

Preventing and Addressing Grave
Violations Against Children During
Armed Conflict in Domestic Law:
Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo,
Colombia, and Ukraine

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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 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision-makers and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children. Watchlist is a fiscally sponsored project of United Charitable, a US-based 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... 1

I. THE CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AGENDA
IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, COLOMBIA,
AND UKRAINE: AN OVERVIEW..... 3

II. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 5

III. COLOMBIA 11

IV. UKRAINE..... 18

V. KEY LESSONS 24

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS 26

INTRODUCTION

Strengthening domestic legal and policy frameworks to prevent and address grave violations against children in armed conflict has been a key recommendation of the United Nations' (UN) Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda since its inception in the 1990s.

Following Watchlist's 2025 report examining general trends across 25 situations of concern included in the Secretary-General's annual reports on CAAC, this report takes a closer look at three contexts: 1) the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), 2) Colombia, and 3) Ukraine.¹ In each of these countries, governments have adopted robust domestic legal frameworks relevant to implementing the UN's CAAC agenda. In this sense, this report examines lessons learned in contexts where governments have been particularly open to integrating relevant international legal and policy instruments into domestic law. However, this report also discusses gaps and persistent challenges that complicate implementation and accountability in all three contexts.

This report focuses primarily on grave violations against children during armed conflict, those being: 1) recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, 2) killing and maiming of children, 3) rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, 4) attacks against schools or hospitals, 5) abduction of children, and 6) denial of humanitarian

access for children.² Additionally, the report addresses other issues—including birth registration laws and processes; child justice; children's access to education, healthcare, and other essential services; and military use of schools and hospitals—that are also relevant to protecting children during armed conflict.

This report's findings are based on an analysis of relevant legal and policy documents in the DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine, as well as a desk review of relevant literature.³ Watchlist also conducted 29 consultations and research interviews with practitioners with relevant experience and expertise in one or more of these contexts.⁴

Three considerations are important to bear in mind:

1. The report does not offer an exhaustive review of all the domestic laws and legal issues relevant to protecting children impacted by armed conflict in these countries. Rather, for each context, the report highlights the laws most relevant to the UN's CAAC agenda; discusses policies, strategic plans, and other governmental efforts geared toward implementing these laws;

¹ See Rob Grace, "Bringing Multilateralism Back Home: Integrating International Legal and Policy Instruments Relevant to the UN's Children and Armed Conflict Agenda into Domestic Law," Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, August 2025.

² For definitions of the six grave violations against children during armed conflict, see "Field Manual: Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on Grave Violations Against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG-CAAC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), June 2014, pp. 8-10.

³ See "Watchlist Digital Library on Children and Armed Conflict," which collects domestic legal and policy documents from these contexts, as well as others.

⁴ Watchlist conducted these consultations and research interviews virtually between June-October 2025.

offers an overview of accountability efforts; and highlights current implementation challenges. Notably, international laws in each of these countries are directly incorporated into domestic law, but this report focuses primarily on laws adopted at the domestic level.

2. The report does not address laws, rules, and policies adopted and implemented by non-state armed groups (NSAGS) or third-party States involved in these armed conflicts. Although doing so is necessary to understand the full picture of protecting children impacted by armed conflict in these contexts, the report focuses instead on efforts undertaken by this report's three governments of focus (DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine).

3. Grave violations frequently overlap with violations of international and/or domestic law, but an armed actor's conduct can constitute a grave violation against a child under the CAAC framework, even if that act does not amount to a breach of the law. Although the six grave violations against children frame this report's scope, it is important to note that the UN's definitions of grave violations under the CAAC framework do not necessarily align with violations as defined in international or domestic law.⁵

After this introduction, Part I provides a brief overview of the three contexts of focus. Parts II, III, and IV present case studies of the DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine respectively. Part V articulates overarching lessons observed across these contexts. Part VI offers recommendations for further action by UN Member States, UN stakeholders, civil society, and donors.

⁵ For an overview of relevant international legal and policy instruments, see Rob Grace, "[Bringing Multilateralism Back Home](#)."

I. THE CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AGENDA IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, COLOMBIA, AND UKRAINE: AN OVERVIEW

This report's three countries of focus are all contexts of protracted armed conflict and are situations of concern in the Secretary-General's annual reports on CAAC.

Parties to armed conflict are listed for perpetrating grave violations against children in each of these contexts. Of the three States included in this analysis

(DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine), only the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) have been listed. **[See Table 1 below.]**

Table 1. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Ukraine on the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda

Country	Situation of Concern	State Forces Listed	Non-State Armed Groups Listed
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Since 2002	FARDC listed for recruitment and use from 2002-2016 and for rape and other forms of sexual violence from 2010-present	Numerous NSAGs listed since 2002 for one or more grave violations (17 NSAGs listed in 2025)
Colombia	Since 2002	None	Numerous NSAGs listed since 2003 for recruitment and use (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, Clan del Golfo, and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo dissident groups listed in 2025)
Ukraine	Since 2023	Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups listed for killing and maiming and attacks against schools or hospitals since 2023	None

In each of these contexts, the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on CAAC has verified grave violations perpetrated by State armed forces, as well as other armed actors. In the DRC and Colombia, NSAGs have perpetrated the vast majority of grave violations, with dramatic escalations over the past several years in both countries. In Ukraine, the MRM has verified high levels of grave violations attributable to Ukrainian armed forces and even higher levels attributable to Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups.

At the multilateral level, the DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine have each exhibited a strong commitment to the UN's CAAC agenda. Each of these three governments has ratified or endorsed all or most of the key international legal and policy instruments relevant to the UN's CAAC agenda, including regional human rights treaties.⁶ **[See text box below.]** Constitutions in each of these countries establish monist legal systems, meaning that upon ratification, international legal agreements become part of domestic law.

