

2019 Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict: Detailed Review and Analysis

On August 2, 2019, the United Nations Security Council held a high-level open debate on children and armed conflict (CAC) under the presidency of Poland and chaired by its Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Mr. Jacek Czaputowicz. The President highlighted the 10-year anniversary of the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1882 (2009) and efforts aimed at prevention, such as Resolution 2427 adopted at the 2018 open debate.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), Ms. Virginia Gamba, presented the Secretary-General's (SG) annual report on children and armed conflict. While the UN indicated some progress in efforts to protect children in war, it reported back-sliding in others, most notably with regard to a record-high number of children killed and maimed (over 12,000 in 2018). The SRSG-CAAC also highlighted the ACT to Protect campaign, launched earlier this year, and marked the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a prevalent theme of the day.

UNICEF Executive Director Ms. Henrietta Fore flagged a number of concerns, including the increasing unlawful detention of children for their real or perceived affiliation with armed groups, insufficient investment into rehabilitation and reintegration programs for affected children, and the need for greater attention to children with disabilities in the midst and aftermath of conflict. She reaffirmed that children associated with armed groups should be treated primarily as victims, as underscored in Resolution 2427, and called on Member States to avoid the excessive use of force against civilians, including children. Ms. Fore concluded by stressing how child protection today can bring about sustainable peace in the future.

Two civil society speakers briefed the Council. Ms. Mariatu Kamara, UNICEF Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, shared her story of abuse during an attack on her village in Sierra Leone in 1999. Ms. Kamara called for stronger support from the Council – specifically through further investment in education, training, and counselling – to address the trauma and stigmatization of child victims and prevent their relapse into the culture of conflict.

Mr. Majok Peter Awan, Child Protection and Psychosocial Support Coordinator for War Child Holland in South Sudan, recalled his recruitment as a child by rebel groups in what was then southern Sudan. Mr. Awan remarked how child protection has still not been systematically prioritized in humanitarian responses despite its proven ability to prevent violence, facilitate family reunification, and promote children's access to health care, food, education, and psychosocial support. Mr. Awan urged the Council to allot all resources necessary to heal victims' physical and psychological wounds.

The ensuing discussion among UN Member States included **interventions from 80 speakers, representing 115 delegations in all**. The tone was mostly positive, and the overwhelming majority conveyed strong support for the CAC mandate. A small minority of delegations, including several mentioned in the report, were critical of some aspects of the report and/or agenda; these included the inclusion or exclusion of certain countries in the text or its annexes or the sourcing of data (7 speakers).¹ However, the open debate was an important moment for States to commit, or to reaffirm their commitments, to protecting children in war.

After a careful review and analysis of interventions at the 2019 open debate, Watchlist has identified the following key themes and recommendations.

1. Strengthen the CAC agenda through the effective use of all mechanisms and tools.

A number of statements highlighted the importance of using the different tools and mechanisms available to support implementation of the UN's CAC agenda. These include the transparent and impartial listing of perpetrators in the SG's annexes (12)ⁱⁱ; maintaining child protection capacities in peacekeeping missions (22)ⁱⁱⁱ; and mainstreaming child protection into Security Council and intergovernmental processes (6).^{iv} Notably, a number of speakers underscored the impact of the consolidation of child protection and human rights functions within peacekeeping missions (4 statements, representing 55 Member States)^v; the European Union indicated that it was monitoring and would welcome a Secretariat briefing on the process at a later date.

2. Enact concrete and effective measures to protect children.

Speakers identified and expressed concern about current trends in armed conflict and their impact on children, such as the use of explosive weapons in urban areas (10).^{vi} A number of statements reminded parties to conflict to allow for the unhindered delivery of aid to children and other civilians in need, and/or encouraged the UN to strengthen reporting on the denial of humanitarian access (11).^{vii} Several underlined the role of action plans to end and prevent grave violations, some urging listed parties to sign and implement time-bound action plans (11).^{viii}

Regarding measures and commitments to protect children on the ground, 31 speakers called on fellow Member States to avoid the military use of schools and to integrate guidance on military use of schools into trainings, by endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration.^{ix} Continued support for the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was echoed throughout a number of statements (22).^x Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania welcomed South Sudan's accession to the treaty, while Myanmar reported on its progress toward ratification.

Several states also reiterated their alignment with the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (15)^{xi} and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (24).^{xii} Notably, Morocco announced its endorsement of the Vancouver Principles at the open debate, bringing the total number of endorsements at the time to 91.

3. Support child victims through sustainable, gender-sensitive rehabilitation and reintegration programming, and support services for survivors of sexual violence.

The call for sustainable reintegration programming and support services to assist survivors of armed conflict was a common theme at the open debate. A number of delegates stressed the importance of providing long-term, sustainable support for the reintegration and rehabilitation of children formerly associated with armed forces or groups (21).^{xiii} Additionally, many Member States reiterated the need to treat children of war primarily as victims (16).^{xiv} Several delegates also called for the release and timely transfer to child protection actors of children detained for their alleged affiliation with parties to conflict (7).^{xv} In particular, Sierra Leone insisted that children who may have committed illegal acts should be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards.

