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**Promotion and protection of the rights of children:  
promotion and protection of the rights of children**

## **Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict**

### *Summary*

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly pursuant to its resolution [74/133](#) on the rights of the child, in which it requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to the Assembly on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate and on the progress achieved in advancing the children and armed conflict agenda. In the report, which covers the period from August 2020 to July 2021, the Special Representative describes trends, issues of concern and progress made. She also provides information on raising global awareness and building partnerships, including her engagement with regional and subregional organizations and international partners. She outlines a number of challenges and priorities in the children and armed conflict agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

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\* [A/76/150](#).



## I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 74/133, the General Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to it and the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate, including on progress achieved and challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The request stemmed from the mandate given by the Assembly in its resolution 51/77, in which it recommended, *inter alia*, that the Special Representative raise awareness and promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by armed conflict and foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children rights.

2. In line with that mandate, and as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 74/133, in the present report the Special Representative provides information on current trends regarding children affected by armed conflict and gives an overview of emerging issues and challenges. She also highlights the ongoing engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, as well as efforts undertaken with a broad range of actors to raise global awareness and catalyse action on the issue. She further elaborates on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on her work and on ending and preventing grave violations against children.

## II. Global overview of trends, emerging issues and challenges

### A. Trends in grave violations

3. In 2020, the United Nations verified an overall number of 26,425 grave violations against children, including 2,479 that occurred prior to 2020 but were only verified in 2020. A total of 19,379 children (14,097 boys, 4,993 girls, 289 sex unknown) were victims or survivors of at least one of the four grave violations affecting individual children: recruitment and use; killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; and abduction.

4. The recruitment and use and the killing and maiming of children, closely followed by the denial of humanitarian access and the abduction of children, continued to be among the highest verified violations in 2020. A total of 8,521 children were recruited and used by parties to conflict, with the highest numbers verified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Myanmar. More than 8,400 children were killed or maimed, with Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and Somalia remaining the deadliest conflicts for children. Children were particularly affected by explosive weapons and remnants of war, including improvised explosive devices, landmines and bombs, with boys and girls comprising one quarter of civilian casualties from these weapons. For instance, in Iraq, in areas previously controlled by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an unprecedented contamination by explosive remnants of war affected children. In South Sudan, children were killed and maimed when picking up and playing with explosives placed in grazing fields. Child survivors often experienced lifelong impairments, such as amputation, paralysis and loss of vision or loss of hearing, and were likely to face educational hurdles and social exclusion.

5. The attribution of incidents of killing and maiming caused by explosive weapons and remnants of war is particularly challenging. To end and prevent those child casualties, it is important that Member States sign and fully implement international legal instruments pertaining to those weapons, including anti-personnel mines. Armed groups must also refrain from their use. The promotion of mine

clearance, mine-risk education programmes for children, victim assistance and stockpile destruction should also be prioritized.

6. The violation with the greatest exponential increase in 2020 was the abduction of children, which increased by 90 per cent with 3,202 children abducted. Roughly half of all abduction incidents were attributed to armed groups in Somalia; some children were as young as 2 months. High numbers of abductions were also verified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Lake Chad basin. Rape and other forms of sexual violence increased by 70 per cent, with 1,268 boys and girls affected. Most incidents of sexual violence occurred in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Rape and other forms of sexual violence against boys and girls remained chronically underreported due to protection concerns, fear of reprisal or rejection, stigma, weak rule of law and lack of appropriate response and services, among other factors.

7. Attacks on schools (536) and hospitals (320) continued to have a devastating impact on conflict-affected girls and boys and remained particularly high in 2020, with a total of 856 attacks. The highest figures were verified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Burkina Faso. Schools and hospitals were bombed, looted and/or used for military purposes and were consequently temporarily or permanently closed. Protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals<sup>1</sup> were abducted, threatened, detained, injured or even killed. Such attacks compounded pre-existing challenges for children in terms of accessing education and health services, with the situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. In some situations, such as in Afghanistan, Mali and Nigeria, armed groups specifically targeted girls' schools and female educators because of the key role of girls' education in achieving gender equality. In other situations, attacks against girls' education reflected, instead, the violence experienced by girls in all areas of their public and private lives. Whatever the motives of attacks on schools, and even in situations where girls were not specifically targeted, they were usually the first to drop out of school and the last to return, if they returned at all. In addition, families often avoided sending their daughters to schools for fear they would face heightened risks of sexual violence in school or on their journey to and from school. The impact of attacks on schools goes well beyond the immediate denial of girls' right to education. Frequently, related civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are also affected and thus also the social and economic development of communities and societies.

9. In general, as in previous years, grave violations affected boys and girls differently. Whereas 85 per cent of children recruited and used were boys, 98 per cent of sexual violence was perpetrated against girls. Abduction and killing and maiming also affected boys more severely (76 and 70 per cent, respectively).