Relevant International Legal and Policy Instruments Ratified or Endorsed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Ukraine

International Human Rights Law

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- Convention Against Torture (1984)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)
- International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999)
- Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2000)
- Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) (2000)

International Criminal Law

- Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (1998)

International Humanitarian Law

- Geneva Conventions I-IV (1949)
- Additional Protocol I (1977)
- Additional Protocol II (1977)

Political Commitments and Standards⁷

- Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007)
- Safe Schools Declaration (2015)
- Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (2017)

⁶ The DRC has ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Colombia has ratified the American Convention on Human Rights. Ukraine has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.

⁷ Additionally, Colombia has endorsed the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA) (2022), whereas the DRC and Ukraine have not.

II. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

- Armed conflict has plagued the DRC since the beginning of the UN's systematic engagement in children and armed conflict.

The destructive wars of the 1990s and the early 2000s in the DRC ultimately led to a post-conflict political transition process supported by international stakeholders endowed with a newfound focus on protecting children impacted by armed conflict. In 2012, the DRC government signed an action plan with the UN focused on preventing and addressing recruitment and use, as well as rape and other forms of sexual violence. Leading up to, and in the context of implementing, this action plan, the government

has developed a robust legal and policy framework geared toward preventing and addressing grave violations against children. Nevertheless, the DRC remains a situation of concern with one of the highest levels of grave violations verified by the MRM.

The DRC's 2006 Constitution incorporates a wide-ranging set of provisions relevant to protecting children during armed conflict. **[See below text box for details.]**

Key Provisions in the "Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo" (2006)

The Constitution defines a child as any person under the age of 18 and recognizes numerous child-specific rights and State obligations, including public authorities' "obligation to ensure protection for children in difficult situations and to bring to justice the perpetrators and accomplices of acts of violence against children." (Art. 40-41) Notably, the Constitution establishes that maintaining a youth army is punishable as an act of high treason. (Art. 190) Regarding human rights more generally, the Constitution:

- reaffirms the Congolese people's "adherence to and commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, [and the] United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and on the Rights of Women;" (Preamble)
- recognizes numerous non-child-specific rights (including civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, and collective rights) and prohibits derogations of fundamental rights and principles during states of emergency or siege; and
- obliges the State to ensure respect for human rights and to undertake dissemination, education, and training (including for security sector personnel) related to international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL). (Art. 11-61, 85-86, 144, and 215)

Even before the Constitution's adoption, the DRC government had already taken steps to address recruitment and use in the context of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). In 2003, the DRC government mandated the Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion (CONADER), which included a directorate tasked with identifying, offering psychosocial support for, and reintegrating children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG).⁸ Progress was initially slow, but the process ultimately resulted in the demobilization of thousands of CAAFAG.⁹

The "Child Protection Law," adopted in 2009, addresses issues relevant to all six grave violations against children. **[See Table 2 below.]** Additionally, the law recognizes every child's "right to protection against all forms of exploitation and violence;" incorporates the fundamental principles of the CRC; and establishes the State's responsibility for "rehabilitation and reintegration of children in difficult and/or exceptional situations."¹⁰ The law also includes key child justice provisions, setting 14 as the minimum age of criminal responsibility and specifying that detention of children shall be "a last resort and for the shortest possible period."¹¹

Table 2. "Child Protection Law"
Provisions Relevant to Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations Against Children

Recruitment and Use	Prohibits and criminalizes recruitment and use of children under 18 by armed forces, armed groups, and police. (Art. 53, 71, 187)
Killing and Maiming	Recognizes every child's right to life and prohibits and criminalizes intentional assault and battery of a child; torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment toward children; and the death penalty for children. (Art. 9, 13, 147-152)
Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence	Prohibits and criminalizes all forms of sexual violence and sexual harassment toward children. (Art. 48, 60-61, 169-184)
Attacks Against Schools or Hospitals	Recognizes every child's rights to education and the highest attainable standard of health; obliges the State to guarantee "protection, education and necessary care to children affected by armed conflicts, tensions or civil unrest." (Art. 21, 38, 72)
Abduction	Prohibits and criminalizes child abduction, as well as trafficking and sale of children. (Art. 161-162)
Denial of Humanitarian Access	Recognizes every child's right to a standard of living adequate for their full development and displaced children's "right to protection, supervision and humanitarian assistance." (Art. 41, 44)

⁸ "Decree on the Establishment of the National Commission on Disarming, Demobilization and Rehabilitation," 2003, Art. 7. In July 2007, CONADER was replaced by Unité d'Exécution du Programme National de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion (UEPNDDR).

⁹ "Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," S/2006/389, June 13, 2006, para. 50.

¹⁰ "Child Protection Law," 2009, Art. 3-7, 57, and 73.

¹¹ *Ibid*, at Art. 10 and 95.

Additional laws in the DRC address recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other issues relevant to the UN's CAAC agenda.

[See text box below.]

Additional Relevant Domestic Laws in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Recruitment and Use

"Law No. 015" (2002) prohibits forced or compulsory recruitment of children during armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labor.

"Law No. 11/012" (2011) establishes that conscription during general mobilization is only allowed for people 18 years or older.

Torture

"Law No. 11/008" (2011) revises the Congolese penal code to criminalize torture perpetrated by civil servants or public officers.

International Criminal Law

"Law No. 15/022" (2015) criminalizes genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes; specifies that superiors will be held liable for giving orders to commit these crimes; excludes defenses rooted in official capacity; prohibits amnesties for these crimes.

Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence

"Law No. 018" (2006) amended the Congolese penal code to raise the legal age of consent from 14 to 18, expand the definition of rape, and introduce penalties for additional forms of sexual assault.

"Law No. 06/019" (2006) requires the State to provide justice in a timely manner for victims of sexual violence.

"Law No. 22/065" (2022) establishes basic principles on protection and reparations for victims of wartime sexual violence and mandates various institutions for implementation, including the Fund for Support to Access to Justice, Reparation, Empowerment and Community Rehabilitation for Victims and their Claimants; the Single Consolidated List (a registry of names of victims that the fund has identified); and the Inter-Institutional Commission for Victim Support and Reform.

