, in July 2018, a government helicopter dropped a barrel bomb on a school used as a shelter for internally displaced persons in Ayn al-Tinah village, Qunaytirah town, killing eight children. In another example from January 2019, air strikes by the international counter-ISIL coalition hit a house in Shu'aytat, Dayr al-Zawr, killing three children and their family.

20. Explosive remnants of war constituted the second main cause of child casualties, affecting 724 children (27 per cent). Incidents occurred in 11 out of 14 governorates, with Aleppo (216), Dayr al-Zawr (158) and Raqqah (91) most affected. Overall, 23 per cent of victims of explosive ordnance incidents in 2019 were children, who were struck while farming, herding, removing rubble or playing. In November 2019, for example, six children were killed as a result of an explosive remnant of war while playing in a schoolyard in Tayyibah village, Dayr al-Zawr. According to the United Nations, more than 11.5 million persons, half of whom are children, live in areas where there is a risk of explosive ordnance.

21. Indiscriminate ground shelling of civilian-populated areas, including schools, medical facilities and camps for internally displaced persons, by both government forces and armed groups resulted in 487 child casualties (18 per cent) and was the third leading cause of child casualties.

⁷ Including the al-Hamzah Brigade, Dir' al-Furat, Faylaq al-Sham and Jabhah al-Shamiyah.

22. Indiscriminate attacks by armed groups using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and suicide bomb tactics in civilian-populated areas, including near marketplaces and schools, led to 303 child casualties (11 per cent) and represented the fourth leading cause of child casualties. Responsibility for many of the child casualties caused by improvised explosive devices (75 per cent) could not be attributed, since such tactics were used by several parties to the conflict in areas where they operate with others, such as remnants of ISIL, the Afrin Liberation Forces and Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA. In one situation in January 2019, a suicide attack claimed by ISIL struck a marketplace in Manbij city, Aleppo, purportedly targeted at the international counter-ISIL coalition and SDF members and resulting in the killing of two children.

23. The remaining child casualties were caused by the denial of humanitarian access; instances of ill-treatment, torture and summary executions; shootings, including by snipers; and explosions of an unconfirmed nature or source. Notably, 3 children were killed and 19 were maimed while associated with parties to the conflict. For example, in January 2019, a 15-year-old boy associated with the Jaysh al-Izza Syrian armed opposition group was killed while guarding a checkpoint in Halfaya town, Hama, in the course of an attack by pro-Government forces.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

24. Verified incidents of sexual violence against children attributed to belligerents remained underreported, with 6 cases affecting five girls and one boy as young as 10 attributed to ISIL (5) and YPG (1). The United Nations verified a further 30 incidents of sexual violence affecting 30 girls as young as 8 years of age that occurred between 2016 and the first half of 2018. The incidents were attributed to ISIL (18), government forces (10), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (1) and Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawrah, a Syrian armed opposition group (1). The 36 cases included rape, trafficking and sexual exploitation, forced marriage to armed group fighters, sexual assault while deprived of liberty and sexual exploitation while associated with an armed group.

25. ISIL remained the most prevalent perpetrator of sexual violence. Girls from the Syrian Arab Republic were forcibly married to ISIL fighters, sometimes multiple times over a brief period; consecutively with several, sometimes foreign, fighters; and under coercion and threats to their families, but sometimes also motivated by financial incentives, status in the community, access to health services and perceived protection. Cases included five Yazidi girls who had been abducted in Iraq, trafficked to ISIL-held areas in the Syrian Arab Republic and enslaved for sexual and domestic purposes. Yazidi abductees as young as 5 have known only enslaved lives, with no memory of their parents, having been bought and sold multiple times and raised in a different language and religion than their communities. For example, one of the girls was abducted at 11 years of age from the Sinjar region in Iraq in 2014. She was taken to the Syrian Arab Republic and held until the fall of the last ISIL territory in Baghuz in March 2019, after which she was transferred by SDF to the Hawl camp, from where she was able to return to Iraq in April 2020. She was subjected to sexual violence throughout her captivity. In the case attributed to YPG, a 15-year-old boy associated with the group in Raqqah city was raped by his commander in January 2019. After filing a complaint with the military police, the boy himself was arrested for two weeks. The commander remained in his function.

