

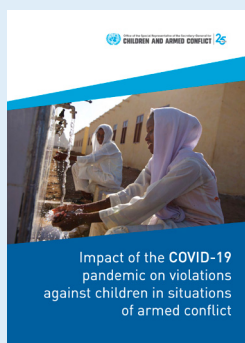
CHILDREN and ARMED CONFLICT ANNUAL REPORT of the SECRETARY-GENERAL SUMMARY · 2020

Children Affected by Grave Violations TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS 2020

Violence and hostilities have continued to have a devastating impact on children in 2020. The number of grave violations verified in 2020 remained high and the **COVID-19 pandemic** has further exacerbated the vulnerability of boys and girls to grave violations and impeded verification in some situations.

The report A/75/873-S/2021/437 is available at: undocs.org

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict



A new study released by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC) in May 2021 on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grave violations against children exposes how the UN has had to face the challenges posed by the pandemic and related measures and adapt its capacity to monitor and verify grave violations against children in armed conflict. Ongoing efforts to engage parties

to conflict to end and prevent the violence have also been hampered.

The study covers the year 2020 and focuses on five countries on the CAAC agenda: Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Sudan.

The study highlights push and pull factors brought about by the

COVID-19 pandemic which threaten the increase of certain violations, most notably recruitment and use, sexual violence and attacks on schools and hospitals. The study concludes with a series of urgent recommendations to guide those attempting to alleviate the problems faced by conflict-affected children due to the pandemic and help them cope with possible future crises, including additional support to CTFMRs for staffing and resources. The study further encourages the United Nations and partners on the ground to continue to analyze 2020 grave violations through a COVID-19 lens, to consider the long-term socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and continue their monitoring, and to adapt programmatic and advocacy responses accordingly.

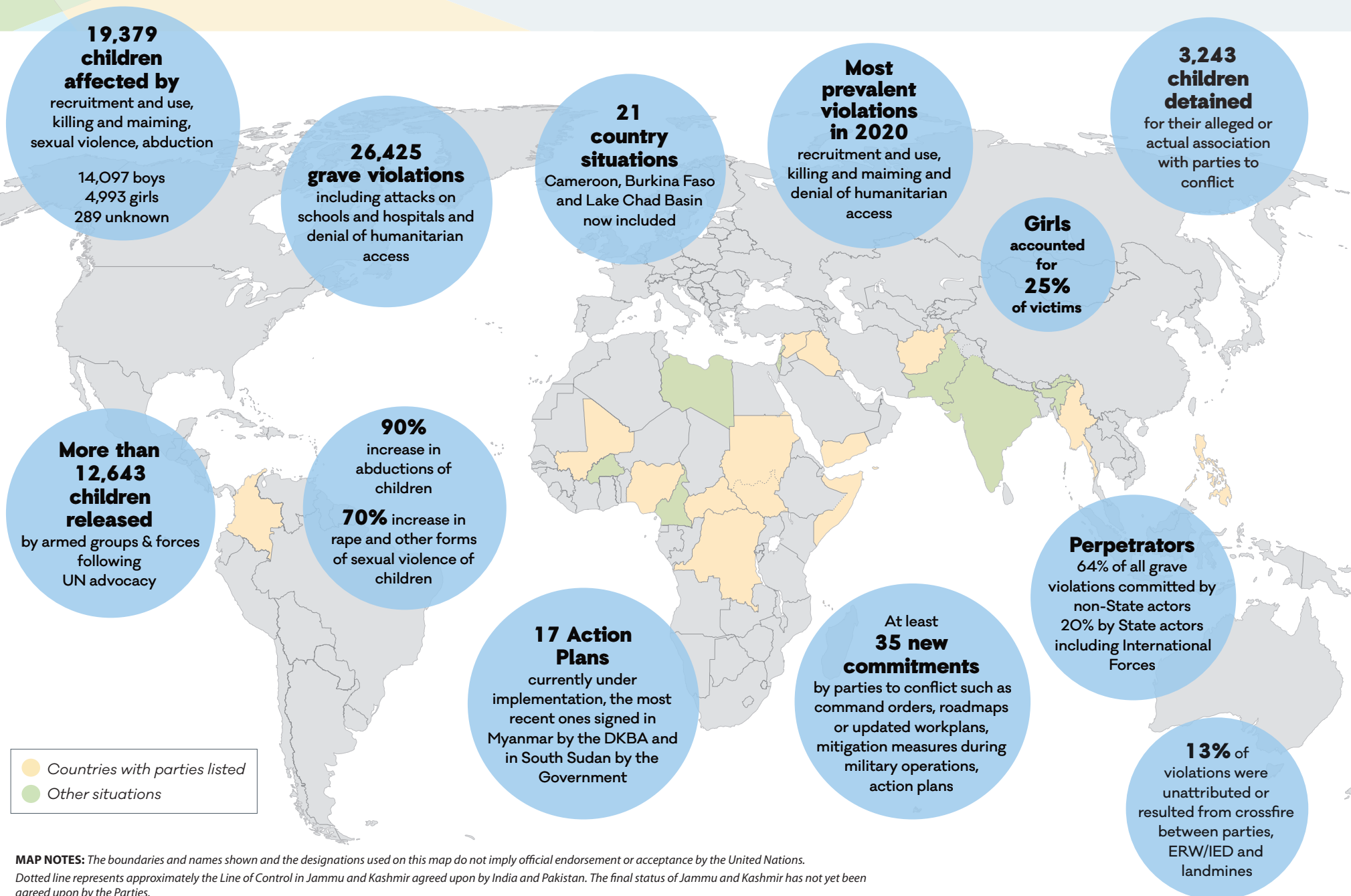
Lessons learned and best practices can further be drawn from successful contexts and should include the sharing of information on trends and patterns of violations emanating from COVID-19 between CTFMRs to inform the CAAC work on prevention.