10. In the first half of 2021, armed confrontations, intercommunal conflict, military operations, insecurity and the continuing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a heavy impact on children's lives and protection in countries on the children and armed conflict agenda. While a slight decrease in the overall number of verified grave violations was observed during the first quarter of 2021, cases of abduction and sexual violence continued to increase at concerning rates (by more than 50 and 10 per cent, respectively) compared with the first quarter of 2020. The highest

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present report, the phrase "protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals", used in Security Council resolutions [1998 \(2011\)](#), [2143 \(2014\)](#) and [2417 \(2018\)](#), as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 ([S/PRST/2013/8](#)) and 31 October 2017 ([S/PRST/2017/21](#)), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients.

numbers of abductions continued to be verified in Somalia, followed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Lake Chad basin region, while sexual violence against children was predominant in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and the Central African Republic. The killing and maiming of children was the most-verified grave violation during that period, followed by recruitment and use and the denial of humanitarian access to children, all of which continued to be of significant concern.

## **B. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

11. During the reporting period, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to aggravate an already vulnerable protection environment for children in many contexts, but particularly for conflict-affected children, including those living in extreme poverty, in internally displaced and refugee camps, and in detention. The information available does not yet fully reflect the impact of the pandemic on the protection of children on the ground. Nonetheless, most country task forces on monitoring and reporting reported increased risks in terms of children being recruited and used, sexually abused, exploited and forcibly married. The closure of some of the most protective environments for children, namely schools and child-friendly spaces, coupled with the loss of family income, may have incentivized parties to conflict to take advantage of children's increased vulnerabilities or may have pushed children to join armed groups or perform other forms of exploitative labour. Attacks on health facilities and personnel were particularly appalling given the burden of the ongoing global health crisis on the most fragile health-care systems of conflict-affected countries. After an initial reopening of schools following the first wave of the pandemic, school closures continued in most countries covered by the mandate, including Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali, leading to an increased risk of military use of schools and a negative impact on children's education, particularly that of girls. Children in detention and in internally displaced camps saw their already limited access to services further restricted and were at a higher risk of being subjected to violence, including sexual violence. As vaccines are rolled out, it is vital to ensure global vaccine equity and address the rights and needs of children with regard to vaccine distribution and recovery planning.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic and related confinement measures and movement restrictions continued to have an impact on the monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children, albeit in a less disruptive way than during the first six months of the pandemic. Indeed, in situations on the children and armed conflict agenda, the imposition of movement restrictions fluctuated based on the increase or decrease of COVID-19 infection rates. Country task forces on monitoring and reporting were thus restricted in their movements to varying degrees, rendering the verification of violations challenging, affecting reintegration programmes and age-screening exercises and complicating the delivery of services, including education and health care.

13. The pandemic further exacerbated the challenges usually experienced by the United Nations in the collection and verification of information, such as access and security considerations for child protection personnel, monitors and victims. As illustrated in the study entitled "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict",<sup>2</sup> published by the Office of the Special Representative in April 2021, violations considered more sensitive to discuss, notably sexual violence and recruitment and use, were significantly more difficult to

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-violations-against-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict-1.pdf>.

document and verify. For other violations such as killing and maiming and attacks on schools and hospitals, information was more easily available.

14. Despite those challenges and as highlighted in the study, the United Nations, in the situations covered by the mandate, was able to progressively adapt its working methods, and the monitoring and verification of grave violations against children continued in accordance with the verification standards of the monitoring and reporting mechanism. The United Nations worked with child protection partners to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on conflict-affected children and facilitate greater protection for them. The Office of the Special Representative contributed to these efforts, particularly by supporting capacity-building initiatives for child protection actors. In Colombia, in October 2020 and April 2021, her Office supported the country task force on monitoring and reporting in delivering virtual capacity-building training to child protection organizations to strengthen existing monitoring and reporting capacities on grave violations against children. In the Philippines, in August and September 2020, the Special Representative and her Office contributed to the high-level and technical webinars organized by the country task force. The webinars aimed at discussing the policies and practices of the monitoring and reporting mechanism and identifying ways to enhance the contribution of United Nations entities to the mechanism. This resulted, among other things, in the identification of a variety of programmes to be implemented by United Nations entities in the Philippines to mainstream and sustain the child protection agenda.

15. To better capture the impact of the pandemic, the Office of the Special Representative adapted the template of the global horizontal notes on grave violations against children presented quarterly to the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council. This allowed for the highlighting of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including its impact on the protection of conflict-affected children and the monitoring and verification of violations. It also resulted in an improved presentation of qualitative and quantitative information. As requested by Member States, the Office of the Special Representative will undertake in 2022 a follow-up study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

### **III. Taking stock and looking forward following 25 years of the children and armed conflict mandate**

16. The creation of the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict by the General Assembly 25 years ago was an important milestone in acknowledging that the protection of conflict-affected children must be prioritized on the international agenda to ensure sustainable development and maintain global peace and security. As later emphasized in Security Council resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#) and by the Secretary-General himself, the protection of children affected from armed conflict is crucial to preventing conflict and sustaining peace.