26. Separately, in an incident that had occurred previously but was verified during the reporting period, at least 10 girls aged between 14 and 17, detained by government forces in Damascus city between March 2016 and September 2017 because of the alleged association of their relatives with armed opposition groups, were forced to be almost naked and were raped repeatedly. Some became pregnant as a result and

delivered while in detention. In another case from January 2018 that was verified during the reporting period, a commander of Maghawir al-Thawrah, a Syrian armed opposition group operating in and around Tanf, raped an 8-year-old girl residing in Rukban, who died as a result.

27. Alarming, sexual and gender-based violence continued to affect the lives of girls in the Syrian Arab Republic, with deep-rooted social norms compounded by the protracted conflict and the lack of the rule of law in some areas. Measures relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other related psychosocial and economic implications, led to a significant increase in the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of increased recourse to negative coping mechanisms, including early and forced marriage and forced prostitution.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

1. Attacks on schools and protected persons

28. The United Nations verified 236 attacks on schools (229) and protected persons (7), of which 33 occurred in the second half of 2018, 154 in 2019 and 49 in the first half of 2020. During the incidents, education personnel were killed (14), maimed (9) or arrested (17), and 133 children were killed (58) or injured (75) while at school. The attacks occurred in 8 out of 14 governorates, with Idlib (187), Aleppo (21) and Hama (13) primarily affected. Most attacks (94 per cent) occurred in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic. Attacks on schools remained constant, although the highest number of verified attacks in a single year (154) since the beginning of the conflict occurred in 2019. Children, their families and education personnel became fearful of returning to school, and the number of functioning classrooms and schools was reduced.

29. Some 210 attacks on schools and education personnel were attributed to government (15) and pro-government forces (195), including government and pro-government air forces (121). Other attacks were attributed to SDF (5), ISIL (3), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (2), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (1), the international counter-ISIL coalition (1), joint operations of Syrian armed opposition groups and Turkish armed forces (1) and unidentified perpetrators (13). Overall, 129 (55 per cent) involved air strikes, 52 (22 per cent) ground shelling and 10 (4 per cent) vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. For example, on 25 February 2020, eight schools in Idlib city were hit by air strikes. In another incident in March 2019, a Syrian armed opposition group raided two schools in the Ashrafiya neighbourhood of Afrin city, Aleppo, and abducted seven teachers.

2. Military use of schools

30. Schools were frequently used for military purposes, with 67 incidents verified during the reporting period in 6 out of 14 governorates, most of which occurred in Hasakah (23), Raqqah (21) and Aleppo (13). Verified cases of the military use of schools were attributed to YPG/YPJ under the SDF umbrella (24), government forces (15), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (7),⁸ other SDF components (7), the Turkish armed forces (6), internal security forces (3), ISIL (3) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2). The schools were used as command centres, military bases and military police stations. In one incident in May 2020, in the context of the suspension of education due to COVID-19 restrictions, SDF used the Yarmouk School in Kharayij town, Dayr al-Zawr, for military purposes.

⁸ Including Faylaq al-Sham.

3. Other school-related interferences

31. The United Nations also verified 38 incidents in which parties to the conflict interfered with education through measures including the temporary suspension of schools under threat of attack by opposing parties, the imposition of a party-affiliated curriculum or language and the prevention of cross-line movement by children wishing to take official school examinations. In June 2020, for example, at least 12 children were prevented by Syrian armed opposition groups from reaching Hama to take such examinations. Of further concern, in the north-eastern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria took control of most schools and introduced a local curriculum. As a result, many children are deprived of an accredited education, which is needed to obtain a recognized diploma in order to pursue higher education opportunities.

4. Attacks on hospitals and protected persons

32. The United Nations verified 135 attacks on medical facilities (123) and protected persons (12), of which 15 occurred in the second half of 2018, 101 in 2019 and 19 in the first half of 2020. Medical personnel were killed (18), maimed (19), abducted (2) or arrested (13), and 15 children were killed (7) or injured (8). These attacks occurred in 8 out of 14 governorates, with Idlib (77), Aleppo (23) and Hama (21) primarily affected. Most attacks (90 per cent) occurred in the north-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic. Attacks on medical facilities remained prevalent, with the highest number of verified attacks in a single year (108) since the beginning of the conflict occurring in 2018.