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT



Children and Armed Conflict: 2020 at a Glance



MAP NOTES: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the Parties.

Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Grave Violations¹

26,425 grave violations against children (of these 2,479 occurred prior to 2020 but were only verified in 2020).

19,379 children affected by at least one of the four individual violations recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction

Situations with the highest numbers of children affected: Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Afghanistan, and Syria.

○ **Recruitment and Use: 8,521 children recruited and used**

Situations with the highest numbers of children recruited and used:
DRC, Somalia, Syria, and Myanmar



○ **Killing and Maiming: 8,422 children killed or maimed**

Situations with the highest numbers of children killed and maimed:
Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia



○ **Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence: 1,268 children victims of sexual violence**

Situations with the highest numbers of children raped and sexually abused:
DRC, Somalia, Central African Republic (CAR), and Sudan



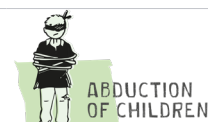
○ **Attacks against Schools and Hospitals: 856 incidents**

Most affected situations:
DRC, Afghanistan, Syria, and Burkina Faso



○ **Abductions: 3,202 children abducted**

Situations with the highest numbers of children abducted:
Somalia, DRC, Syria, and the Lake Chad Basin region



○ **Denial of Humanitarian Access:² 4,156 incidents**

Most affected situations:
Yemen, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mali, and CAR



¹ Numbers include violations committed prior to 2020 and verified at a later date in 2020

² Not a listable violation

OTHER CONCERNING TRENDS AFFECTING CHILDREN

Detention: At least 3,243 children were deprived of liberty for their actual or alleged association with armed parties to conflict, including groups designated as terrorist by the United Nations. The detention of children for alleged or actual association with parties to conflict made them particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic and related control measures as well as to physical violence and sexual violence, with less protection available to this already highly vulnerable population. The detention of children should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest period, alternative to detention should be actively sought and reintegration support provided.

Situations with the highest numbers of children in

detention: Iraq, Syria, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, and Afghanistan

Military use of schools and hospitals: The widespread military use of schools by both armed forces and armed groups was in 2020 again a worrying trend, although the military use of hospitals remained marginal. Most cases of military use of schools were verified in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Iraq and Cameroon. Overall, 127 million children were out of school in conflict situations because of insecurity, attacks on schools or related personnel or the military use of schools. Children's right to education must be protected, especially girls' right as they are often the last ones to resume their education after schools' closure.