17. Throughout the years, the children and armed conflict mandate has evolved from an agenda initially created by the General Assembly to an issue also at the core of the work of the Security Council. Several tools, such as the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict with its annexes, and a monitoring and reporting mechanism, among other things, were put in place by the Council and endorsed by the Assembly. While the mandate evolved in terms of the tools at its disposal, it also spread geographically. As of July 2020, it covered 21 country situations and one regional situation (the Lake Chad basin), and regional and subregional organizations and arrangements such as the African Union, the European

Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have translated the agenda into their own policies.

18. As of the time of writing, 171 States parties have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, more than 160,000 children have been released from parties to conflict and 33 action plans have been signed with parties to conflict, 17 of which are currently under implementation. In 2020 alone, at least 35 new commitments by parties to conflict, such as command orders, road maps or updated workplans, mitigation measures during military operations or action plans were adopted.

19. These are only some of the important achievements made so far by the children and armed conflict mandate, yet more needs to be done to ensure that all children in situations of armed conflict are protected. Country task forces on monitoring and reporting are central to the work of the Office of the Special Representative. To this end, child protection provisions and capacity must be included in all relevant mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions. It is also important to mainstream child protection concerns in early warning systems, conflict analysis and peace processes, including mediation, transitional justice, security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, as well as in overall prevention activities. The need to develop and expand initiatives and tools to prevent grave violations, including through engagement with parties to the conflict, has become increasingly evident. In this regard, the prioritization of data analysis is crucial for early identification and response in order to prevent children from being exposed to violations and to alleviate the overall impact of armed conflict on them. Enhanced data collection and analysis will also support national and regional entities that are engaged in the protection of conflict-affected children in developing or enhancing their capacities, including within the framework of mediation and prevention efforts.

20. The past 25 years have witnessed an evolution of armed conflicts and of the actors directly and indirectly involved in them. Furthermore, emerging areas of concern require further attention. For example, one of the aspects often overlooked is the disaggregation of data not only based on age and sex, but also based on special needs, specifically those of children with disabilities. Understanding the gender dimensions of grave violations beyond the collection of sex-disaggregated data is vital in order to better protect children in conflict situations. In addition, climate change has been playing a major role in the further deterioration of the situation of children affected by conflict, yet this aspect has not yet been considered within the framework of the children and armed conflict mandate. Therefore, one of the priorities of the Special Representative is to invest more in the improvement of data collection and analysis, as well as data management, to ensure these trends, and those that are new and emerging, will be sufficiently studied and elaborated in the context of the monitoring and reporting mechanism.

21. Another priority has been to identify lessons learned and good practices that can further enhance the impact of the mandate. In this context, the Office of the Special Representative is leading the development of a report consolidating the outcomes and recommendations from the high-level and technical level regional consultations on the implementation of the children and armed conflict mandate, which were organized from 2018 to 2020 and covered the Middle East and North African region, the East Africa and African Great Lakes region, South and South-East Asia, West and Central Africa, and Colombia. The “Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict”,<sup>3</sup> developed by the Office of the Special Representative

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practical-guidance-for-mediators-to-protect-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict.pdf>.



in cooperation with other United Nations partners, is now available in all six official languages of the United Nations. The Special Representative has also been working extensively with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs within the framework of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Technical Reference Group, co-chaired by the Special Representative and UNICEF, to develop guidance for monitors. The guidance note on abductions is expected to be published and launched in October 2021. Lastly, her Office is currently undertaking several other studies, including on the impact of grave violations on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and on the gender dimension of the impact of armed conflict on children. Both studies will be published and launched towards the end of 2021.

22. To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inception of the mandate, the Special Representative launched a study to analyse its evolution and how it has been implemented since its establishment in 1996. The study will look at the results achieved by the mandate and the challenges that affected its implementation, as well as the opportunities encountered to improve the protection of children affected by conflict. The study will also explore possible gaps in monitoring and reporting and in the available tools for engagement with parties to conflict. It will identify lessons learned and good practices, such as new working methods that have emerged as a result of specific circumstances, including – but not limited to – the recent COVID-19 pandemic. It will also explore regional dimensions and partnerships in the execution of the mandate. Lastly, the study will include recommendations for the continuous strengthening of the monitoring and reporting mechanism and the overall methodology for engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations against children and enhance the impact of the mandate and its relevance for the future.

