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Promotion and protection of the rights of children****Security Council
Seventy-seventh year****Letter dated 10 June 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of
Canada and Germany to the United Nations addressed to the
Secretary-General**

We have the honour to submit to you the report of the workshop on children and armed conflict convened by the non-governmental organization Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs of Fordham University on 3 February 2022 (see annex).

We would be grateful if you could issue the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 70 (a), and of the Security Council.

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Annex to the letter dated 10 June 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Canada and Germany to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Report of the annual policy workshop on children and armed conflict: priorities for the United Nations children and armed conflict agenda 2022

3 February 2022

I. Introduction

1. The non-governmental organization (NGO) Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs of Fordham University, with the support of the Permanent Missions of Canada and Germany to the United Nations, convened a policy workshop on 3 February 2022. The workshop, which was held virtually, brought together representatives of States Members of the United Nations, including members of the Security Council, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Committee of the Red Cross, academia and civil society to discuss priorities for the United Nations children and armed conflict agenda in 2022. This was the eighth such policy workshop organized by Watchlist since 2013, and the second co-organized with Fordham University. The aim of the workshop was to engage participants in identifying priorities and developing recommendations for concrete, targeted actions to be taken in the coming year within the framework of the children and armed conflict agenda.

2. The Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict opened the workshop with a keynote address, in which she reflected on progress made in implementing the children and armed conflict agenda over the past 25 years and the challenges that remained. In her remarks, the Special Representative emphasized prevention and early warning, as well as collaboration among various child protection stakeholders, including regional and subregional organizations. Additional themes included the need to maintain and reinforce monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict, engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent violations and the need for dedicated child protection capacity to implement the agenda on the ground.

3. In addition to the keynote address, the workshop consisted of three closed working sessions. The first session was focused on supporting implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda through the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council and the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, and featured reflections by the Deputy Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations and the Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations. The second session was focused on protecting children's education in armed conflict, including through the implementation of recently adopted Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#), and featured presentations by a former representative of the Permanent Mission of the Niger to the United Nations, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack and UNICEF. The third session was focused on addressing the multiple vulnerabilities that children experience during armed conflict, and featured presentations by civil society and academic experts on disability rights, mental health in complex emergencies and children's rights.

4. The present report summarizes the discussions that took place in the sessions and provides recommendations for action by the Security Council, the United

Nations, NGOs and other stakeholders to end and prevent violations and abuses against children in situations of armed conflict in 2022 and going forward.

II. Keynote address

5. The Special Representative reflected on the progress achieved by the children in armed conflict mandate over the past 25 years and the challenges it faced today, celebrating the mandate's concrete effects for children affected by war. More than 170,000 children had been separated from armed forces and armed groups; 37 joint action plans had been signed between the United Nations and parties to conflict, leading to better protection for children; and Member States had coalesced around common action, such as ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and initiatives such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles) and the Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers. Despite those achievements, however, abuses against children in armed conflict persisted.

6. The Special Representative highlighted three areas of strategic priority for protecting children affected by armed conflict in the short- and long-terms. First, efforts to prevent grave violations must be strengthened. In that regard, it was important to proactively engage with parties to conflict, strengthen early warning systems and make better use of data on grave violations against children, including by adding emerging crises to the children and armed conflict agenda at an early stage. Second, fostering greater collaboration between the United Nations, Member States and collectives such as the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict was essential, as was the formation of new partnerships, including with regional and subregional organizations. Third, child protection capacity must be maintained and reinforced in United Nations missions and country teams.

III. Supporting the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda

7. The first working session of the workshop featured reflections on the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda by the Deputy Permanent Representatives of Norway and Canada to the United Nations in their respective roles as Chair of the Working Group and Chair of the Group of Friends. A representative from the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict also joined the session to address any additional questions related to the mandate. The panellists highlighted current challenges to the effective implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda and priorities going forward, as well as the role of stakeholders outside of the Security Council in supporting the implementation of the agenda.

8. The panellists reflected on the obstacles to negotiating Working Group conclusions in situations where the local context had changed rapidly (due to a coup, for example), as well as on the continuing impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Working Group had continued to meet frequently in 2021 despite the pandemic, and the Chair hoped to continue that trend in the year ahead. Panellists reiterated the need for the Working Group to adopt streamlined and practical conclusions, with concrete recommendations, and to ensure follow-up and localization by organizing briefings with country task forces on monitoring and reporting and resuming field visits when possible. Furthermore, panellists discussed

the importance of strengthening attention to children and armed conflict issues throughout all the work of the Security Council. Concretely, Security Council members were encouraged to bring child protection perspectives into all relevant geographic discussions, renewals of mission mandates and other relevant discussions. Members of the Working Group and the Group of Friends should consider convening meetings as specific conflicts evolved throughout the year, in addition to formal meetings. Panellists also reflected on the progress achieved through the recent adoption of Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#), and on how that resolution demonstrated both the broad support for the children and armed conflict agenda and the difficulties in achieving consensus.