Measures to Better Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict

In several country situations, enhanced engagement between the UN and parties to conflict in 2020 resulted in the adoption of measures to better protect boys and girls from hostilities.

Engagement with parties to conflict by the Special Representative and the United Nations on the ground in 2020 included bilateral engagement, training and capacity building, advocacy and public awareness, development of commitments and action plans, setting up age assessment mechanisms within armed forces and groups, review and advocacy to reinforce existing laws governing the criminalization of the six grave violations, advocacy for accountability for perpetrators, issuance of command orders, screenings for the identification of children to be released in camps and bases, assistance to parties engaged in peace processes and national dialogues so that they incorporate child protection measures into discussions and ultimately, peace agreements, development of prevention plans and measures including protocols for handover and release of children, advocacy for reintegration resources, for greater child protection capacity and for reinforcing the monitoring and reporting mechanism as well as strengthening CAAC focal points in country and in regional organizations.

Afghanistan

- Implementation of the action plan with the Afghan National Police (ANP) on the recruitment and use of children and discussions to broaden it to include prevention of other violations
- Child protection policy launched by the Ministry of Interior in November 2020 covering the recruitment and use of children as well as *bacha bazi*, as part of the implementation of the 2011 action plan and the 2014 roadmap to end and prevent child recruitment and use
- Screening of children in ANP recruitment centres, with 187 child applicants prevented from enrolment in 2020
- Development of a paper titled "The Integration and Prioritization of Child Protection Issues in the Peace Process in Afghanistan" based on the *Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict* published by the OSRSG CAAC, for the promotion of child protection issues in the Afghan peace process.



- Continuous implementation of action plans with *Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC)*, *Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC)* and *Front Populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC)* covering the four grave violations for which the parties are listed (recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals)

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

- Signature of seven new commitments by commanders of armed groups and factions to end and prevent recruitment and use and other grave violations
- Continuous implementation of the action plan with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) to end and prevent sexual violence against children
- Conviction of Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka, former NDC leader, to life in prison for war crimes, including child recruitment and use, rape, and sexual slavery
- Conviction of 17 FARDC soldiers and 11 police officers for the rape of children
- 838 children were released in 2020 following commitments by armed groups commanders
- Additionally, 2,101 children were separated from armed groups in 2020
- The DRC joined the *Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers* in 2020



Central African Republic (CAR)

- Appointment of a Minister Counsellor to the President on child protection
- Promulgation of the Child Protection Code criminalizing child recruitment and use
- Convictions of 110 perpetrators of violations against children



Lake Chad Basin

- ⊙ Handover protocols for children associated with armed groups to civilian child protection actors adopted in Chad and Niger (2014 and 2017)
- ⊙ Efforts by the Government of Chad to train armed forces during 2020
- ⊙ Government of Niger's interest and action in relation to the protection of schools



Myanmar

- ⊙ Signature of an action plan between the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children (November 2020), the first action plan with an armed group in the country
- ⊙ Engagement between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the United Nations on recruitment and use resulting in the release of 26 children
- ⊙ Establishment of a National Complaint Mechanism to eliminate forced labor, prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in February 2020
- ⊙ Issuance of four military directives on the use of children and the development of a roadmap by the Tatmadaw and the United Nations to end and prevent the use of children



Nigeria

- ⊙ Implementation by the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children with a significant decrease in recruitment
- ⊙ Government's constructive role in the action plan's implementation including through investigation into the sexual violence case attributed to CJTF
- ⊙ Release of 230 children from detention



South Sudan

- ⊙ Comprehensive action plan signed by parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan signed on 7 February 2020 to address all violations against children
- ⊙ Progress in the implementation of the comprehensive action plan including the establishment of national and state level committees in support of the action plan



- ⊙ Joint efforts between UN & the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (NDDRC) resulting in the release of 44 children in 2020