## **IV. Dialogue, action plans and commitments with parties to conflict**

### **A. Addressing grave violations against children by Government forces**

23. In Afghanistan, the Special Representative engaged with the Government on the implementation of its 2011 action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by its national security forces (the Afghan National Police, including the Afghan Local Police). She also continued to advocate for reinforced measures to mitigate child casualties during military operations and encouraged the Government and international forces to broaden their engagement with the United Nations. In November 2020, the Ministry of Interior Affairs launched its child protection policy, which includes provisions to prevent the recruitment and use of children and *bacha bazi*.<sup>4</sup> In December 2020, the Ministry of Defence created a coordination mechanism to mitigate child casualties in military operations. In February 2021, with support from the United Nations, the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights endorsed the National Child Protection Policy, developed in line with the Child Act. Following an increase in child casualties in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army was listed in the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for the killing and maiming of children (A/75/873-S/2021/437, para. 288). At the same time, the Afghan National Police was delisted for the

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<sup>4</sup> *Bacha bazi* is a harmful practice whereby boys are used by men for entertainment. The boys are made to dance at parties and are often dressed in female clothes and subjected to sexual violence, as reported by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in their annual report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

recruitment and use of children owing to the sustained progress in the implementation of its action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and to the significant continued decrease in cases under this violation. This delisting was conditioned on the finalization of all pending action plan activities and the continued decrease in the recruitment and use of children by the Afghan National Police ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#), para. 290).

24. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations regularly engaged with the Government to sustain the gains of its action plan on recruitment and use, including through the screening of recruits of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Engagement also related to the implementation of provisions of the action plan pertaining to ending and preventing sexual violence against children. As accountability efforts by the Government continued, in November 2020, Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka, former leader of the Nduma défense du Congo, was sentenced by a court in North Kivu to life in prison for war crimes, including the recruitment and use of children, rape, murder and sexual slavery.

25. The Special Representative welcomes the collaboration extended by the Israeli and Palestinian parties following the request of the Secretary-General in 2019 to further examine the cases of maiming and injuries caused by Israeli forces and of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups ([A/73/907-S/2019/509](#)), which was reiterated in June 2020 ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)). Israel and the State of Palestine reported that corrective measures had been taken and existing protection frameworks had been strengthened, and both expressed commitments to continue to engage to better protect children. The Special Representative will continue to engage with all parties to protect children, and to encourage the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to reinforce their dialogue with the United Nations at the country level, in particular in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

26. In Mali, the United Nations and the Special Representative continued their advocacy with the Government to prevent grave violations against children. In October 2020, the Minister for Defence and the Defence Chief of Staff issued orders to military commanders prohibiting the use of children under 15 years of age and instructing army personnel to curb the presence of children around military barracks. In February 2020, the United Nations and the Ministry of Defence finalized the terms of reference for a mechanism to follow up on allegations of grave violations by the Malian defence and security forces.

27. In Myanmar, through the beginning of 2021, the Special Representative accelerated her engagement with the Government, led by the National League for Democracy, and the Tatmadaw regarding the ad hoc use of children in non-combat roles. The Tatmadaw issued four military directives prohibiting the use of children and developed, with the United Nations, a road map to end and prevent this practice. The Special Representative also continued to urge the Government to sign a joint action plan to end and prevent the killing and maiming of children, and rape and other forms of sexual violence against children. However, this dialogue was halted after the military takeover on 1 February 2021. In the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, the Tatmadaw, including the integrated border guard forces, was relisted for the recruitment and use of children following its failure to end and prevent the ad hoc use of children in non-combat roles ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#), para. 289).

28. In Nigeria, the United Nations continued to support the implementation of the action plan signed by the Civilian Joint Task Force in 2017 to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The Task Force remained committed to the provisions of the plan, which resulted in a significant decrease in this violation and the separation of 2,203 children in previous years. During a consultation in August



2020, Civilian Joint Task Force commanders and representatives of Borno State ministries and of United Nations entities reviewed the progress made in the implementation of the action plan and made concrete propositions to implement the remaining activities. In the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, the Civilian Joint Task Force was delisted following a significant decrease in the recruitment and use of children through the continued implementation of its action plan ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#), para. 290).

29. In the Philippines, the Office of the Special Representative supported, through the United Nations in the field, the completion of a protocol on handling children in situations of armed conflict adopted in September 2020. The Government and the United Nations also developed a strategic plan, adopted in June 2021, to end and prevent violations against children by the armed forces. It is the first national plan to realize the prevention aspects of Security Council resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#).

30. In South Sudan, the implementation of the comprehensive action plan covering all six grave violations against children signed in 2020 by the Government and endorsed by all parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan progressed. The United Nations provided child protection training and awareness-raising sessions to security forces and supported the establishment of national and state-level committees responsible for the implementation of the action plan. In September 2020, the Special Representative met virtually with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to discuss the protection of children in South Sudan.

31. In the Sudan, the Special Representative advocated for the adoption of a national prevention plan to ensure the sustainability of measures following the completion, in 2018, of the Government's 2016 action plan on the recruitment and use of children. In September 2020, the Special Representative met virtually with the Permanent Representative of the Sudan to the United Nations to discuss the protection of children in the Sudan. She continued to advocate for the use of the publication "Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict" in the ongoing peace process. Following the signing of the Juba Agreement for Peace in the Sudan, the United Nations engaged with the Government to prevent the recruitment and use of children. Command orders prohibiting the recruitment of children into their ranks were issued by the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces.