33. Some 101 attacks on medical facilities and personnel were attributed to government (2) and pro-government forces (99), including government and pro-government air forces (83). Other attacks were attributed to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (5), joint operations of Syrian armed opposition groups and Turkish armed forces (5), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (3), ISIL (2), SDF (1), the international counter-ISIL coalition (1) and unidentified perpetrators (17). Of the total number of attacks, 91 (66 per cent) involved air strikes, 21 (16 per cent) ground-to-ground shelling and 11 (1 per cent) vehicle-borne-improvised explosive devices. For example, in one incident at the end of August 2019, pro-government air forces hit the maternity and paediatric hospital in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man town in Idlib, resulting in significant damages and leaving the facility temporarily out of service. In another case from June 2019, Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham arrested the head of Al-Hikma Hospital at a checkpoint in Taftanaz, Idlib: the whereabouts of the person remained unknown at the time of writing.

5. Military use of hospitals

34. Medical facilities were also used for military purposes, with a total of five incidents verified in Aleppo (2), Raqqah (2) and Hasakah (1) and attributed to Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (3)⁹ and SDF (2). The medical facilities were used as military posts or police stations. In April 2020, for example, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, an armed opposition group, raided and took over a medical centre run by a non-governmental organization in Afrin city, Aleppo, after assaulting a doctor and destroying COVID-19 testing equipment and an isolation tent.

6. Other hospital-related interferences

35. The United Nations also verified seven incidents in which parties to the conflict had interfered in the operation of health clinics, including the temporary suspension

⁹ Including Ahrar al-Sharqiyah.

of medical facilities under threat of attack by opposing parties or owing to affiliation with or support for medical facilities by opposing parties. For example, in October 2018, three fixed and mobile health clinics were closed in Raqqah city owing to the use of the logo of the Ministry of Health of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic.

D. Abduction

36. The United Nations verified the abduction of 70 children (36 boys, 27 girls, 7 sex unknown), of whom 37 were abducted in the second half of 2018, 25 in 2019 and 8 in the first half of 2020. Incidents occurred in 8 out of 14 governorates, with Suwayda' (18), Hasakah (14) and Idlib (12) primarily affected. Abductions were attributed to ISIL (28), YPG/YPJ (17), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (9), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (5),¹⁰ government forces (4), other SDF components (1), internal security forces (1) and unidentified perpetrators (5).

37. Children were abducted because of the alleged affiliation of relatives with opposing parties to the conflict or alleged infractions of the rules and restrictions of armed groups, or for the purposes of recruitment and use, forced marriage or ransom. Six cases involved cross-border abduction, which constitutes transnational child recruitment and child trafficking: three Yazidi girls were trafficked from Iraq to the Syrian Arab Republic after their abduction by ISIL, and three boys from the Syrian Arab Republic were recruited by Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA and trafficked to Libya to participate in hostilities.

38. In one example in July 2019, ISIL conducted a complex attack on Suwayda' city and several villages in the southern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, resulting in many reported fatalities and injuries. ISIL also abducted dozens of civilians, including 12 girls between 7 and 13 years of age and 6 boys between 2 and 15 years of age. In another incident in March 2020, a 16-year-old boy was abducted at a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham checkpoint near Idlib city. After information was found on his mobile phone, he was held for having "improper" relations with a girl, tortured for three weeks and executed. In a separate incident in April 2020, a 15-year-old boy was abducted from his neighbourhood in Afrin, Aleppo, by the Samarqand Brigade, a Syrian armed opposition group, for the purpose of transnational recruitment. The boy was trafficked into Libya to fight alongside Syrian armed opposition groups against the Libyan National Army. Two weeks after his disappearance, the boy managed to contact his family, who had been unaware of his whereabouts, to inform them of his presence in Libya. In another situation in April 2019, a mother was arrested with her two children, who were 3 and 6 years of age, by government forces at a checkpoint near Hama city, while returning to their village. Her relatives received a call asking for a ransom of 3 million Syrian pounds (approximately \$5,800).

39. Of the 18 cases attributed to YPG/YPJ and the internal security forces, 13 related to the military recruitment of nine boys and four girls, of whom four were still associated at the time of writing, eight had been informally released and one had escaped.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

40. The United Nations verified 137 incidents of the denial of humanitarian access, of which 49 were attacks on humanitarian facilities, personnel and transports, 46 were attacks on water facilities and 42 were instances of the deliberate denial of

¹⁰ Including the Samarqand Brigade, the Hamza Movement and the Sultan Murad Brigade.

humanitarian access. Of these incidents, 67 were attributed to government (3) and pro-government forces (64), including government and pro-government air forces (32). Other incidents were attributed to the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria (12), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (9), joint operations by Syrian armed opposition groups and Turkish armed forces (8), YPG/YPJ (6), Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (4), ISIL (2), other SDF components (1) and unidentified perpetrators (28).