9. Participants in the session further examined the role of stakeholders outside of the Security Council both in contributing to the achievements of the children and armed conflict agenda thus far, and in ensuring continued progress. Panellists reflected on the “ecosystem” that existed around the children and armed conflict agenda, which included the Working Group, the New York-based Group of Friends and the 14 country-specific groups of friends of children and armed conflict, United Nations country teams, civil society networks (such as Watchlist) and academia. That system of diverse stakeholder support was unique among United Nations thematic agendas and had achieved significant progress, building a strong normative framework for the protection of children in armed conflict and developing guidelines, manuals and best practices for child protection. Participants were invited to reflect on how to operationalize those frameworks, better use collective insights, expertise and real-time knowledge from the ground and fortify and expand the existing ecosystem. While acknowledging that political considerations had influenced stakeholders’ behaviour, panellists noted the need to rise above politics and come together around a common view on the implications of policy decisions for the situation of children affected by armed conflict.

10. Participants also discussed: (a) early warning, prevention and strengthened communication between United Nations system entities, civil society and in-country teams to facilitate quicker responses to emerging situations and evolving conflict dynamics, and to reflect real-time humanitarian needs more efficiently; (b) ways to leverage all available children and armed conflict tools to promote concrete engagement and progress in situations that received less international attention, but where the protection of children was a serious concern; (c) progress made on referencing handover protocols in country-specific conclusions of the Working Group and Security Council resolutions in order to promote the signing of more of those agreements; (d) moving beyond normative commitments to implementation; (e) dealing with obstacles that the politicization of country-specific discussions could present to the adoption of conclusions by the Working Group, mainstreaming the children and armed conflict agenda throughout the Security Council’s work and influencing warring parties’ behaviour; and (f) the role of all Security Council members, not solely the Chair of the Working Group, in introducing and defending child protection language throughout the work of the Council.

IV. Protecting education in armed conflict: translating Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#) into action

11. The second working session centred on protecting education in situations of armed conflict and translating Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#) into concrete action for children. A former representative of the Permanent Mission of the Niger to the United Nations spoke about his country’s efforts to promote the protection of education in armed conflict during the 2020–2021 tenure of the Niger on the Security Council, including through the adoption of resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#). An advocate from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack spoke about recent trends in

attacks on education and good practices by Governments to implement the Safe Schools Declaration, while a child protection specialist from UNICEF spoke about programmes implemented to strengthen the protection of education. Panellists highlighted the sustained efforts over multiple years to promote the protection of education in armed conflict that had culminated in the adoption of the resolution, the key elements that the resolution added to the children and armed conflict agenda, examples of good practices and lessons learned in the protection of education and practical recommendations to support the protection of schools in armed conflict.

12. Reflecting on the momentum and process leading up to the resolution's adoption, panellists described consistent, multi-stakeholder engagement over the course of several years, with collaboration between Member States, United Nations entities, civil society organizations, research institutions and national and regional initiatives to examine the protection of education from various angles. Children had been able to share their own experiences of the impact of conflict on their education at Security Council open debates on children and armed conflict in June and September 2020, which, crucially, had been coordinated with civil society and child protection actors having the necessary safeguarding expertise. New key elements that resolution 2601 (2021) brought to the children and armed conflict agenda included an explicit link between education and international peace and security, including the recognition of education's life-saving role for children affected by war. In the resolution, the Council went beyond condemning attacks on schools, which constituted a grave violation, to call upon Governments to protect education and facilitate the continuation of learning during armed conflicts. Other important new aspects of the resolution were the Council's emphasis on preventing attacks on schools and respecting their civilian character, its encouragement of the use of digital infrastructure and learning technology, its recognition of the Safe Schools Declaration and its call for greater attention to the needs of girls, children with disabilities, displaced children and those with mental health and psychosocial needs.

13. The panel also highlighted new data on recent trends in attacks on education, which would be more thoroughly explored in the June 2022 report of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education Under Attack 2022*. The panel noted a rise in attacks on schools following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, spikes in the military use of schools in some contexts and patterns of vulnerability to additional grave violations in connection with attacks on schools, such as abductions, sexual violence and the recruitment and use of children. Girls had been targeted because of their gender and had been subjected to sexual violence and abduction on the way to and from school. The Safe Schools Declaration had been effective, however, in promoting concrete measures for the protection of education, including updates to military manuals and doctrines, changes in the behaviour of armed actors with regard to the military use of schools and the introduction of new laws and action plans to protect education from attack. Member States, regional organizations, and non-State armed groups alike had taken additional steps to ensure that schools were protected in armed conflict.