32. In Yemen, the Government pursued its efforts to implement its action plan of 2014 to end and prevent child recruitment and use and the related road map endorsed in 2019. The interministerial committee on children and armed conflict based in Aden resumed its work in August 2020. The Special Representative engaged actively with the Government of Yemen through its Permanent Mission in New York and participated in a virtual ministerial-level meeting in March 2021. Since July 2020, the Special Representative has also pursued her active engagement with the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen to expedite the implementation of the workplan of agreed time-bound activities endorsed in January 2020. Several consultations were held between the Special Representative, her Office and the Coalition to identify the remaining priority activities for implementation. In November 2020, a meeting took place between the Special Representative and the Force Commander of the Joint Forces of the Coalition. In March 2021, her Office organized a training on child protection for members of the Coalition. In May 2021, her Office organized a high-level event on the prevention of violations with representatives of the Coalition, including of States members of the Coalition.

## **B. Addressing grave violations against children by armed groups**

33. In the Central African Republic, the United Nations engaged with the Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique, the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique and the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique to accelerate the implementation of their respective action plans signed in 2018 and 2019. The United Nations also engaged with other armed groups to adopt measures to end and prevent grave violations against children.

34. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the commanders of six armed groups and factions signed unilateral commitments to end and prevent child recruitment and use and the other grave violations. At least 260 children were released by armed groups following direct engagement by the United Nations.

35. In Mali, the Special Representative continued her engagement with the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad on the implementation of the action plan signed in 2017 to end the recruitment and use of and sexual violence against children. In March 2021, a consultation was held between the United Nations and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad to identify priority activities for the implementation of the action plan.

36. In Myanmar, in November 2020, a joint action plan was signed between the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and the United Nations to end and prevent child recruitment and use, representing the first action plan with an armed group in Myanmar.

37. In the Sudan, the United Nations continued to engage with armed groups to ensure the implementation of their respective action plans, and the Special Representative continued to urge the Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid to engage with the United Nations on the development of an action plan. Following the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement, the United Nations also engaged with armed groups to address recruitment drives targeting children and advocated for the issuance of command orders prohibiting child recruitment. The Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council issued a command order, and the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi recommitted to existing orders.

38. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the Syrian Democratic Forces continued to implement their 2019 action plan to end and prevent child recruitment and use, which resulted in the disengagement of 85 children from their ranks. An age assessment committee was established and, as a result, at least 81 children were prevented from being recruited. In December 2020, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the United Nations agreed to a road map to accelerate the implementation of the action plan. Furthermore, the Syrian Democratic Forces issued a military order to prohibit the military use of schools and vacated at least six schools during the period under review. A dialogue on the protection of children held in detention facilities in the north-eastern part of the country, as well as in Hawl and Rawj camps, has been ongoing.

39. In Yemen, the Special Representative supported the United Nations in Yemen to develop with the Houthis (who call themselves Ansar Allah) an action plan to end and prevent grave violations against children.

## **V. Raising global awareness and building partnerships**

### **A. Awareness-raising**

40. The Special Representative continued to use her voice as the highest United Nations advocate for the protection of conflict-affected children to publicly call for

their increased protection, including through issuing some 40 press releases and public statements, several of which were published jointly with other high-level United Nations officials, as mentioned below.

41. Participation in high-level events continued to be central to the Special Representative's efforts to raise awareness. In September 2020, she was a speaker at a virtual high-level event to commemorate the International Day to Protect Education from Attack, co-organized by Qatar, the Education Above All Foundation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and UNICEF. In February 2021, she shared a video message for the T20 Italy Virtual Inception Conference organized within the framework of the Group of 20. The same month, she was a speaker at the opening of the exhibition "Rebel Lives. Photographs from Inside the Lord's Resistance Army" organized by Belgium. In March 2021, she was a speaker at an event entitled "Violence against girl children in armed conflicts and the role of the international criminal justice system", co-organized by Italy and El Salvador and co-sponsored by Sierra Leone, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg as part of the Commission on the Status of Women.

42. The campaign "Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict" continued to support the Office's global advocacy efforts and be a strategic part of its global communications strategy. Campaign material was made available in all official United Nations languages and the hashtag #ACTtoProtect continued to be widely used. The Office assessed the campaign in early 2021 in anticipation of its second anniversary and to inform its next phase, scheduled to last until the end of 2022. An Instagram account was launched on the second anniversary to widen the online reach of the Office.

43. To make the voices of conflict-affected children heard, the development and sharing of stories from the field was prioritized, while at the same time highlighting the work done by partners such as the Whitaker Peace and Development Initiative and War Child. Such collaboration will be increased in the coming months in anticipation of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the children and armed conflict mandate. Stories about boys and girls affected by conflict were also included in the summary of the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#)).