Yemen

- ⊙ Continuous implementation by the Government forces, including the Yemeni Armed Forces, of the action plan to end the recruitment and use of children, leading to a decrease
- ⊙ Adoption of a Presidential Directive on the prevention of child recruitment and use on 12 February 2020
- ⊙ Issuance of a military directive on 3 March 2020 as part of the implementation of the 2014 action plan and 2018 roadmap to end and prevent child recruitment and use
- ⊙ Handover protocol signed in April 2020 between the United Nations and the Houthis and release of 68 children by the Houthis from detention centers
- ⊙ Training and high-level workshop on CAAC conducted in March and May 2021 by the CAAC Office with the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen
- ⊙ Investigation of two incidents of high casualty airstrikes that led to high number of child casualties during 2020 by the Joint Independent Assessment Team (JIAT)
- ⊙ Continued bilateral engagement with Coalition members by SRSR CAAC within the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of 2019 and the time-bound program of activities endorsed in January 2020



ACTION PLANS UNDER IMPLEMENTATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

MALI — Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, including the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence)

SOMALIA — Somali Federal Defence and Police Forces (recruitment and use, killing and maiming)
** now including sexual violence*

SUDAN — Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minnawi (recruitment and use); Justice and Equality Movement (recruitment and use); Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N) Malik Agar and al-Hilu factions (recruitment and use)

SYRIA — Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (recruitment and use)

Impacts of armed conflict on boys and girls

Girls and boys experience conflict differently and present different vulnerabilities to grave violations perpetrated by armed forces and groups. Understanding who is affected and how they are can inform our interventions to better address the specific needs of boys and girls.

- ⊙ In 2020, one out of four children victims of grave violations were girls
- ⊙ At least 4,993 girls endured one of the four individual grave violations in 2020, compared to 14,097 boys for the same period
- ⊙ Girls were mostly affected by rape and other forms of sexual violence followed by killing and maiming, abduction and recruitment and use
- ⊙ Countries where the greatest number of children, both girls and boys, were affected by grave violations: Somalia, DRC, Afghanistan, and Syria
- ⊙ 85% of children recruited and used were boys
 - » Girls are also recruited and used, mainly in support roles such as cook, cleaner, sex slave and child brides. In some situations, girls are involved in hostilities as combatants, weapon cleaners, or carriers of improvised explosive devices – a despicable practice of several UN-designated terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram affiliated or splinter groups in the Lake Chad Basin region.
- ⊙ 98% of sexual violence was perpetrated against girls
 - » SVC is the most underreported grave violation
 - » Girls are affected by all grave violations against children, but are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage. Sexual violence remains chronically underreported due to stigma and lack of legal protection among many factors. Boys notably face barriers to reporting sexual violence, owing to factors such as cultural taboos, harmful social norms, association with emasculation, or fear of persecution.
- ⊙ 23% of abductions affected girls
 - » Abduction primarily affects boys, including for the purpose of recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups. Girls are often abducted for the purposes of sexual slavery, rape, forced marriage, but also to be used as suicide bombers.
- ⊙ 27% of killing and maiming affected girls
 - » In many contexts, boys have greater freedom of movement and spend more time outside the house, including to go to schools, which places them at higher risk of being caught in crossfire, exposed to attacks on schools and becoming victims of explosive remnants of war. They are also particularly targeted by armed actors because they are more often perceived as a threat than girls. Conversely, girls carry out domestic and agricultural tasks such as firewood and water fetching, exposing them to roadside attacks and sexual violence.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

The plight of boys and girls affected by conflict is a tragedy beyond words, one that must not be obscured by statistics. For behind each number is the heart-breaking story of a girl or a boy, a daughter or a son, a sister, a brother.



Recruitment and Use

In Myanmar, a 15-year-old boy was recruited by the Kachin Independence Army in 2018 and used until 2020. His family appealed for his release, including invoking his health issues; when his health deteriorated, he was sent back to his family and he died in the hospital at the age of 17.

In the Philippines, in Negros Occidental province, a 16-year-old boy who joined the armed group when he was 11 surrendered from the New People's Army. Security Forces facilitated his handover to social welfare, which provided psychosocial and financial assistance for his reintegration into the community.

