

COVID-19 and Children in Armed Conflict

Since December 2019, the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has spread to 216 countries and territories and claimed nearly one million lives globally. 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. Since then, the UN has released policy briefs on the virus' impacts on children and on education. Highlighting the devastating effects 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 July, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2532 demanding "a general and immediate cessation of hostilities in all situations on its agenda" and a 90-day "humanitarian pause."

In April, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict published a factsheet warning about the potentially devastating risks the COVID-19 pandemic could pose for children in conflict-affected countries. This update examines some of the ways in which these children have been impacted in the six months since the pandemic was declared and provides recommendations to mitigate these challenges.

COVID-19's reach in conflict-affected countries

Despite calls from the Secretary-General and the Security Council, armed conflict has not stopped during the pandemic. Health care systems already strained by conflict, have been **placed under additional stress in responding to COVID-19**. In Libya, for example, the health care system has been described as "nearing full collapse" under the combined weight of conflict and pandemic, with health services, including child immunizations, impacted. Simultaneously, **access restrictions** can hinder providers' ability to track the spread of cases, to provide health care services, and to ensure continued delivery of humanitarian assistance. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), at least 30 measles vaccination campaigns were or are at risk of cancellation due to COVID-19.

While child protection actors have identified some of the following impacts, strengthened data collection over time is needed to understand the full impact of the pandemic on children in these contexts.

How is COVID-19 impacting the rights of children in war?

- Measures to combat COVID-19 have confined many children to dangerous home settings, increasing their risk of exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation, including sexual and gender-based violence, while limiting their access to protection services and social networks. According to UNICEF, 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19. World Vision estimates that up to 85 million more children have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence during the pandemic. In forthcoming research from Plan International, children in the Lake Chad region cite suspension of NGO activity as an obstacle to reporting rights violations and obtaining support.
- Child protection actors have further expressed concerns that children may be at increased risk of recruitment and use by armed forces or groups, abduction, and sexual violence due to deepening poverty, restrictions on movement, and reduced access to essential services. In Colombia, the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in the Colombian Armed Conflict (COALICO) reported 190 cases of recruitment and use of children, including Venezuelan migrant and refugee children, by armed groups between January 1 and June 30, compared to 38 cases in the same period in 2019. ▶

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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- Children in detention – many of whom are held in crowded, unsanitary conditions, with inadequate access to health care and other services – are at serious risk of contracting COVID-19. While at least 79 countries have released adult detainees as part of their pandemic response, only around 20 countries are known to have released children. In Afghanistan and Iraq, release orders have excluded those charged with terrorism or national security offenses, possibly excluding children detained for alleged association with armed groups. In August, UNAMA estimated that more than half of children held in juvenile rehabilitation centers had been released, but reported that a boy held in such a center in Kabul had committed suicide after being placed in solitary isolation when it was believe he may have contracted COVID-19.
- Denial of humanitarian access had seen an alarming spike even before the pandemic. Measures aimed at stopping COVID-19's spread, have posed additional challenges to the timely and effective delivery of lifesaving assistance to children in need, limiting the movement of goods, aid workers, and beneficiaries, and disrupting transportation services and domestic and international trade. Similarly, conflict-related attacks against health care facilities and personnel have continued, with violence against health care workers increasing since the pandemic was declared and at least 79 health care workers killed and 39 abducted in 2020. Airstrikes have repeatedly hit health facilities designated as COVID-19 response centers in Libya and quarantine centers in Yemen.
- School closures and disruptions to mitigate the virus' spread have impacted 1.6 billion students in 190 countries. The risk of military occupation of closed schools remains a concern and once occupied, it becomes more difficult for children to resume their studies, even after the pandemic threat has subsided. For example, Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) reportedly took over a girls' primary school in June to use as a training base, preventing the school from re-opening for exams. 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?

- While child protection actors have faced access restrictions, efforts to document grave violations have continued in line with the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) standards, with an increased reliance on remote verification. In Afghanistan, for example, the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) verified 620 child casualties, 19 cases of child recruitment and use, 18 conflict-related incidents involving healthcare facilities or workers, nine attacks on schools, and 11 denials of humanitarian access in the second quarter of 2020.
- Child protection actors have found innovative ways to continue engagement with warring parties for the protection of children, even while working under remote conditions. In the Central African Republic (CAR), for example, MINUSCA has used radio broadcasts to disseminate information on COVID-19, while advocating for prevention and protection measures. However, some forms of engagement have been limited, such as the ability of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) to carry out scheduled field visits in light of travel restrictions, relying instead on video conferencing.
- To mitigate the risk of the virus spreading in larger group settings, community and family reintegration solutions have been prioritized over interim care centers for children released from armed forces and groups. In South Sudan, COVID-19 prevention measures restricted interstate movement, causing family tracing and reunification of former children associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG) to stop for months, only to resume at reduced capacity. ▶

Other Resources

- ➔ [Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Technical Notes 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, Halting Lives: The Impact of COVID-19 on Girls](#)
- ➔ [Save the Children, Protecting a Generation: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children's Lives](#)
- ➔ [Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Urgent to Protect Schools from Military Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- ➔ [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Statement on the Grave Physical, Emotional and Psychological Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children](#)
- ➔ [UNICEF, Protecting Children from Violence in a Time of COVID-19](#)
- ➔ [United Nations, Policy Brief: Education During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)

- The Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC) has continued its work virtually, adopting [conclusions](#) on Yemen, Afghanistan, CAR, Iraq, Colombia, and Somalia since the UN went remote in March. The SCWG-CAAC continues to explore ways to engage and effectively use a diverse range of the tools in its [toolkit](#).

What can be done to safeguard children's rights in conflict during the global crisis and post-crisis recovery?

- 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 conflict-affected countries. This should include continuing efforts to secure the release and reintegration of CAAFAG and to prevent future child recruitment and use.
- Governments should urgently **facilitate access for all frontline medical and humanitarian workers** in order to ensure timely COVID-19 response and continued provision of humanitarian assistance. In conflict-affected countries, **'essential' personnel exempt from COVID-19 movement restrictions should include staff responsible for monitoring, reporting, and responding to grave violations** of children's rights and child protection actors.
- 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 **take steps to protect schools**, including incorporating the [Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict](#) into their military training and doctrine.
- Governments should **urgently release all children from detention to civilian child protection authorities** for safe return to their families or an appropriate alternative without any preconditions, and put an **immediate moratorium on new admissions of children to detention** facilities, as recommended by [UNICEF](#), [the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), and other experts.
- Humanitarian actors and governments should facilitate, as appropriate and in line with the best interests of the child, **direct engagement with impacted children** in situations of armed conflict, in order to inform adaptation of protection programming during the pandemic. This should include consultation with girls on changing dynamics and higher risks of gender-based violence.
- Governments should ensure **continued compliance with international laws**, particularly respect for non-derogable human rights, international humanitarian law, and non-refoulement, support the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, and implement Security Council Resolution 2532.
- The UN and civil society actors 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 and sexual violence against children.
- The UN should **prioritize child protection capacity**, including trained personnel, financial resources, and operational space to ensure crucial child protection functions can continue during the pandemic and post-pandemic response.

(continued)

Other Resources

- ➔ [United Nations, Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children](#)
- ➔ [Violence Against Children, Joint Statement: A Hidden Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- ➔ [World Vision International, COVID-19 Aftershocks: Millions More Children at Risk of Violence Under Lockdown and into the 'New Normal'](#)

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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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