

### COVID-19 and Children in Armed Conflict

As of mid-April 2020, the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has claimed approximately 150,000 lives globally, even as governments put in place measures to mitigate its spread. On March 23, 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a worldwide ceasefire in order to create conditions for the delivery of lifesaving assistance and focus resources on ending the pandemic. Highlighting the devastating impacts of armed conflict on children and other vulnerable populations, the Secretary-General noted that these groups are also at the highest risk of suffering devastating losses from COVID-19. In a policy brief published April 15, the UN detailed the harmful impacts of the virus on children.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a global network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and guarantee their rights, has developed this factsheet to put into focus the risks of COVID-19 specifically for those children embroiled in war and provide recommendations to mitigate these challenges.

### Why are conflict-affected countries likely to be ill-equipped to deal with COVID-19, and what are the consequences for children?

- Adequately staffed and well-equipped medical facilities are needed to combat the virus, but **armed conflict has already left many public health systems in shambles**. In Yemen, for example, war has left only half of hospitals still fully functional, and some two-thirds of the population without access to healthcare. In such contexts, health providers do not have nearly enough resources to respond to ongoing needs, let alone to address a pandemic of the current scale.
- Handwashing and social distancing are said to be the first line of defense against COVID-19. Yet in many countries around the world, **armed conflict has led to the destruction of civilian infrastructure, limiting millions of children's access to basic services**, such as access to clean water and sanitation, adequate housing, and access to information. These impacts are compounded for children displaced by conflict and insecurity, many of whom live in crowded camp or urban settings.
- Measures to combat COVID-19 may confine children to dangerous home settings, **increasing their risk of exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation**, including sexual and gender-based violence, while limiting children's access to protection services and social networks. In Syria, for example, at least 450 community centers, child-friendly spaces, and women and girl safe spaces, which provided protection services to 1.2 million people, have been closed.

### What are the possible impacts of COVID-19 on the rights of children affected by war?

- As long as armed conflicts continue, so too will grave violations of children's rights. In some countries, warring parties have even sought to exploit the current dynamics, increasing grave violations, despite calls for a global ceasefire. Meanwhile, restrictions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 threaten to **hamper efforts to prevent, monitor, report, and respond to child rights violations**.
- **Children in detention** – many of whom are held in crowded, unsanitary conditions, with inadequate access to healthcare and other services – are at serious risk of contracting COVID-19. In at least 15 conflict-affected countries, governments imprison children suspected of involvement with armed groups or other national security offenses, often based on little or no evidence and in violation of their rights.
- Measures aimed at stopping COVID-19's spread can pose **challenges to the timely and effective delivery of lifesaving assistance** to children in need. Restrictions that limit travel and movement are already impacting the delivery of humanitarian aid by limiting the movement of goods, aid workers, and beneficiaries, and disrupting transportation services and domestic and international trade. School closures have led to the suspension of school feeding programs – which, for many children in armed conflict, are a key form of lifesaving assistance. Public gathering regulations can prevent timely aid distribution, even where adapted for COVID-19, while some forms of assistance may not be delivered at all.

### Situations involving parties listed for grave violations against children:

Afghanistan  
Central African Republic  
Colombia  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
Iraq  
Mali  
Myanmar (Burma)  
Nigeria  
Philippines  
Somalia  
South Sudan  
Sudan  
Syrian Arab Republic  
Yemen

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- In addition to overwhelming already fledgling healthcare systems in conflict-affected countries, the spread of COVID-19 has led to the **disruption of critical lifesaving services for children**, including immunizations and neo-natal care, increasing their risk of infection with otherwise preventable diseases.
- As an increasing number of conflict-affected countries close schools to reduce virus transmission – leaving some 1.5 billion children worldwide out of school – **the risk of military occupation of education facilities** also increases. Once schools are occupied, it becomes more difficult for children to resume their studies, even after the pandemic threat has subsided. The longer children are out of school, the more likely they will never return – especially girls and children already in crisis situations.

## How has COVID-19 affected the ability of the UN and its partners to respond to grave violations against children in armed conflict?

- The spread of COVID-19 has challenged the UN's usual working methods, with diplomats and staff moving to remote work and many scheduled events canceled or postponed. The UN Security Council has also been impacted, with Member States initially struggling to reach agreement on remote working procedures. While the Security Council has agreed to a temporary, informal plan of video-conference, many of these meetings have been closed, lacking transparency and limiting the ability of civil society and non-Council members to engage.
- The pandemic has also impacted the work of UN peacekeeping missions, with troop rotations and deployments postponed to June 30. Travel restrictions have also limited the effective implementation of child protection mandates, which require child protection actors to travel to field locations and interact with local populations in order to monitor, report, and respond to grave violations of children's rights.
- At the same time, the UN can play an important role in contributing towards preventing and mitigating the spread of COVID-19, and in many places, it has already. Peacekeeping missions are encouraging parties to the conflict to 'silence the guns' and facilitate humanitarian access, in line with the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire. UN agencies and their partners are shoring up the global humanitarian response, and the UN has donated much-needed medical supplies to governments around the world.

## What can be done to safeguard children's rights in conflict in a time of global crisis?

- Governments, the UN, and members of civil society should take proactive measures to mitigate the primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19 on children and ensure that response efforts at all levels **take into account the rights and needs of vulnerable children**, including those living in war-torn countries.
- Governments should **facilitate access for all frontline medical and humanitarian workers** in order to ensure timely COVID-19 response and continued provision of humanitarian assistance to affected populations. In conflict-affected countries where movement of essential personnel and supplies is allowed, **'essential' should include staff responsible for monitoring, reporting, and responding to grave violations** of children's rights.
- Governments should also **ensure the protection of all health care facilities and personnel**, and strongly urge all warring parties to **comply with the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire**.
- Governments and the UN should consider the potential risk of military occupation of schools in the development of policies aimed at preventing and mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and **put in place measures to protect schools**.
- Governments should **urgently release from detention all children** who can safely return to their families or an appropriate alternative, and put an **immediate moratorium on new admissions of children to detention** facilities, as recommended by UNICEF and other experts.
- Governments should ensure **continued compliance with international laws**, particularly respect for non-derogable human rights and non-refoulement.
- The UN and civil society actors in the field should continue to **rigorously monitor and report on grave violations against children in armed conflict**, as well as other child protection concerns, including the military occupation of schools, sexual violence against children, and other abuses.
- The Security Council should adapt to the current reality in order to continue the full extent of its work to ensure international peace and security, including the protection of children in armed conflict. This includes **adopting working modalities that are transparent** and allow for engagement by civil society and non-Council members.

## Other Resources

- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Technical Note on the Protection of Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- CRIN, Coronavirus and Children in Detention
- Human Rights Watch, COVID-19's Devastating Impact on Children
- Plan International, How Will COVID-19 Affect Girls and Young Women?
- Save the Children, Protecting a Generation from COVID-19: An Agenda for Action
- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Statement on the Grave Physical, Emotional and Psychological Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children
- Violence Against Children, Joint Statement: A Hidden Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic
- World Vision International, COVID-19 Increases Risk of Child Abuse and Exploitation for Refugee and Internally Displaced Children

## About Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a global network of international human rights and humanitarian non-governmental organizations which strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts through local partnerships, reporting, and advocacy.

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