

Children and Armed Conflict:

UN SECURITY COUNCIL OPEN DEBATE ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

SPECIAL UPDATE:
JULY 2022

Recommendations for the UN Security Council and Member States

In July, the Security Council will hold its open debate on children and armed conflict (CAAC), under Brazil's presidency. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) will present the Secretary-General's (SG) 2022 annual report on CAAC (forthcoming), covering the period from January 1 to December 31, 2021.

In the 25 years since its establishment, the UN's CAAC mandate has made valuable progress in protecting children from the devastating impacts of war, encouraging compliance with international law, and promoting behavior change of warring parties. Despite this progress, children continue to suffer disproportionately in armed conflict. Wars are increasingly prolonged and fought in urban areas amid civilian populations, blurring the lines between the battlefield and traditional protected spaces. Homes, schools, hospitals, and other critical civilian infrastructure have come under attack, with immediate and long-term impacts for children's survival and well-being. Attacks against schools and hospitals are often committed in conjunction with other grave violations against children, such as abductions, recruitment and use, and sexual violence. The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas (EWIPA) has resulted in deaths, physical injuries, and psychological trauma, and has hindered civilians' ability to safely return and rebuild once conflict ends.

Displacement due to armed conflict poses additional risks to children, including vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation, recruitment and use, and other abuses, particularly for those who are unaccompanied or have been separated from their caregivers. Armed conflict may also heighten children's risk of statelessness due to breakdown of civil registration procedures, counterterrorism (CT) or citizen-stripping measures impacting children associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG), or being born in territories under the control of armed groups.

The proliferation of CT measures that lack adequate safeguards for children's rights, shrinking civic space, challenges to principled humanitarian action, pervasive impunity, and growing disregard for international law undermine efforts to protect children in armed conflict. CAAFAG, including those allegedly associated with armed groups designated as 'terrorist' by the UN, are first and foremost victims of serious violations and should be treated accordingly and provided reintegration support. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated children's vulnerability to rights violations and abuses. Parties to conflict exploit these vulnerabilities, targeting children in distinct ways on the basis of their gender, age, disability, and other characteristics.

Specialized child protection capacity remains crucial for UN peacekeeping and political missions to fully deliver on their child protection mandates. Yet, child protection represents only a tiny fraction of overall peacekeeping personnel and budgets: 0.13 percent and 0.21 percent, respectively, as of 2020. Budget cuts, streamlining, and mission transitions/drawdowns place child protection capacity at risk of further reduction.

Against this backdrop, it is crucial for the UN, its Member States, and civil society to defend and uphold existing protection frameworks, such as the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Other global initiatives, such as the Paris Principles and Commitments, Vancouver Principles, and Safe Schools Declaration, provide additional tools to strengthen child protection. Accountability is essential for protecting children in war and ending grave violations. Holding perpetrators of such violations accountable increases the costs of noncompliance with international law, deters future violations, and thus, better protects children. Moreover, the listing and de-listing of perpetrators in the SG's annual CAAC report remains a unique and powerful tool for promoting compliance with international law.

Accountability also encompasses ensuring that programs and policies are responsive to the very children they are designed to protect. Children can meaningfully participate in decision-making processes affecting them, including peace processes, where such participation is in line with their best interests, contributing to their own protection and that of their communities.

In view of the upcoming open debate, Watchlist recommends that the Security Council and other UN Member States:

Situations before the Council 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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1. Call for increased compliance with international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law and child protection norms, and strengthen accountability for all grave violations against children:

- a. Strongly condemn all grave violations and abuses against children and encourage the signing and implementation of joint action plans with the UN to end and prevent grave violations; demand that all parties take action to protect children in accordance with the principles of precaution, distinction, and proportionality.
- b. Reiterate support for the UN's CAAC agenda, including the integrity and impartiality of the listing mechanism; call for a complete, evidence-based list of perpetrators in the annexes of the SG's annual reports that accurately reflects data collected and verified by the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM); strongly urge the SG to implement a rigorous, objective, and transparent process to ensure that parties are listed and de-listed according to the [2010 criteria](#), consistently across all country situations.
- c. Urge Member States to bring to justice all those responsible for grave violations against children, including through prompt investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other egregious crimes against children; encourage cooperation with international justice mechanisms, including the ICC, and call for dedicated child rights expertise within investigative and justice mechanisms.
- d. Encourage Member States who have not done so to ratify OPAC and endorse and implement the Paris Principles and Commitments, Vancouver Principles, and Safe Schools Declaration; encourage endorsers to exchange lessons learned and good practices.

2. Strengthen effective use of existing mechanisms and tools to monitor, report, and respond to grave violations:

- a. Call for increased child protection capacity in UN peace operations and political missions, with financial, political, and operational support to fully deliver on child protection mandates; prioritize child protection considerations in the context of mission drawdown or transition.
- b. Encourage the SG to swiftly alert the Security Council wherever there is credible information that parties are committing grave violations by including such "situations of concern" in his annual CAAC report.
- c. Call for effective measures to prevent and address attacks and threats of attack on education facilities, paying particular attention to inclusive access to education for girls, refugee and internally displaced children, and children with disabilities, per [SCR 2601 \(2021\)](#).
- d. Call for increased financial and political support for the UN's MRM, encouraging systematic analysis of the impact of gender, disability, and other vulnerabilities to inform response and prevention efforts; further support efforts to strengthen and enhance monitoring and reporting, including the disaggregation of data by gender, age, and disability.
- e. Demand that all parties to conflict allow and facilitate unimpeded, rapid, and safe access to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations, especially children, and respect and protect humanitarian personnel, assets, and infrastructure.
- f. Call on the SRSF-CAAC to develop a guidance note on monitoring, reporting, advocacy, and dialogue on denial of humanitarian access for children, in line with existing guidance notes for other grave violations.

3. Prioritize the protection of the rights and well-being of children in armed conflict:

- a. Call for renewed efforts to mark and clear explosive remnants of war, prioritizing areas where displaced civilians are returning and where children are likely to pass through, and support the adoption of a political declaration committing to avoid the use of EWIPA.
- b. Recalling that CAAFAG should be treated primarily as victims and that detention should be used only as a last resort, call for the release and timely transfer of children in security force custody to civilian child protection authorities; in cases where children may have committed violent criminal acts, ensure they are treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards; urge donors to provide long-term, predictable funding for reintegration of CAAFAG.
- c. To prevent the military detention of children, call for the adoption and effective implementation of [handover protocols](#) that ensure children's swift transfer to civilian child protection authorities, as well as access to detention facilities for UN and other independent monitors.
- d. Call for the protection, rights, well-being, and empowerment of children affected by war to be fully incorporated and prioritized in ongoing and future efforts to build and sustain peace, per [SCR 2427 \(2018\)](#); encourage and facilitate consideration of children's perspectives in these processes, where possible and compatible with their best interests, drawing on existing tools, including the [Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict](#).

NGO Resources

-  Watchlist and Fordham University, [Denial of Humanitarian Access for Children: Legal, Policy, and Operational Challenges](#), June 2022
-  Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), [Education Under Attack 2022](#), June 2022
-  Open Letter by 18 NGOs to Secretary-General Guterres [Calling for a Complete and Accurate List of Perpetrators](#), May 2022
-  Watchlist, "A Credible List": [Recommendations for the Secretary-General's 2022 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#), April 2022
-  Human Rights Watch, [UN: High Risk in Conflicts for Children with Disabilities](#), February 2022

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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122 East 42nd Street, Suite 451, New York, NY 10168 USA • Phone: 212.972.0695

Email: watchlist@watchlist.org - Website: www.watchlist.org