41. The 49 attacks on humanitarian facilities, persons and transports resulted in the killing, maiming and abduction of 53 humanitarian personnel. The incidents occurred in 7 of 14 governorates, with Idlib (34), Aleppo (9) and Hama (2) mainly affected. Incidents were attributed to pro-government forces (19), including pro-government air forces (16); Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA (3);¹¹ ISIL (2); and unidentified perpetrators (18). For example, in September 2018, pro-government militia in Homs city arrested 18 persons who then disappeared. They had been working as civil defence first-responders at the time when northern Homs was controlled by Syrian armed opposition groups.

42. In an unprecedented development in the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Nations verified 46 attacks on water facilities between May and November 2019, affecting 37 water facilities. All attacks but one occurred in the north-western part of the country and were attributed to government and pro-government forces (45), including government and pro-government air forces (16). The attacks affected the access to clean water of more than 777,000 persons in the areas and exacerbated displacement from the affected areas to northern Idlib during the period. In July 2019, for example, the Basidah water station in Idlib was hit by shelling that damaged the facility and disrupted water availability for 120,000 persons.

43. The United Nations further verified 42 incidents of the deliberate denial of humanitarian access, involving the forced closure of humanitarian (including water) facilities and the blocking of supplies or services, delays to or cancellations of humanitarian convoys and assistance, and the imposition of unwarranted administrative barriers, in 8 out of 14 governorates, with Hasakah (16), Raqqah (6) and Dayr al-Zawr (5) primarily affected. The incidents were attributed to at least nine parties to the conflict. In at least five separate incidents in the first half of 2020, the water supply from the Uluk water station in Ra's al-Ayn town was disrupted, affecting the access to clean water of approximately half a million persons in the Hasakah and Tall Tamr areas. The interruptions occurred as a result of hostilities, technical failings and energy supply disruptions.

44. In other parts of the Syrian Arab Republic, intense hostilities, shifts in front lines and control of territory, disruptions to key access routes and extensive explosive hazard contamination continued to severely affect humanitarian access. In March 2019, SDF and the international counter-ISIL coalition captured the last ISIL stronghold in the Syrian Arab Republic. Civilians fled former ISIL-held areas from September 2018 onwards amid serious protection concerns for their safety in the area and along their escape routes. The health condition of those arriving at the Hawl camp was alarming, with most showing clear signs of distress, fatigue, malnutrition and trauma injuries, and many requiring urgent medical care. At least 56 children died as a result of the deprivation of food and access to medical care on their way to the Hawl camp or shortly after their arrival. Access was extremely challenging in the Operation Peace Spring area between Tall Abyad and Ra's al-Ayn because of armed activities on the ground from 9 October 2019 and the resulting insecurity.

¹¹ Including Ahrar al-Sharqiyah.

45. Throughout the reporting period, the situation in Rukban continued to be a concern, with only three inter-agency convoys bringing life-saving assistance between July 2018 and June 2020. From March 2020, urgent medical cases in Rukban were no longer able to access the medical clinic run by the United Nations. By June 2020, an estimated 11,000 individuals, of whom approximately 50 per cent were children, remained stranded in the Rukban camp on the border between the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Only minimal basic services and humanitarian assistance are available owing to access constraints.

46. From March 2020, humanitarian access in the Syrian Arab Republic was constrained by restrictive COVID-19 prevention measures, which were progressively relaxed in May and June 2020. Various COVID-19-related curfew measures were imposed to restrict the movement of people and goods. The measures were often accompanied by steps to facilitate the movement of humanitarian staff and supplies.

IV. Advocacy and dialogue with parties to conflict

A. Dialogue with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic

47. The implementation by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic of the national workplan of February 2017 to prevent and respond to child recruitment and the establishment of an interministerial committee on children and armed conflict requested by the United Nations have not progressed. However, following the release of the concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in March 2019 ([CRC/C/SYR/CO/5](#)), a new interministerial committee was established, with the support of the United Nations, to prepare a national plan for implementing the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee provided tailored recommendations to the Government to prevent the involvement of children in armed conflict, including recommendations based on law No. 11 of 2013, by which all forms of recruitment and the use of children under the age of 18 were criminalized and the sentence for the crime of rape against girls under 15 years of age was increased, and on legislative decree No. 20 of 2013, by which the kidnapping of persons, including children, was criminalized and the sanctions set out in the penal code for rape were reinforced.