The Government of the DRC has sought to bring these laws into practice with a rich volume of implementation measures—many undertaken in the context of implementing the 2012 action

plan—that include adopting national strategy documents and policies and issuing directives and decrees to armed actors. **[See text box on the next page.]**

Key Congolese Government Implementation Measures

Directives and Decrees

- **June 2000:** Decree Law 066 ordered the demobilization and reintegration of CAAFAG in the DRC.
- **May 2005:** Cable sent to regional military commanders stating that recruitment and use is prohibited and asserting a commitment to prosecute perpetrators.
- **May 2013:** Directive issued by the Ministry of Defence that prohibits killing and maiming, recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and military use of schools and hospitals.
- **May 2013:** Directive issued by the National Intelligence Agency requiring that all detained CAAFAG be handed over to UN child protection actors.

Additional Measures Relevant to Recruitment and Use

- **March 2014:** Endorsed the UN's "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign, committing the government to ending recruitment and use by government forces in the DRC by 2016.
- **April 2016:** Adopted standard operating procedures for age verification of new military recruits.
- **July 2021:** Announced the Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et Stabilisation (P-DDRCS), a multi-faceted program that includes reintegration of former fighters, including children.

Additional Measures Relevant to Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence

- **November 2009:** Adopted a national strategy against sexual violence that addressed combatting impunity, prevention and protection, security sector reform, multisectoral responses for survivors, and data collection and mapping.
- **March 2024:** Approved a code of conduct for military and police that involved mainstreaming, child protection, preventing sexual and gender-based violence, and gender.

Impunity has been a consistent concern in the DRC. The vast majority of alleged crimes remain unpunished; high-ranking commanders and politicians suspected of committing, ordering, or failing to prevent and respond to alleged crimes are rarely prosecuted; victims' participation and reparations remain elusive; and guarantees of non-recurrence remain inadequate.¹² The government has nevertheless made notable advances on

accountability. At the international level, the government has cooperated with the ICC, which currently has six ongoing cases open for alleged crimes perpetrated in the country.¹³ Domestic investigations and trials in the DRC have focused on members of the FARDC, the Congolese National Police, and NSAGs for a range of crimes, including recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, crimes against humanity, war crimes,

¹² See "La Justice Congolaise Face aux Crimes Contre la Paix et la Sécurité de L'Humanité," UpRights, 2025.

¹³ See "Democratic Republic of the Congo," ICC.

murder, and abduction.¹⁴ Given the monist nature of the Congolese legal system, even before the adoption of the 2009 “Child Protection Law” (which criminalized various harms against children) and the 2015 law (which criminalized genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes), Congolese military courts applied provisions of the Rome Statute, which the DRC had ratified in 2002, in cases involving crimes perpetrated against children.¹⁵ A novel aspect of accountability in the DRC has been the introduction of mobile courts, which bring accountability processes closer to victims and affected communities.¹⁶

Current challenges in the DRC include:

- **Pervasive Inadequacies in the Justice System.**

The justice system in the DRC suffers from deep-rooted problems that impede accountability efforts, including for children. Challenges include the influence of politics on judicial actors; corruption; inadequate capacities and processes for protecting witnesses and victims; general financial and capacity shortfalls, including for providing services and reparations for victims; inability to exercise authority in conflict-affected areas of the country; and lack of awareness about international and domestic laws among security sector personnel, judges, prosecutors, and

affected communities.¹⁷ Rape and other forms of sexual violence are particularly difficult crimes to prosecute, especially due to the social stigma and fear of retribution that victims face.¹⁸ Detention of children, including for alleged association with armed groups, also remains prevalent, including children detained alongside adults, despite persistent advocacy efforts from the Secretary-General, the Security Council Working Group on CAAC, and the UN country task force.¹⁹

- **Lack of Cultural Acceptance for Child Protection Norms.** The norms that define the CAAC agenda are not always widely accepted and embraced by communities in the DRC. This has been especially true for recruitment and use of children, rape and sexual violence against children (especially against girls, including in the context of child marriage), and treating children as victims instead of perpetrators. Recruitment and use of children is driven, in part, by cultural expectations that community or family ties oblige children to support or participate in hostilities.²⁰ Congolese judicial processes continue to treat former CAAFAG as perpetrators due to beliefs among judges and impacted communities that doing so is essential for meaningful accountability.²¹

¹⁴ For examples of recent domestic cases, see “[Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General](#),” S/2024/705, October 15, 2024, paras 87-88. See also “[Enhancing Accountability for Attacks on Education: Guidance on Investigating and Prosecuting Education-Related Crimes](#),” Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, January 2025, p. 24

¹⁵ “[The Application of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court by the Courts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#),” *Avocats Sans Frontières*, 2009.

¹⁶ See “[In DRC, Mobile Courts Fight Impunity and Bring Dignity to Victims](#),” OHCHR, January 2, 2025.

¹⁷ See “[Justice on Trial: Lessons from the Minova Rape Case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#),” Human Rights Watch, 2015; and “[A Human Rights Agenda for the Democratic Republic of Congo](#),” Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2024.

¹⁸ “[Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General](#),” S/2024/705, October 15, 2024, para. 54.

¹⁹ For a recent example, see *ibid.*, at para. 103.

²⁰ “[‘Our Strength is in Our Youth’: Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#),” MONUSCO, January 2019, pp. 27-29.

²¹ Christelle Molima Bameka, “[Narrowing the Gap in the Access to Justice for Child Victims in Postconflict Societies: An Analysis Stemming from the Construction of Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy](#),” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 17, Issue 1 (March 2023): 141-156.