## **B. Building and supporting global alliances**

44. The Special Representative actively engaged with Member States and other stakeholders to build and support global alliances aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children. She continued to advocate with Member States for the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. In March 2021, Fiji became the 171st State party to the Optional Protocol. She also encouraged Member States to endorse political commitments such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles), the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (Vancouver Principles). In February 2021, the Special Representative co-organized with Jordan, France, the European Union, UNICEF and Save the Children a high-level event to announce the endorsement by Jordan of the Paris Principles.

45. As in previous years, the Special Representative and her Office held regular exchanges with Groups of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict in New York, Geneva and in the countries on the children and armed conflict agenda. In October 2020, the Special Representative gave a briefing to the Geneva-based Group of

Friends. The same month, she participated in a joint virtual briefing of the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict in New York and Kabul, and the Group of Friends of Afghanistan in New York. In November 2020, she briefed the New York-based Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, in March 2021 the Somalia-based Group of Friends, and in June 2021 her Office again briefed the New York-based Group of Friends.

46. Her Office continued to spearhead the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, launched in 2018 together with UNICEF. This broad, geographically representative group of Member States, United Nations entities, the World Bank, non-governmental organizations and academia researched and published three briefing papers in 2020, namely: “Reframing child reintegration: from humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond”; “Gaps and needs for the successful reintegration of children associated with armed groups or armed forces”; and “Financing support for child reintegration: issues and options study”. A high-level launch of the briefing papers took place in July 2021.

47. As part of the second phase of this initiative, an academic advisory group on reintegration is being set up. In addition, specific aspects of the studies will be analysed in greater detail, including the use of innovative financing for reintegration activities, the strengthening of mental health and psychosocial support for separated children, and the differentiated needs of girls and boys in reintegration programmes.

48. As a member of the United Nations inter-agency task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty, the Special Representative remained committed to supporting the follow-up to the recommendations of this study. Her Office contributed to the development of a United Nations system common position on incarceration and the drafting of advocacy messages for the protection of children deprived of liberty in situations of armed conflict.

49. As a member of the Board of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, the Special Representative continued to engage with other organizations, including civil society partners, on Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 on ending all forms of violence against children by 2030.

50. In April 2021, the Office of the Special Representative became an official partner of Alliance 8.7. In May 2021, her Office submitted an action pledge for the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. The same month, the Special Representative participated in a webinar organized by Alliance 8.7 and War Child on ending child recruitment and use by 2025.

## **C. Working with regional and subregional organizations**

### **African Union**

51. The Special Representative continued her strong partnership with the African Union. In November 2020, her Office co-chaired with the African Union the yearly meeting of the African Union coordination group on children in situations of conflict, composed of the African Union and United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations. In December 2020, she remotely participated in the African Union high-level retreat on the promotion of peace, security and stability in Africa. In June 2021, to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the children and armed conflict mandate and the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Special Representative and the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security issued a joint statement on the Day of the African Child.

52. The Special Representative's Office also continued to provide technical support to the African Union Commission, including on integrating child protection into the African Peace and Security Architecture.

### **European Union**

53. The partnership between the Office of the Special Representative and the European Union continued throughout the reporting period. The Special Representative met virtually with several European Union officials, including the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, and the European Commission's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography in charge of the new comprehensive European Union strategy on the rights of the child. In January 2021, the Special Representative sent a video message to the European Union-United Nations consultations on conflict prevention, peace and stability to highlight the links between the children and armed conflict agenda and the humanitarian, development and peace and security agendas. In February 2021, on the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, she published a joint statement with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission.

54. The Special Representative's Liaison Office in Brussels provided information on children and armed conflict for the European Union human right dialogues and for members of the European Parliament, and closely followed discussions on European Union policy documents relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate, including the European Union strategy on the rights of the child and the European Union integrated strategy for the Sahel. On the occasion of the International Day of the Francophone, a representative from the Liaison Office spoke at an event on children and armed conflict organized by Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Luxembourg and Romania. In July 2021, the Office of the Special Representative provided a briefing on children and armed conflict to European Commission cabinet members. The Liaison Office also facilitated the engagement of the Special Representative with the Human Rights Council and Geneva-based United Nations partners.

### **League of Arab States**

55. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the League of Arab States. In October 2020, she held a virtual meeting with the Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the Social Affairs Sector of the League, and in December 2020 she sent a video message to the League's empowerment forum for girls.

56. In July 2021, the Special Representative, together with the League of Arab States and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, organized an event to discuss the protection of children against violence in the Arab region and cooperation regarding the 2021–2022 priorities of the League's Committee on Violence against Children.

### **North Atlantic Treaty Organization**

57. The Office of the Special Representative continued its partnership with NATO, including by cooperating closely with the Senior Focal Point on Children and Armed Conflict at NATO headquarters.

58. In October 2020, her Liaison Office in Brussels spoke by telephone with the NATO Allied Command Transformation to discuss, inter alia, the development of an immersive training tool on children and armed conflict. In November 2020, her Liaison Office participated in a United Nations-NATO expert working group meeting on the protection of civilians, child protection and conflict-related sexual violence. In

February 2021, the Special Representative sent a video message to the NATO workshop on children and armed conflict, organized as part of the NATO conference on human security.