48. At the end of March 2020, the Government passed legislative decree No. 6 of 2020, by which general amnesty was granted to convicted adults and children for several crimes in order to reduce overcrowding in detention facilities and prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, children detained for their alleged association with armed groups or held in military or intelligence detention facilities were not among those released.

49. In February 2020, the United Nations raised an incident with the Ministry of Education regarding the use of a school for military purposes by government forces in Talbisah, Homs. The school was successfully vacated on 1 March 2020. In addition, the United Nations verified that 10 other schools previously used by government forces in 2019 had also been returned to their civilian purpose. In May 2020, the United Nations raised the cases of two other schools under military use in Dar'a and Raqqah, respectively. The school in Dar'a was vacated.

50. The Government informed the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict of the measures it had taken to ensure that military operations in the Syrian Arab Republic are conducted in line with international humanitarian law, in particular the principle of distinction between military and civilian targets, and that the training of their armed and security forces has been

reinforced, including with measures to better protect children, through cooperation between the Syrian National Committee on International Humanitarian Law and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

B. Dialogue and action plan with the Syrian Defence Forces

51. Following dialogue with the United Nations, SDF issued a military order in September 2018 in which the minimum age for recruitment was defined as 18 and a commitment was made to cease stipends to recruits under 18 years of age. In June 2019, SDF signed an action plan with the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to halt and prevent child recruitment and use, which applies to all SDF components and the internal security forces. In August 2019, SDF issued a second military order notifying all of its members of its commitment under the action plan. Senior focal points were appointed and an implementing committee was established. Information was shared with the United Nations on the past identification and release of 56 children in October 2018 and 30 children in January 2019. By January 2020, the implementation of the action plan made possible the identification and release of 51 girls who had been under 18 years of age when recruited. In mid-August, another 30 boys and 5 girls were demobilized and returned to their families. SDF further established an age assessment committee and, jointly with the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria, a larger child protection committee. The establishment of a civilian complaint mechanism to resolve individual cases of child recruitment and use was also announced.

52. Separately, in June 2019, the United Nations was granted access to Centre Houry in Hasakah, a detention facility housing 110 children, mainly Syrian children and some foreign children formerly associated with ISIL. A humanitarian assessment was conducted in September, with regular visits and support services provided since then. In September 2020, SDF shared information about more than 800 children held for alleged association with ISIL in 10 detention facilities that child protection actors were allowed to visit in order to assess the situation of the children. The United Nations engaged with the international counter-ISIL coalition, which agreed to support SDF and the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria in order to remove children from military or adult detention facilities through the creation of a civilian-run juvenile facility focused on the rehabilitation of children. The United Nations also raised the cases of two boys whose whereabouts were unknown and who were reportedly being held in SDF military detention. Both boys were located and one repatriated to his country of origin. In addition, the United Nations engaged with SDF on the military use of schools, which resulted in 10 schools being vacated in Hasakah and Raqqah Governorates.

C. Engagement with other parties to the conflict

53. In 2018, exchanges and training sessions were conducted with representatives of 12 Syrian armed opposition groups formerly known as FSA, as well as Army of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Subsequently, Army of Islam informed the United Nations of a command order it had issued earlier in April 2018 in which the minimum age for recruitment was defined as 18. In May 2020, the leadership of the Syrian National Army issued a public statement prohibiting recruitment of anyone under 18 years of age by any armed group, faction or military formation under its umbrella.

D. Other advocacy initiatives

54. The United Nations engaged with Member States to advocate rights-based durable solutions for foreign women and children stranded in the north-eastern region of the Syrian Arab Republic.