Following up on earlier statements from Ms. Fore, Ms. Kamara, and Mr. Awan, 13 speakers drew attention to Resolution 2475 (2019) and the special needs of persons with disabilities, both during and after conflict.^{xvi} Finally, a total of 11 statements representing 53 delegations called for strengthening support services for child survivors of sexual violence in conflict.^{xvii}

4. Ensure justice and accountability for violations of children’s rights.

The importance of ensuring justice and accountability for violations of children’s rights was emphasized repeatedly. A considerable number of speakers (25) discussed the need for compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law, and the global community’s responsibility to bring violators to justice.^{xviii} Specifically, 13 statements representing 60 delegations expressed their support for the International Criminal Court.^{xix}

5. Strengthen prevention efforts in order to protect children.

A broad range of speakers underlined the power of conflict prevention and how addressing the root causes of conflict would support the protection of children on a more sustainable basis. To this end, 13 speakers representing 65 delegations specifically referenced Resolution 2427.^{xx} Canada (speaking on behalf of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict), Germany, and Italy were among those to highlight the value of regional and sub-regional organizations in prevention programming. Member States such as the Maldives called for the full implementation of the resolution, while Poland asserted that doing so would help safeguard children from sexual violence. Côte d’Ivoire and Kuwait underscored the need to mainstream child protection and promote the rights, well-being and empowerment of children through all stages of the conflict cycle, including peacebuilding.

The open debate is a key opportunity for Member States to reaffirm their support for the CAC agenda at the global level, especially at a time when parties to conflict are showing a flagrant disregard for international law. The 2019 open debate was a reminder that, despite normative progress, much more must be done to protect children caught in the throes of war, and their needs should be central to any efforts to maintain international peace and security. It is now incumbent upon all stakeholders to translate their words into actions and take decisive steps toward upholding the rights of children in armed conflict.

ⁱ India; Iran; Iraq; Israel; Observer State of Palestine; Pakistan; and Syrian Arab Republic.

ⁱⁱ Belgium; European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); France; Germany; Iran; Republic of Korea; Liechtenstein; Malaysia; Observer State of Palestine; Qatar; Switzerland; and Uruguay.

ⁱⁱⁱ Belgium; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict); Côte d’Ivoire; Dominican Republic; Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia and Lithuania); Fiji; France; Germany; Holy See; India; Indonesia; Jordan; Kenya; Kuwait; Malaysia; Maldives; Montenegro; Poland; Sierra Leone; Switzerland; and Thailand.

^{iv} Belgium; Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia and Lithuania); Fiji; Liechtenstein; Switzerland; and Thailand.

^v Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Germany; and Malaysia.

^{vi} Belgium; Ethiopia; European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Fiji; Germany; Guatemala; Ireland; Liechtenstein; San Marino; and Uruguay.

^{vii} Armenia; Bulgaria; Egypt; Fiji; Ireland; Kuwait; Malaysia; Maldives; Sierra Leone; Slovenia; and United Kingdom.

^{viii} Angola; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Côte d’Ivoire; Equatorial Guinea; European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Germany; India; Kenya; South Africa; Switzerland; and Yemen.

^{ix} Andorra; Argentina; Armenia; Brazil; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Dominican Republic; Ecuador; Fiji; France; Georgia; Germany; Guatemala; Italy; Japan; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Liechtenstein; Luxembourg; Malaysia; Montenegro; Norway (on behalf of itself, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden); Peru; Portugal; Qatar; San Marino; Slovenia; Spain; Switzerland; United Kingdom; and Uruguay.

^x Andorra; Armenia; Bahrain; Bangladesh; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Ecuador; France; Georgia; Guatemala; Holy See; Italy; Kazakhstan; Maldives; Montenegro; Morocco; Pakistan; Portugal; Slovenia; Ukraine; United Kingdom; and Uruguay.

^{xi} Andorra; Armenia; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Dominican Republic; France; Italy; Kazakhstan; Mexico; Morocco; Peru; Portugal; Slovenia; Ukraine; United Kingdom; and Uruguay.

^{xii} Andorra; Armenia; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Colombia; Dominican Republic; El Salvador; Equatorial Guinea; France; Georgia; Italy; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Malaysia; Mexico; Montenegro; Morocco; Peru; Portugal; San Marino; Slovenia; Thailand; United Kingdom; and Uruguay.

^{xiii} Andorra; Argentina; Belgium; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Côte d'Ivoire; Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia, and Lithuania); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Germany; India; Indonesia; Japan; Kazakhstan; Republic of Korea; Kuwait; Liberia; Malaysia; Norway (on behalf of itself, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden); Poland; Sierra Leone; South Africa; and United Kingdom.

^{xiv} Angola; Argentina; Brazil; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia, and Lithuania); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Fiji; Ireland; Italy; Luxembourg; Mexico; Morocco; Qatar; Sierra Leone; and South Africa.

^{xv} Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); India; Italy; Kazakhstan; Luxembourg; and South Africa.

^{xvi} Andorra; Argentina; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Guatemala; Ireland; Italy; Jordan; Kuwait; Maldives; Poland; and San Marino.

^{xvii} Dominican Republic; Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia, and Lithuania); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); France; Germany; Republic of Korea; Liechtenstein; Maldives; Norway (on behalf of itself, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden); Portugal; and United Kingdom.

^{xviii} Belgium; Brazil; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Côte d'Ivoire; El Salvador; Estonia (on behalf of itself, Latvia and Lithuania); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); France; Germany; India; Ireland; Italy; Kazakhstan; Kenya; Republic of Korea; Liechtenstein; Luxembourg; Malaysia; Norway (on behalf of itself, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden); Pakistan; Slovenia; South Africa; Ukraine; United Kingdom; and Uruguay.

^{xix} Andorra; Belgium; Brazil; Bulgaria; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Germany; Ireland; Republic of Korea; Liechtenstein; Luxembourg; Slovenia; Uruguay.

^{xx} Bahrain; Canada (on behalf of the Group of Friends); Côte d'Ivoire; Ecuador; Equatorial Guinea; European Union (on behalf of its current members as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine); Germany; Ireland; Italy; Kuwait; Maldives; Norway (on behalf of itself, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden); and Poland.