- Inadequate Levels of Capacity, Funding, and Coordination.** Funding and capacity gaps impede implementation of laws and policies relevant to CAAC in the DRC. Although many governmental stakeholders exhibit a commitment to protecting children during armed conflict, many others still lack knowledge about the CAAC agenda. Ineffective coordination between different governmental entities further complicates implementation, including during handover processes amidst turnover of governmental personnel. Follow-through on implementation does not always filter down to the sub-national level. The lack of sustainable programming for reintegration programming for former CAAFAG endures as a serious concern, and severe shortfalls also persist for international humanitarian programs in the country.²² The gap between capacities and needs is likely to further widen due to the pending withdrawal of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), as well as the loss of funding for humanitarian programming from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).²³
- Low Birth Registration Rate.** Under fifty percent of Congolese births have been registered, despite a clear legal framework mandating birth registration, including a provision in the “Child Protection Law” recognizing every child’s right to registration within ninety days of birth.²⁴ Lack of birth registration can impede children’s access to services, including education and medical care, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation, including recruitment and use by armed forces and groups, as well as early marriage (especially for Congolese girls).²⁵

²² See, for example, “Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General” S/2020/1030, October 19, 2020, para. 78; “Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General” S/2022/745, October 10, 2022, para. 85.

²³ “Children and Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Report of the Secretary-General” S/2024/705, October 15, 2024, para. 109; Jacques Mukena, “USAID Suspension’s Impact on Critical Sector Funding in the DRC,” Center on International Cooperation, March 26, 2025.

²⁴ See “Child Protection Law,” 2009, Art. 16. See also “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Profile, UNICEF, which notes that “Law No. 87/010” (1987), modified by “Law No. 16/008” (2016), mandates free birth registration for all children born in the country, although late registrations entail penalties. For birth registration data, see “UNICEF Data Warehouse,” UNICEF.

²⁵ “Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor,” U.S. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2012, p. 2; Fabíola Ortiz, “Lack of Birth Certificates Exposes Congolese Girls to Early Marriage,” *The New Humanitarian*, November 13, 2017; and Hélène Caux, “Birth Registration Drive Brings Congo’s Indigenous in from the Shadows,” UNHCR, November 11, 2021.

III. COLOMBIA

Colombia's decades-long armed conflict began in 1964, when hostilities erupted between the government and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP).

The International Committee of the Red Cross now classifies eight armed conflicts in Colombia, involving State forces, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), paramilitary groups, other illegal armed groups, and FARC-EP dissidents that continue to battle the government even after a peace agreement forged in 2016.²⁶ President Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" initiative, which entails dialogue between the Colombian government and the major NSAGs

operating in the country, has evoked calls to ensure that preventing and ending child recruitment, including demobilization and reintegration of CAAFAG, remains central to the negotiations.²⁷

Colombia's Constitution of 1991 (revised in 2015) includes numerous provisions that establish protections and State obligations relevant to child protection, human rights, and IHL.²⁸ **[See text box below.]**

Key Provisions in the "Constitution of Colombia" (1991, revised in 2015)

The Colombian Constitution recognizes a wide range of rights and protections for children, including protection "against all forms of abandonment, physical or moral violence, sequestration, sale, sexual abuse, work or economic exploitation, and dangerous work." (Art. 44) The Constitution also recognizes non-child-specific rights that encompass fundamental rights; social, economic, and cultural rights; and collective rights and the environment. (Art. 11-82) Moreover, the Constitution:

- establishes that norms and principles of IHL will be applied during investigations and judgments of State forces for conduct during situations of armed conflict; (Art. 221)
- prohibits people who have been convicted and sanctioned for acts of genocide and crimes against humanity from serving elected office or participating in politics; (Transitional Art. 67)
- clarifies that the State may recognize the jurisdiction of the ICC; (Art. 93) and
- mandates an Ombudsman to "oversee the promotion, exercise, and publicizing of human rights." (Art. 282)

²⁶ "Classification of the Armed Conflicts in Colombia," ICRC, March 25, 2025.

²⁷ "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace," International Crisis Group, January 30, 2025.

²⁸ "Constitution of Colombia," 1991, revised in 2015.

The “Code of Childhood and Adolescence,” adopted in 2006, includes provisions relevant to preventing and addressing each of the six grave violations.

[See Table 3 below.] The law defines a child as anyone under 12 and an adolescent as anyone between the age of 12 and 18 and affirms that international human rights treaties, including the CRC, “shall form an

integral part of this Code and serve as a guide for its interpretation and application.”²⁹ The law sets 14 as the minimum age of criminal responsibility, recognizes the right to rehabilitation and resocialization for children and adolescents who have violated the law, and establishes that adolescents deprived of freedom should be detained separately from adults.³⁰

**Table 3. “Code of Childhood and Adolescence”
Provisions Relevant to Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations
Against Children**

Recruitment and Use	Prohibits recruitment and use of children and adolescents and participation of children and adolescents in military activities. (Art. 20, 41)
Killing and Maiming	Recognizes children and adolescents’ rights to “life, a good quality of life, and a healthy environment in conditions of dignity and the prevailing enjoyment of all their rights” and specifies that children and adolescents shall be protected from torture; all forms of cruel, inhuman, humiliating and degrading treatment and punishment; and anti-personnel mines. (Art. 17, 20)
Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence	Specifies that children and adolescents shall be protected against rape and other forms of sexual violence. (Art. 20, 41, 89)
Attacks Against Schools or Hospitals	Recognizes children and adolescents’ rights to health and quality education and establishes relevant State obligations. (Art. 27-28, 41)
Abduction	Specifies that children and adolescents shall be protected against kidnapping, trafficking, illegal transfers and retention abroad for any purpose, and enforced disappearance. (Art. 20)
Denial of Humanitarian Access	Recognizes children and adolescents’ right to “food and other means for their physical, psychological, spiritual, moral, cultural, and social development” and establishes relevant State obligations. (Art. 24, 41)

²⁹ “Code of Childhood and Adolescence,” 2006, Art. 3 and 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, at Art. 19, 142, and 162.

Additional protections for children impacted by armed conflict are enshrined in laws relevant to birth registration, recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, denial of humanitarian access, and other crimes.

[See text box below.]