14. Panellists suggested several concrete ways to better protect education during armed conflicts and take the implementation of resolution 2601 (2021) forward, including: (a) endorsing, implementing and supporting the Safe Schools Declaration, in a gender-responsive manner; (b) taking concrete measures, such as legislation, training and standing orders, to deter the military use of schools; and, at a minimum, implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict; (c) ensuring accountability and redress for attacks; (d) strengthening data and monitoring systems with analysis disaggregated by type of attack, location, institution type and the demographic information of survivors; and

(e) strengthening early warning systems and prevention, including through the development of regional action plans to address transnational conflicts.

15. Following the panellists' presentations, participants discussed: (a) raising awareness of the multidimensional impacts of armed conflict on children and of the fact that the children and armed conflict agenda encompassed more than merely the recruitment and use of children; (b) positive examples of national programming and good practices; (c) how to engage diplomatic missions and use bilateral diplomatic relations to further disseminate those messages beyond New York; (d) the need to prioritize and strategically sequence the long-term implementation of resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#); and (e) action plans and accountability.

V. Addressing multiple vulnerabilities of children in armed conflict

16. The final session of the workshop featured presentations by an expert on the rights of children with disabilities, a mental health practitioner and expert from the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Network and Fordham University and an advocate from Save the Children. The panellists spoke about the multiple vulnerabilities of children during armed conflicts, with a particular focus on children with disabilities and children's mental and psychosocial needs, as well as how the children and armed conflict agenda could more consistently and systematically address those needs.

17. Participants in the session highlighted the compounding vulnerabilities of children with disabilities during armed conflict. Children with disabilities might be less able to flee violence, and those with visual, hearing-related, developmental or intellectual disabilities might not hear or understand what was happening when their communities were attacked. Those children were less likely to be able to access educational spaces and other protection services in conflicts, exacerbating the impact of conflict on their mental health. Also, specialized services for children with developmental needs were lacking in conflict settings, as was access to necessary medications and equipment, such as wheelchairs, crutches or prosthetics. Panellists called for greater consideration of the impact of armed conflict on children with disabilities in United Nations reports, resolutions and data collection, and for United Nations child protection staff to be trained on the rights and needs of children with disabilities. Participants in the session raised concerns about the use of the term "maiming" in the children and armed conflict agenda and discussed the need to explore alternatives that were less stigmatizing, in consultation with persons with disabilities themselves and their organizations. (It should be noted that the term "maiming" had been used by the Security Council in its resolution [1261 \(1999\)](#), where it identified "killing and maiming" as a grave violation against children in armed conflict, and in its resolution [1882 \(2009\)](#), where it established "maiming" as an action that would trigger the perpetrator's inclusion in the annexes to the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict.)

18. Participants in the session also addressed the varied and long-lasting mental health and psychosocial impacts that armed conflict could have on children, their families and their communities. Panellists noted the links between mental health and psychosocial support and long-term peacebuilding and community resilience. Extensive evidence showed that armed conflicts increased the incidence of mental conditions such as severe trauma, anxiety and depression, profoundly affecting children's development. Women and girls were particularly vulnerable to increased levels of gender-based violence during war. Despite consistent evidence that children were amongst the most affected by conflict situations, funding for child protection

made up, on average, less than 1 per cent of the total funding received for humanitarian responses. Panellists emphasized that mental health and psychosocial support should be incorporated as a cross-cutting issue across all sectors of the humanitarian response, with the 2007 Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee serving as a benchmark. Participants also highlighted the need to create safe opportunities for children to share their experiences and meaningfully participate in decision-making processes that affected them, in order to develop a more effective response.

19. In the ensuing discussion, participants considered: (a) the need to more consistently bring the voices of children, persons with disabilities and local organizations into children and armed conflict spaces, in order to incorporate their perspectives and experiences when framing responses; (b) ways in which the Security Council, the Working Group, non-members of the Council and other relevant actors could make mental health and psychosocial support a priority issue in the response to armed conflicts by inserting relevant language in outcome documents and encouraging cross-sectoral and whole-of-society approaches to mental health and psychosocial support, matched by adequate funding; and (c) the need to improve the disaggregation of data and apply intersectional lenses in children and armed conflict spaces, including through the use of appropriate terminology.

VI. Recommendations

20. Throughout the workshop discussions, the following recommendations were proposed to strengthen the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda and the United Nations response to grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

Upholding and implementing existing normative frameworks for the protection of children in armed conflict

(a) Member States having not yet done so should ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and endorse the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles, and take steps to implement those instruments;

(b) Member States should adhere to the principle that children associated with armed groups, including those designated by the United Nations as “terrorist” groups, should be treated primarily as victims and given the services they need, including reintegration and mental health and psychosocial support.