#### **D. Building partnerships with civil society and academia**

59. Building and maintaining strong partnerships with civil society organizations and academia remained a priority for the Special Representative. In addition to regular interactions with New York-based non-governmental organizations, she engaged with non-governmental organizations based in Europe, including in Geneva, facilitated through the Liaison Office in Brussels.

60. The Special Representative participated in dozens of events organized by civil society, and dozens more were attended by representatives from her Office.

61. In September 2020, the Special Representative delivered the keynote address at the Knowledge for Prevention online symposium, convened by the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative. In October 2020, she sent a video message to a joint session with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the Victims' Rights Advocate, entitled "A global concern: United Nations perspectives on child safeguarding and development", organized in the context of the Keeping Children Safe 2020 Summit. Also in October 2020, the Office of the Special Representative participated in an online event on justice for all survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, organized by the All Survivors Project, with Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the International Human Rights Clinic of Harvard Law School. In December 2020, the Special Representative shared a video message for the launch of the technical note on "Girls associated with armed forces and groups" drafted by UNICEF and Plan International. The same month, she also participated in a webinar entitled "Children and armed conflict: the effect of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics", organized by Sweden and Save the Children.

62. In January 2021, the Special Representative took part in a policy workshop on children and armed conflict organized by the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs at Fordham University. In February 2021, she was a speaker at an event entitled "Conflict-related sexual violence in detention: putting principles in action", organized by the All Survivors Project, the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-determination at the University of Princeton and the International Human Rights Clinic.

63. In April 2021, the Special Representative participated in a webinar on preventing and ending the recruitment and use of children associated with non-State armed actors, organized by Fight for Humanity and Independent Diplomat, with Belgium, Liechtenstein and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as co-sponsors.

64. Concerning academia, in October 2020 the Special Representative recorded a statement for the webpage of the University of Geneva on the impact of her work and the challenges ahead. In November 2020, she was the keynote speaker at a conference entitled "Giving hopes to girl children in armed conflict: a joint commitment from the academic community", organized by the University of Perugia, the Institute of Political Studies "S. Pio V" and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy. This conference also marked the launch of the Universities Network for Children in Armed Conflict, the first such network for promoting the rights and the protection of children involved in armed conflict. In March 2021, the Special Representative was a speaker at a Human Rights Council side-event organized by the Network and Italy on safeguarding the right of conflict-affected children to education and ensuring the safety of schools.



65. In December 2020, the Office of the Special Representative was awarded the Sapienza Human Rights Award 2020 by the University of Rome “for its outstanding contribution to human rights”, and more specifically “the irreplaceable action carried out in order to promote the fundamental rights of boys and girls in situations of armed conflict, trying to ensure in every way possible their protection from the perpetration of war crimes and serious violations of human rights”.

## **E. Building partnerships within the United Nations system**

66. As in previous years, the Special Representative worked closely with the Security Council and relevant subsidiary organs. In September 2020, she provided a briefing at a Security Council open debate convened by the Niger on the subject “Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children’s rights”. She briefed the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1533 \(2004\)](#) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [2206 \(2015\)](#) concerning South Sudan, the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1591 \(2005\)](#) concerning the Sudan and the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [2140 \(2014\)](#) concerning Yemen. She briefed the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on specific country situations (using a virtual format once the COVID-19 pandemic began), and provided the Working Group with a briefing on the impact of the pandemic on conflict-affected children. The Secretary-General issued country reports on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan ([S/2021/662](#)), Mali ([S/2020/1105](#)), Myanmar ([S/2020/1243](#)), the Philippines ([S/2020/777](#)), South Sudan ([S/2020/1205](#)) and the Syrian Arab Republic ([S/2021/398](#)). Four global horizontal notes were issued to the Working Group. Her Office supported the organization of seven videoconferences between the Working Group and the co-chairs of country task forces on monitoring and reporting.

67. In November 2020, in an informal meeting organized by Belgium, the Special Representative, alongside the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, briefed Security Council experts on children and armed conflict with regard to promoting the protection of children affected by armed conflict and the work and synergies between the Office of the Prosecutor and the children and armed conflict mandate.

68. In February 2021, the Special Representative co-organized with Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation an Arria-formula meeting on “Children and armed conflict, repatriation of children from conflict zones: from camps to homes, call for action”. In May 2021, together with Estonia and 14 co-sponsors, she co-organized an Arria-formula meeting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grave violations against conflict-affected children.

69. The Special Representative also continued her outreach with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. In November 2020, she released, together with the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, a joint statement on the conviction of Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka for the war crimes of rape, sexual slavery, the recruitment of children and murder in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In March 2021, the Special Representative released, together with the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the Special Representative on Violence against Children, a joint statement on escalating violence against civilians, including women and children, in Mozambique. The same month she participated in a meeting of the Steering Committee of United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict chaired by the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. In June 2021, she co-hosted with the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Argentina an event to

commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict.