Additional Relevant Domestic Laws in Colombia

International Criminal Law

“Law 599” (2000) Criminalizes, and establishes penalties for, a wide array of crimes, including genocide, homicide against minors, recruitment and use of people under 18 during armed conflict, trafficking and smuggling of children and adolescents, war crimes, abusive sexual acts toward children and adolescents, arbitrary detention, and torture; specifies that superiors will be held liable for giving orders to commit these crimes, and that obeying superior orders is not a defense for crimes of genocide, enforced disappearance, and torture.

“Law 1820” (2016) specifies that crimes against humanity, genocide, serious war crimes, hostage-taking or other serious deprivation of liberty, torture, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearance, rape and other forms of sexual violence, child abduction, forced displacement, and the recruitment of minors shall not be subject to amnesties and pardons.

Recruitment and Use

“Law 1861” (2017) establishes that only people 18 or older will be subject to compulsory military service. (Art. 4, 11)³¹

Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence

“Law 1719” (2014) “guarantee[s] the right of access to justice for victims of sexual violence, especially sexual violence associated with the internal armed conflict” and obliges the State to “prioritize the needs of women, girls, boys, and adolescent victims.” (Art. 1)

Denial of Humanitarian Access

“Law 2272” (2022) states that humanitarian organizations “with a registered presence in Colombia... may maintain occasional or ongoing contact with illegal armed groups or high-impact organized criminal organizations, for exclusively humanitarian purposes, subject to the express knowledge and authorization of the President of the Republic and the High Commissioner for Peace.” (Art. 9)

Birth Registration

“Law 2129” (2021) regulates Colombia’s registration system for birth certificates.³²

In 2007, the Government of Colombia established the Inter-sectoral Commission for the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Children and Adolescents by Illegal Armed Groups (CIPRUNNA), bringing together 22 State agencies under a common prevention

mandate, with the Presidential Council for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law serving as its secretariat. Among these agencies is the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), initially established in 1968, which has implemented numerous programs for children,

³¹ For earlier laws relevant to recruitment and use, see Veronica Escobar, “Reclaiming the ‘Little Bees’ and the ‘Little Bells’: Colombia’s Failure to Adhere to and Enforce International and Domestic Laws in Preventing Recruitment of Child Soldiers,” *Fordham International Law Journal*, Vol. 26, Issue 3 (2002): 785-869.

³² Additionally, see “Code for Children and Adolescents,” 2006, Art. 25, which recognizes the right of children and adolescents “to have an identity and to retain the elements that constitute it, such as their name, nationality, and parentage, in accordance with the law,” and states, “For these purposes, they must be registered immediately after birth in the civil registry.”

including protection and reintegration programming for former CAAFAG. Notably, the program, “A Different Path of Life,” has combined case identification, protection, psychosocial care, and school reintegration with inter-agency follow-up. Additionally, the “Dreamcatcher” prevention initiative focuses on building protective environments for children, including by strengthening skills, promoting mental health, and supporting the inclusion of children and adolescents with disabilities.³³

Attacks on, and military use of, educational facilities in Colombia have been rising in recent years.³⁴ In response, the Colombian government has adopted a series of significant policy measures, including a national action plan for implementing the Safe Schools Declaration; a public policy on education; and “Escuelas Territorio de Vida,” a strategy implemented by CIPRUNNA that positions schools as protective community hubs.

Additional implementation measures include adopting or launching:

- National Council on Economic and Social Policy (CONPES) 3673, a policy framework for preventing recruitment and use of children and adolescents that clarified CIPRUNNA’s functions and structure;
- “Public Policy for the Prevention of Recruitment, Utilization, Use, and Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents by Organized Armed Groups and Organized Criminal Groups,” which updated CONPES 3673;
- the “Protocol and Model of Comprehensive Healthcare for Victims of Sexual Violence,” which addresses rape and other forms of sexual violence in the context of armed conflict;

- “Todos por un nuevo país” (“All for a new country”), a development plan that addressed preventing recruitment and use, as well as sexual violence against children, with a specific focus on protecting marginalized groups (namely, indigenous, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, Palenqueras and Rrom children);
- “My future is today,” a government strategy focused on child recruitment prevention activities, including by educating children on their rights;
- “Súmate por mí,” a project to prevent recruitment, use, and exploitation of children by organized armed groups and organized criminal groups; and
- a suspension on air strikes targeting NSAG camps where children are suspected to be present (which remains in effect as of this report’s publication).

Over the past two decades, Colombia has implemented a comprehensive transitional justice process. After forging a 2003 agreement on demobilization with Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—an umbrella group for numerous paramilitaries—the Colombian government adopted the “Justice and Peace Law” (2005). The law established a legal framework for demobilizing illegal armed groups, as well as investigations and trials, also establishing the National Commission for Reparations and Reconciliation.³⁵ The “Victims and Land Restitution Law” (2011) established the Single Register of Victims (RUV), which is a national registry to enable compensation for victims of armed conflict in Colombia via assistance, reparations, and land restitution. In the context of the 2016 peace agreement, the Colombian government and FARC-EP agreed to create the Comprehensive System of Truth,

³³ “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2024/161, February 13, 2024, paras 42-44 and 47.

³⁴ “Education Under Attack,” Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024.

³⁵ Human rights organizations initially criticized the law for granting lenient sentences for perpetrators without offering meaningful accountability for victims. However, a 2006 decision of the Constitutional Court addressed many of these concerns. See “Court Fixes Flaws in Demobilization Law,” Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2006.