Promoting prevention

(a) All stakeholders should support prevention efforts, including by bolstering collaboration among regional, subregional and international organizations, civil society, academia and the regional groups of friends of children and armed conflict;

(b) In particular, the United Nations should establish new partnerships with regional and subregional organizations, such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, to develop regional prevention plans and multi-country standard operating procedures for the timely handover of children apprehended in the course of security operations to civilian child protection actors;

(c) United Nations agencies and civil society organizations should send timely information to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on situations with rapidly changing conflict dynamics and on violations being perpetrated against children;

(d) The Secretary-General, with the support of his Special Representative, should promptly add emerging crises where there is evidence of grave violations against children to the children and armed conflict agenda as “other situations of concern”, making use of the tools of the children and armed conflict agenda and early warning systems;

(e) The Security Council and the Human Rights Council should work to strengthen the links between the efforts of the United Nations to maintain and restore international peace and security and its efforts to protect and promote human rights;

(f) The Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict in New York should convene meetings more nimbly to consider situations of concern as they arise, in order to facilitate the sharing of information.

Strengthening the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda

(a) The Working Group should ensure that its conclusions are timely, streamlined and practical, with a focus on recommendations for concrete action. The Working Group should consistently follow up on recommendations from conclusions at the country level, including by working with country-specific groups of friends to convene local civil society actors and government entities to constructively explore ways to take recommendations forward;

(b) The Working Group should continue to consult with civil society, especially during difficult negotiations on conclusions of the Working Group. Civil society can support such negotiations through advocacy and the provision of additional information, as needed;

(c) The Working Group should make use of all available tools to address grave violations against children, including by holding videoconference meetings with country task forces on monitoring and reporting, especially in advance of relevant mandate renewals, and resuming field visits when conditions allow;

(d) All members of the Working Group should mainstream child protection throughout the work of the Security Council, including by introducing relevant language in pertinent Council products, in discussions on mission mandates and transitions and in the creation and deployment of new child protection posts;

(e) Security Council members should include child protection provisions in all mandate renewals and other relevant Council decisions. In subsequent budget negotiations, members of the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly should allocate sufficient financial and human resources to allow missions to fulfil their child protection mandates, including through the timely deployment of specialized child protection staff;

(f) Member States should establish country-specific and regional groups of friends of children and armed conflict in every country on the children and armed conflict agenda. Country-specific groups of friends of children and armed conflict should convene country-level discussions on conclusions issued by the Working Group in order to strengthen buy-in and implementation of the recommendations;

(g) The Governments of countries affected by armed conflict should take steps to ensure accountability for crimes against children, including through timely and impartial investigations and, where appropriate, the prosecution of perpetrators.

Protecting education in armed conflict

(a) Member States which have not yet done so should endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration and apply the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict. Member States which have

endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration should exchange good practices, training plans and operational readiness lessons;

(b) Member States should take concrete measures, such as legislation, standing orders, military doctrine and training, to deter the military use of schools;

(c) All stakeholders should support the signing of action plans by parties to conflict to end and prevent attacks on schools and hospitals. Member States should leverage their influence over parties to conflict to promote the highest standards of protection for students and educational personnel and facilities;

(d) Child protection actors should increase advocacy for the protection of education in armed conflict in relation to non-State armed groups, and build such groups' awareness of their obligations under international law;

(e) United Nations agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders responsible for implementing the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict should continue to strengthen the monitoring and reporting of attacks on schools and hospitals, including through the disaggregation of data by type of attack, location, institution type, whether or not the attack was targeted and the genders and ages of survivors. Furthermore, they should strengthen the use of digital technologies to improve data collection and analysis.

Addressing multiple vulnerabilities of children in armed conflict

(a) United Nations agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders implementing the monitoring and reporting mechanism should take steps to include information on grave violations against children with disabilities in order to ensure their needs and vulnerabilities are appropriately addressed in response and prevention efforts;

(b) Humanitarian agencies should ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to humanitarian assistance that is available to other children, including mental health and psychosocial support;

(c) Humanitarian agencies should incorporate mental health and psychosocial support as a cross-cutting issue across all sectors of the humanitarian response, using the 2007 *Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings* of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee as a benchmark;

(d) Operational agencies involved in the development of mental health and psychosocial support programming should consult closely with caregivers, communities and affected children. Such programming should be linked to other humanitarian interventions, such as education and protection;

(e) The United Nations should deploy disability protection advisers to all its missions and provide training to child protection staff on the rights and needs of children with disabilities;

(f) Donors should increase funding for child protection and mental health and psychosocial support;

(g) The children and armed conflict community should explore alternatives to the use of the term "maiming" that are less stigmatizing and more in line with Security Council resolution 2475 (2019), on the protection of persons with disabilities during armed conflict, and with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Persons with disabilities themselves and their organizations should be consulted in these discussions.