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**NEW REPORT: VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY ARMED GROUPS AGAINST CHILDREN IN MALI;
GREATER ACTION NEEDED BY ALL**

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict demands that all stakeholders quickly act to protect children.

19 June, New York – Armed groups operating in Mali, including AQIM, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and the MNLA, are committing grave violations against children, and insufficient actions are being taken to protect and prevent them according to a report released today by Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a network of international human rights and humanitarian organizations that work together to protect the security and rights of children in situations of armed conflict. .

The conflict in Mali, which began in January 2012, has taken a large toll on children. Boys have been recruited and used by armed groups, including in hostilities; girls have been raped or forcibly married to members of the armed groups. Schools have been closed and destroyed. Children have been injured or killed by grenades and other explosive remnants scattered around their neighbourhoods and schools. Efforts by government, the UN, humanitarian actors, and armed forces operating in Mali to protect children have been too slow and insufficient. Donors have not prioritized children in their humanitarian funding.

The report, *Where are they...? The situation of children and armed conflict in Mali* is the first report published since the beginning of the conflict, focusing exclusively on the impact of the conflict on girls and boys in Mali. It describes how armed groups recruited, trained, and used boys as young as seven years old, including in combat. Community members from all three regions told Layal Sarrouh, researcher and author of the report, that they saw young children, armed and guarding checkpoints: children barely as tall as their guns – AK 47s – with uniforms so big that the sleeves hung off; children so small that they couldn't carry their guns and had to drag them.

“The lack of action by both national and international actors means that children continue to experience grave violations, without an adequate means of protection,” says Eva Smets, Executive Director of Watchlist. “Yet the numbers of children involved are not known beyond the estimates provided by community members.” Based on such testimonies, Watchlist and other human rights organizations believe that armed groups have recruited hundreds of boys.

Girls, too, have been greatly impacted by the conflict. Community members spoke to Watchlist of the forced marriages of girls of all ages to members of the armed groups. “They [the armed groups] would go around telling people you cannot refuse a man if they ask, ‘you have no right to refuse,’” one mother told Watchlist, adding that they would take the girls right away.

The report's publication comes ahead of the UN Security Council's deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, MINUSMA, to Mali. Watchlist is concerned that the peacekeepers aren't ready to take up their role to protect children. “Troops need to know what to do if they come face to face with an armed child while on patrol. They need specific training and protocols on this, and on their interactions with vulnerable civilian populations. None of these things are in place yet,” says Sarrouh.

In the report, Watchlist details recommendations to all stakeholders demanding action to protect children and to better care for those who have experienced violations. As dialogues and peace and reconciliation efforts move forward, it is crucial that these address the plight and future of children affected by this conflict. “The needs of children must be prioritized and considered at the highest levels. Too often the experiences and perspectives of children are side-lined in these processes, says



Sarrouh. “The abuses need to stop and perpetrators need to be held to account. The government and international community must do more to ensure a safe and hopeful future for Malian children.”

For a full list of findings and recommendations, please request an embargoed copy of the report. Interviews with the author are also available by request.

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Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national, and international non-governmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision makers to create and implement programmes and policies that effectively protect children.

Watchlist is a fiscally-sponsored project of Tides Center, a U.S.-based non-profit public charity. Watchlist does not receive direct financial support from Tides Center. Watchlist’s vision, mission, and programmatic content are set by an Advisory Board composed of leading international NGOs.

For more information on Watchlist, please visit our website: www.watchlist.org

Watchlist’s Mali page goes live 19 June at 10:30am EST: <http://watchlist.org/the-countries/mali>