70. The Special Representative continued her cooperation and engagement with other United Nations entities, including UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Her Office continued to contribute to the ongoing review of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards with regard to principles on the release and the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, and guidance on security sector reform. In December 2020, Belgium, Canada and the Niger, in partnership with the Special Representative, the Department of Peace Operations and the Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security, organized an event on the theme “Child protection through United Nations peacekeeping operations: safeguarding dedicated capacities, protecting children’s rights”. In January 2021, she sent a video message to the closing round table of the sixth annual specialized course on child protection for the United Nations military.

71. The Office of the Special Representative continued to cooperate closely with the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees regarding their participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict.

72. Cross-cutting issues relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate remained an important entry point for mainstreaming child protection concerns. The Special Representative continued to treat the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse as a matter of priority, including by engaging with the High-level Steering Group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. In March 2021, she was a speaker at the event “Violence against children recruited by terrorist groups: the cycle of victimization”, organized by the Working Group on Children Recruited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups as part of the fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. In May 2021, she was a speaker at an event co-organized by Spain and the Office on Counter-Terrorism entitled “Dialogue with human rights and civil society partners on building a better paradigm to prevent and counter terrorism”. In July 2021, the Office of the Special Representative became a member of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons.

73. Regular communication with the Human Rights Council regarding violations of the rights of children in situations of conflict continued. In March 2021, the Special Representative presented her annual report to the Council ([A/HRC/46/39](#)). Her Office continued to support the universal periodic review process by providing information on the six grave violations and progress made by the countries on the children and armed conflict agenda. The Special Representative continued her dialogue with the Council’s special procedure mandate holders on common areas of concern. In October 2020, she met virtually with the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material. Also in October, she spoke by telephone with the Head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. Her Office established a collaboration with the team of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. Her Office also provided inputs for reports of special rapporteurs and independent experts and collaborated on situations of mutual interest.

74. Within the United Nations system, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights continued to be an important partner for the Special Representative, including through its field level participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict. The Office of the Special

Representative actively participated in implementing “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights”, launched by the Secretary-General on 24 February 2020. Engagement by the Special Representative with Geneva-based mechanisms and institutions was facilitated through her Liaison Office in Brussels.

## **VI. Recommendations**

**75. The Special Representative remains deeply concerned by the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children and by the worrisome increases in abductions and sexual violence against children. She calls for the adoption and implementation of legislation criminalizing violations and abuses against children and urges Member States to strengthen accountability measures to end impunity and ultimately prevent the occurrence of these violations.**

**76. The Special Representative is concerned by the ongoing killing and maiming of children by explosive weapons and remnants of war, including improvised explosive devices, landmines and bombs. She urges Member States to sign and implement existing international legal instruments pertaining to these weapons and to promote mine clearance and mine risk education, including prior to any movement by internally displaced persons back to contaminated areas.**

**77. The Special Representative expresses concern about the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on conflict-affected children and urges all parties to conflict to endorse the Secretary-General’s appeal for a global ceasefire and to put an immediate and effective halt to hostilities. She calls upon all Member States to ensure that child protection concerns are central to the design of COVID-19 response measures and recovery programmes. She further calls upon Member States to ensure that services and child protection actors are safeguarded and have enough resources despite shrinking economies.**

**78. The Special Representative calls upon parties to conflict to remove all impediments to humanitarian access to children and to enable unimpeded access to education for conflict-affected children. She expresses concern about the increasing instrumentalization of schools as part of hostilities and stresses that it is fundamental to preserve their civilian character, including during school closures enforced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. She urges Member States to do their utmost to protect schools, schoolchildren and teachers, as well as hospitals, health-care institutions and health workers. She further calls for the implementation of special measures to ensure the continuous education of girls.**

**79. The Special Representative calls upon all Member States to further strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including through the ratification and implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the implementation of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), and the endorsement and implementation of the Paris Principles, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles.**

**80. The Special Representative encourages the international community to provide long-term and holistic reintegration programmes for children separated from armed forces or armed groups, released from detention and/or rejected from recruitment and use, and to recognize child reintegration as a crucial contribution to sustainable peace and security. She calls upon Member States and other reintegration actors to provide sustainable political, technical and**

financial support for such efforts and invites all of them to join the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers.

81. The Special Representative underlines the importance of data analysis and management to prevent grave violations from occurring in the first place. She encourages the Security Council, the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, as well as donors, to ensure that child protection priorities are translated into the budgeting and staffing resources necessary to support data analysis, management and the monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children.

82. The Special Representative recalls that 2021 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of resolution [51/77](#), by which her mandate was created. She encourages the international community to use this important milestone to acknowledge that the protection of children must be prioritized on the international agenda to ensure sustainable development and maintain global peace and security. She also encourages all Member States to join the “Act to Protect Children Affected by Conflict” campaign.

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