V. Observations and recommendations

55. **I am deeply concerned by the persistently appalling scale of grave violations committed against children by a multitude of parties to the conflict. I again urge all parties to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and call upon them and those with influence on them to immediately take all actions necessary to better protect children in the Syrian Arab Republic.**

56. **In particular, I urge parties to the conflict to take concrete and effective measures to minimize child casualties in the conduct of hostilities. I further urge them to stop attacks on schools, hospitals and related protected persons, as well as on humanitarian facilities, personnel and objects used for humanitarian relief operations. In this regard, I also recall that the Security Council, by its resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#), urged all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian character of schools in accordance with international humanitarian law.**

57. **I call upon the parties to halt and prevent child recruitment and use through the adoption and dissemination of command orders prohibiting the practice, the establishment of complaints and age assessment systems and the unconditional release of all children from their ranks.**

58. **I take note of the Government's legislative framework that is currently in place prohibiting the recruitment of children, and I call upon the Government to maintain and reinforce measures to prevent child recruitment and use by its forces and pro-government militia. I further note the training of military and police forces in 2020 by the Syrian National Committee on International Humanitarian Law, in cooperation with ICRC, on the prevention of grave violations and on distinction and proportionality in military operations, which is a promising development. I encourage the Government to enter into a dialogue with the United Nations for the purpose of developing and implementing an action plan to end and prevent grave violations against children.**

59. **The signing of an action plan to end and prevent child recruitment and use by SDF in June 2019 and the progress made since the signature thereof are welcomed developments. I call upon SDF to sustain efforts and work with child protection actors on a community-based approach for the reintegration of children, to adopt standard operating procedures on age assessment and exit procedures for further releases of children and to share necessary information with the United Nations.**

60. **I take note of the command order prohibiting the recruitment of children by the Syrian National Army and invite that body to engage with the United Nations for the purpose of developing and implementing an action plan to halt and prevent child recruitment and use by all groups and factions under its umbrella.**

61. **I am concerned by the persistently high number of children deprived of liberty for their alleged association with opposing parties to the conflict and reiterate that such children should be treated primarily as victims. I note the ongoing dialogue with SDF and the self-administration in northern and eastern Syria in this regard and urge them to provide comprehensive information on and**

continued access to children held in facilities under their control, as well as to identify non-custodial alternatives for children and measures to release them.

62. I call upon the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to engage with the United Nations on the situation of children detained on security grounds and recall that children should be treated primarily as victims and that alternatives to detention should be pursued in accordance with their obligations under international law and in line with international standards. I urge the Government to provide child protection actors with access to those children and to include children detained for security reasons in amnesties.

63. I am extremely concerned about the protracted humanitarian situation facing tens of thousands of women and children who have been deprived of liberty in camps in the north-eastern part of the Syrian Arab Republic owing to suspected family ties with ISIL fighters. I reiterate my call upon all States concerned that have not already done so to facilitate their voluntary repatriation in accordance with their obligations under international law, including the principle of non-refoulement and the best interests of the child. I note with appreciation the facilitation by the Government the Syrian Arab Republic of the return of some women and children to their countries of origin.

64. The Government the Syrian Arab Republic has vacated several schools previously used for military purposes. I encourage the issuance of a directive to all forces to prevent the recurrence of such uses and vacate the remaining schools.

65. The military directive on the protection of schools issued by SDF and the subsequent vacating of several schools used for military purposes is positive. I further urge SDF to vacate the remaining schools.

66. I am concerned that children in areas controlled by armed groups do not have access to a recognized curriculum in schools, which obstructs their right to good-quality education. I urge all parties to remove practical obstacles to education in territories under their control so that children can enjoy their right to pursue their future education, in accordance with the best interests of the child.

67. I am alarmed at the recurrent attacks on and interferences with water facilities, including Uluk water station, which are further exacerbating the dire humanitarian situation that is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and perpetuating displacement and conflict. All parties should immediately stop attacking, destroying, removing or misusing objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including drinking water installations. Where such facilities are out of service, cooperation among parties to the conflict, humanitarian actors and Member States is paramount in reinstating them.

68. In view of the protracted conflict, humanitarian access and donor support remain paramount in ensuring that vast numbers of people in need receive indispensable and life-saving assistance. I reaffirm the importance of the Security Council authorization for United Nations humanitarian agencies and implementing partners to carry out cross-border humanitarian operations into the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. I also urge donors to continue providing the necessary financial support in order to ensure that all humanitarian operations have the resources necessary to assist the growing number of people in need.

69. The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has had long-lasting devastating effects on children that are bound to affect generations to come. I urge all stakeholders, including those involved in the ongoing United Nations-facilitated political process in line with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), to prioritize the protection of children.