Killing and Maiming

In Sudan, a 13-year-old boy was killed by a stray bullet as he was walking along a road in Kadugli, South Kordofan. Investigations were launched into the incident, but the identity of the perpetrator has yet to be established.

In Syria, four boys aged between 11 and 13 were injured when an ERW exploded while they were playing in a field in Homs governate. One boy lost one eye and had his hand amputated.

Rape and other Forms of Sexual Violence

In Libya, unknown perpetrators sexually abused a 10-year-old refugee boy. Out of fear, the child stopped going to school.

In Mali, a girl held in sexual slavery by unknown perpetrators was liberated during a FAMa operation. The Government further issued a public communiqué about the incident and urged collaboration to facilitate the release of other women and girls held in sexual slavery.

Abduction

In Nigeria, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) abducted a 14-year-old girl and her mother from a farm in Borno state. The mother was released the following day, but the girl continues to be held captive at the time of reporting.

In May 2020, a 17-year-old Yazidi girl returned to Iraq after having been abducted and held in sexual slavery by several ISIL fighters in Syria. She was 11-years-old when she was abducted from her home in Sinjar district. She arrived in Hawl camp in Syria in April 2019, where she was identified a year later and returned to Iraq.

Attacks on Schools and Hospitals

The intensification in fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan National Defense Security Forces across the southern region resulted in the closure of 14 different health facilities. Clinics were damaged and looted by unknown perpetrators. Children and their families were prevented from receiving health care.

In the DRC, the CODECO Lendu militia in Ituri province targeted a school to prevent education opportunities for Hema children.

Denial of Humanitarian Access

In Somalia, three humanitarian aid workers were abducted in May 2020 by Al-Shabaab in a rural area in Lower Juba region.

In Syria, food assistance by a UN partner to some 220,000 people in non-government-controlled areas of Raqqah was stopped by the Government in early October. The UN received confirmation that it could restart distributions only in December.

Recommendations

Ending but also preventing grave violations against children is at the heart of the children and armed conflict mandate, as the best way to protect children from hostilities is to minimize the push and pull factors leading to their involvement in armed conflict.

- ⊙ **Engagement with parties to conflict is key to end and prevent grave violations against children.** Member States should continue supporting this undertaking, including by facilitating the United Nations' engagement with non-State actors. Engagement can lead to changes in behavior and to significant improvement in the protection of children.
- ⊙ **Strengthening the human capacity dedicated to monitoring and reporting on children and armed conflict** in coordination with United Nations system entities should be a priority. At a time when children are most at risk, the number of child protection experts and advisors should be strengthened.
- ⊙ **Child protection provisions and capacity should be supported politically and financially** and included in all relevant mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions, in line with the 2017 Policy on Child Protection in UN Peace Operations. Continued capacity building and support to Country Task Force monitors for the strengthening of monitoring and reporting imperatives and for their effective engagement with parties to conflict should be vigorously promoted.
- ⊙ **Promotion of best practices and development of practical guidance** are essential elements to build effective protection and prevention strategies on behalf of children used and abused in, for and by armed conflict.
- ⊙ **International Instruments and Commitments are key shields to protect children** from hostilities. Members States are encouraged to join the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict* (OPAC), if they have not yet done so and endorse and implement the *Paris Principles and Commitments*, the *Safe Schools Declaration* and the *Vancouver Principles*.



- ⊙ **Public awareness programs to reach communities** in countries affected by conflict should be prioritized as communities acting to better protect children from the six grave violations are the first line of defense for children.
- ⊙ **Accountability must be pursued** and the adoption and implementation of legislation criminalizing violations and national accountability measures must be included as part of protection frameworks and in national and regional action plans for prevention of violations against children affected by armed conflict.
- ⊙ **Reintegration is crucial for the recovery of conflict-affected children** as well as their community. The donor community must continue to provide financial and technical support for sustainable, timely, gender- and age-sensitive, survivor-centred and inclusive reintegration services and assistance programs for all children affected by armed conflicts. This includes children separated from parties to the conflict, children in detention, children screened out of recruitment centers, and survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

The Office of the Special Representative of
the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict
has been awarded the Sapienza Human Rights Award 2020
by the University of Rome.

More information:

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org>