Justice, Repair and Non-repetition (SIVJNRN), which encompasses the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Commission for the Clarification of Truth,

for Coexistence and Non-Repetition (CEV).³⁶ All of these mechanisms have advanced accountability for children. **[See text box below.]**

Colombian Accountability and Transitional Justice Mechanisms: Key Contributions to Protecting Children During Armed Conflict

“Justice and Peace Law” (2005)

Under this law, demobilized combatants can only access benefits after handing CAAFAG over to child protection actors.³⁷ The law also specifies that special care shall be taken to protect child victims and witnesses and that judicial processes implemented under the law shall take into account the special needs of children.³⁸

“Victims and Land Restitution Law” (2011)

This law—which also recognizes victims’ rights to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition—specifies that CAAFAG disengaged from illegal armed groups will be treated as victims.³⁹ Over two million children have been registered as victims, including children victimized by recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, killing, abduction, and forced displacement.⁴⁰

Special Jurisdiction for Peace

The JEP has initiated a series of cases relevant to grave violations, including “Macro Case” No. 007, which focuses on prosecuting former members of FARC-EP for violations against children, including recruitment and use, rape and other forms of sexual violence, homicide, and torture.⁴¹ The case, which is still ongoing as of this report’s publication, involves more than 9,000 victims, over 3,000 of whom have participated in judicial proceedings related to this case.⁴²

Commission for the Clarification of Truth, for Coexistence and Non-Repetition

The CEV produced a final report in June 2022 that included a chapter dedicated to violence perpetrated against children and adolescents.⁴³ The process of producing the CEV’s final report entailed extensive engagement with children, as well as adults who suffered from violence as children during the armed conflict, including through public testimonies, interviews, and focus group sessions.⁴⁴

³⁶ “Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace,” Art. 5(1)(b), November 24, 2016.

³⁷ “Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” S/2009/434, August 28, 2009, para. 70.

³⁸ “Law 975,” 2005, Art. 38-41.

³⁹ “Law 1448,” 2011, Art. 3 and 28.

⁴⁰ “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2021/1022, December 8, 2021, para. 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, at para. 49.

⁴² “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2024/161, February 13, 2024, para. 52. See also Cristian González Cabrera, “Colombia Charges Former FARC Leaders with Child Recruitment,” Human Rights Watch, November 20, 2024, which discusses JEP charges against former FARC-EP guerrillas for recruitment and use of 18,677 children.

⁴³ “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2024/161, February 13, 2024, para. 10.

⁴⁴ “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2019/1017, December 31, 2019, para. 60; “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2021/1022, December 8, 2021, para. 50.

Current challenges in Colombia include:

- Addressing Vulnerabilities of Children from Marginalized Groups.** Children from marginalized groups, including indigenous children and children of African descent, are disproportionately impacted and especially vulnerable to recruitment and use.⁴⁵ The Secretary-General, in his most recent country-specific report on CAAC in Colombia, has emphasized that programming directed toward these communities “should be strengthened, in consultation and with the participation of ethnic communities, and their sustainability ensured through an allocated budget and designated institutions, at both the national and local levels.”⁴⁶
- Recruitment of Children via Social Media Platforms.** NSAGs are increasingly using social media to recruit children in Colombia. In widely viewed videos circulated on Facebook and TikTok, recruiters promise lucrative payment and glamorize violence as “heroic.”⁴⁷ Addressing this phenomenon requires new legal and/or policy frameworks that include agreements with social media companies, authorities, and civil society to establish shared, evidence-based risk-assessment protocols and joint responses. The Ombudsman, with support from Save the Children, has launched multi-stakeholder roundtable discussions with social media platforms, government agencies, civil society organizations, and children focused on monitoring social media and co-creating prevention messages, as well as formulating policy and legislative recommendations.⁴⁸
- Treating Children as Perpetrators.** The Colombian government does not consider all NSAGs in the country to be linked to the country’s armed conflict.⁴⁹ Children associated with NSAGs that the government classifies as organized armed groups (for example, FARC-EP and ELN) are treated as victims and eligible to be included in the victims’ registry established by the “Victims and Land Restitution Law.” In contrast, children associated with NSAGs that the government classifies as organized criminal groups can be subject to prosecution as perpetrators. Additionally, detention of children persists as a problem, leaving children vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and grave violations, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, in detention settings.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ “Conclusions on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, S/AC.51/2024/4, September 6, 2024, para. 2

⁴⁶ “Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2024/161, February 13, 2024, para. 62.

⁴⁷ Harriet Barber, “Colombia Gangs Lure Children to Join Ranks via TikTok and Facebook, UN Warns,” *The Guardian*, June 27, 2025.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Conclusions on the Situation of Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, S/AC.51/2012/4, December 21, 2012, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Barbara Buckinx and Charu Lata Hogg, “Strengthening Reintegration Support to Boys Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups who are Victims/Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University and All Survivors’ Project, August 2024.

- **Gaps and Persistent Challenges in Sub-national Implementation, Funding, and Coordination.** Despite the abundance of laws and policies relevant to CAAC in Colombia, numerous implementation challenges persist. As the Secretary-General has noted, “significant gaps” exist “between public policies adopted at the central level and their effective implementation at the local level.”⁵¹ Coordination difficulties and funding limitations fuel these challenges. As the Secretary-General has emphasized, CIPRUNNA “should strengthen its coordination and leadership role while

ensuring financial sustainability and institutional capacity for initiatives undertaken.”⁵² Sustainable funding for reintegration, support services, and reparations for former CAAFAG, as well as survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence, constitutes another area of persistent concern.⁵³ Cuts to U.S. foreign aid in Colombia have already begun to exacerbate the challenges that arise from these funding and capacity shortfalls.⁵⁴ More robust participation of children and communities in listening processes is also necessary to ensure that policies and plans are properly funded and implemented.

⁵¹ “Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” S/2009/434, August 28, 2009, para. 62.

⁵² “Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” S/2012/171, March 21, 2012, para. 57.

⁵³ “Conclusions on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia,” Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, S/AC.51/2024/4, September 6, 2024, para. 9(b).

⁵⁴ Alfie Pannell, “USAID Suspension Shatters Colombia Programs, Endangering FARC Peace Deal,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2025.

IV. UKRAINE

- After achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine adopted numerous laws relevant to upholding children's rights. However, these laws would not be tested in the context of armed conflict until 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and high-intensity conflict erupted between Ukrainian armed forces and Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In 2015, hostilities settled into a low-level "frozen" conflict before dramatically escalating when Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Throughout more than a decade of armed conflict, the Ukrainian government has adopted new laws and policies geared toward meeting the evolving needs of children in the country, building on the existing legal foundation.

Ukraine's 1996 Constitution establishes a wide range of State obligations for human rights protection and recognizes an extensive set of child-specific and general human rights. **[See text box below.]**

Key Provisions in the "Constitution of Ukraine" (1996):

The Constitution includes provisions that address numerous rights and protections for children. Notably, the Constitution establishes that "[a]ny violence against a child, or his or her exploitation, shall be prosecuted by law." (Art. 52) The Constitution orients the State toward human rights protection, and in particular:

- articulates that the "main duty of the State" is "[t]o affirm and ensure human rights and freedoms;" (Art. 3)
- recognizes numerous non-child-specific civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights and prohibits restricting specified rights during periods of martial law or states of emergency; (Art. 21-68) and
- specifies that "[e]veryone has the right to appeal for the protection of his or her rights to the Authorised Human Rights Representative of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine." (Art. 55)

The “Law on the Protection of Childhood,” initially adopted in 2001 and subsequently amended, holistically addresses child’s rights protections, including during armed conflict. [See Table 4 below.] The law defines a child as anyone under 18; obliges the State to “take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of children who are in the zone of hostilities

and armed conflicts” and “children who have suffered as a result of hostilities and armed conflicts,” and specifies limitations to depriving children of liberty, stating that “detention and arrest of minors is used as an exceptional measure and only in cases and in accordance with the procedure established by law.”⁵⁵

**Table 4. “Law on the Protection of Childhood”
Provisions Relevant to Preventing and Addressing Grave Violations
Against Children**

Recruitment and Use	Prohibits forced or compulsory recruitment of children and participation of children in armed conflict. (Art. 21, 30)
Killing and Maiming	Recognizes every child’s right to life. (Art. 6)
Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence	Prohibits rape and other forms of sexual violence against, and exploitation of, children. (Art. 21, 30 ²)
Attacks Against Schools or Hospitals	Recognizes every child’s right to healthcare and education. (Art. 6, 19)
Abduction	Prohibits child trafficking, abduction, and illegal removal of children from the country. (Art. 21, 32, 301)
Denial of Humanitarian Access	Recognizes every child’s right to an adequate standard of living. (Art. 8)

Additional relevant laws—some already in place before the armed conflict erupted in 2014 and many others adopted afterward—address rights, protections, and social services for children impacted

by armed conflict; regulate armed actors’ conduct, including in relation to children; and mandate birth registration. [See text box on the next page.]

⁵⁵ “Law on the Protection of Childhood,” 2001, Art. 1, 33, and 301.

Additional Relevant Laws in Ukraine

Rights, Protections, and Social Services for Children Impacted by Armed Conflict

Law of Ukraine “On Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons” (2014): recognizes an elaborate set of rights for IDPs, encompassing children and adults, including social protection, education, family unity, and protection from discrimination.⁵⁶

Law of Ukraine “On the Legal Status of Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances” (2018): recognizes rights for close relatives and family members of people missing due to the armed conflict (or because of other special circumstances) and establishes related State obligations.

“Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 268” (2017): establishes a mechanism for granting the status of a “child affected by military actions and armed conflicts,” which entitles children to access to appropriate social services.⁵⁷ The mechanism was subsequently amended—in 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2024—to improve the process and to expand the qualifying criteria.

Armed Actor’s Conduct

Law of Ukraine “On Military Duty and Military Service” (1992): establishes 18 as the minimum age threshold for conscription into military service.

“Criminal Code of Ukraine” (2001): criminalizes genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes and establishes that superiors are criminally liable for crimes perpetrated by persons under their command.

“Ministry of Defense of Ukraine Order No. 164” (2017): reiterates Ukraine’s legal obligation to ensure education and family reunification for children, ban recruitment and participation of children in hostilities, provide special protection for children under 18, and evacuate children from areas of military operations.

Birth Registration⁵⁸

“Civil Procedural Code of Ukraine” (2004): regulates birth registration, building on earlier legislation that addressed this issue.

“Order of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine No. 407: On Ensuring the Registration of Newborns Under Martial Law Conditions” (2022): establishes a flexible administrative process for registering births, including measures for registering babies born outside of a medical facility.

After the Secretary-General added Ukraine as a situation of concern in his 2023 annual report on CAAC, the Ukrainian president mandated a Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (composed of several governmental entities and led by the Commissioner of the President of Ukraine

for Children’s Rights and Children’s Rehabilitation) to engage with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on CAAC (SRSG-CAAC).⁵⁹ Ukraine has adopted a National Plan for preventive measures to end and prevent grave violations against children, as well as a Joint Prevention Plan with the UN.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ For numerous challenges related to the implementation of this law, as well as other laws relevant to IDPs in Ukraine, see Yevhen Leheza et al., “Administrative and Legal Regulation of the Status of Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine During the War,” *University of Western Australia Law Review*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2024): 297-313.

⁵⁷ “Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 268: On Approval of the Procedure for Granting the Status of a Child Affected by Hostilities and Armed Conflicts,” 2017.

⁵⁸ A key challenge that emerged after the armed conflict erupted has been civil registration (including for births) for Ukrainians living in non-government controlled areas. See “Birth and Death Registration for Residents of Non-Government Controlled Areas of Eastern Ukraine,” Norwegian Refugee Council, June 2018.

⁵⁹ “Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 373/2023,” 2023.

⁶⁰ “Ukraine and the United Nations Extend the ‘Joint Prevention Plan’ to End and Prevent Grave Violations against Children Amid War,” UNICEF, August 28, 2025.

Ukraine has also adopted laws to provide reparations for people impacted by the armed conflict, including a 2025 law that establishes a mechanism for providing “interim reparations” (in the form of rehabilitation and financial support) for victims of conflict-related sexual violence.⁶¹ The Prosecutor General’s Office has adopted “Standards for Prosecutors in Cases Involving Children” that aim to protect the best interests of the child in the context of criminal justice processes.⁶² Ukraine has also opened Barnahus centers across the country to offer protection, recovery, and psycho-social services for children affected by violence related to the armed conflict and to support child-friendly engagement in legal processes.

Another key issue area for law and policy in Ukraine has been continuity of education during armed conflict.⁶³ In 2021, the government approved an action plan for the Safe Schools Declaration, which Ukraine had signed in 2019.⁶⁴ Additional measures have included facilitating distance learning, establishing procedures for enrolling students forced to change their place of study or residence, equipping schools with safe rooms and bomb shelters, and legally recognizing certificates of education received in occupied territories.⁶⁵ Despite wide-ranging Ukrainian policy efforts on this issue, persistent challenges

include accommodating students with disabilities or who lack access to technology necessary for distance education; teachers maintaining consistent access to salaries; and offering adequate psychosocial support for students amidst shortfalls in capacities and personnel.⁶⁶

Regarding compliance and accountability under international criminal law, Ukraine self-referred to the ICC in 2014 (via a unilateral declaration, although Ukraine had not yet joined the court), expanded the temporal scope of the referral in 2015, and became a State Party to the Rome Statute in 2025. The ICC has issued arrest warrants for Russian officials for the war crimes of unlawful deportation and unlawful transfer of population (specifically children), as well as other war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁶⁷ At the domestic level, Ukrainian prosecutors have opened over 100,000 war crimes cases.⁶⁸ In 2024, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense released a voluntary report on IHL compliance. The report discusses Ukrainian government institutions and mechanisms for protecting civilians (including children), as well as activities for dissemination and enforcement of IHL, including via a system within the Ukrainian armed forces for monitoring and investigating alleged violations of IHL.⁶⁹

⁶¹ “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 1 December 2024 - 31 May 2025,” OHCHR, 2025, pp. 20-21.

⁶² “Reintegration of Children Affected by Deportation and Forcible Transfers: International Standards and Best Practices for Ukraine,” Bring Kids Back UA Task Force, October 24, 2024.

⁶³ In 2024, the UN verified 559 attacks against schools in Ukraine. See “Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General,” A/79/878-S/2025/247, June 17, 2025, para. 218.

⁶⁴ “Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Order No. 898: On Approval of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration,” August 4, 2021.

⁶⁵ See “Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine No.1115: On Certain Issues of Organizing Distance Education,” 2020; “Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine No. 274: On Certain Issues of Organizing General Secondary Education and the Educational Process Under Martial Law in Ukraine,” 2022; “Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine No. 135: On Certain Issues Regarding the Establishment and Operation of Safety Classes in Educational Institutions,” 2023; and “Education Under Occupation: Forced Russification of the School System in Occupied Ukrainian Territories,” Human Rights Watch, 2024

⁶⁶ See “Education Under Occupation.”

⁶⁷ “Ukraine,” ICC.

⁶⁸ Mischa Gureghian Hall, “Overfocusing on Prosecuting Aggression Risks Impunity for Ukraine’s Swelling Dock of Alleged War Criminals,” *Opinio Juris*, February 8, 2024.

⁶⁹ “Voluntary Report on Implementation of International Humanitarian Law,” Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 2024.

Current challenges in Ukraine include:

- Recruitment and Use of Children via New Technologies.** Ukraine's legal and policy framework has been largely successful in preventing official recruitment into Ukrainian armed forces. However, children have contributed to Ukraine's war effort in informal ways, including by using drones for surveillance in support of the Ukrainian armed forces.⁷⁰ Additionally, Russia has engaged Ukrainian children via Telegram and other platforms to induce them—via monetary rewards, threats, or blackmail—to support Russian military operations with surveillance activities, arson of Ukrainian military vehicles or other objects, and building bombs.⁷¹ Ukrainian children have been harmed or killed while trying make bombs and have been investigated and prosecuted by Ukraine for these acts.⁷²
- Protecting the Best Interests of the Child During Mandatory Evacuations.** In March 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers submitted a draft law, yet to be enacted, to the Verkhovna Rada that addresses mandatory evacuation of children.⁷³ The law specifies procedures for mandatorily evacuating children accompanied by a parent or guardian, or if the parent/guardian refuses, by other guardians with the involvement
 - of National Police. The draft legislation does not yet clarify a procedure for family reunification in instances when children are evacuated without their parent or guardian and then subsequently transferred to a State institution.⁷⁴ Additional challenges include establishing clear parameters for when, how, and by whom evacuation orders are given; information sharing and coordination during evacuation efforts; and ensuring adequate gender-sensitive care, services, and protection for evacuees.⁷⁵
- Reintegration of Forcibly Transferred or Deported Children.** The Ukrainian government has invested in seeking the return of thousands of children forcefully transferred within occupied territories or deported to Russia.⁷⁶ This effort requires coordination between a wide range of governmental entities under the umbrella of the government's "Bring Kids Back Initiative."⁷⁷ Although some children have been successfully returned, reintegration requires psychosocial support at a scale that Ukrainian government institutions are not equipped to provide. Children in occupied territories and Russia are subjected to a militarized form of educational indoctrination geared toward generating solidarity with Russia, further complicating

⁷⁰ Michela Moscufo, "'Drone Boy' Becomes Hero in Ukraine After Taking Out a Line of Russian Tanks," *ABC News*, August 24, 2022.

⁷¹ "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine," paras 31-38.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ For the bylaw that currently regulates the mandatory evacuation of children, see "Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Resolution No. 841," October 30, 2013.

⁷⁴ "Letter to the Chairman of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy," Ukrainian National Bar Association, n.d.

⁷⁵ "Guidance on Humanitarian Evacuations of Civilians in Ukraine with Special Considerations for Children," Protection Cluster Ukraine, July 2024.

⁷⁶ "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine Children," Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, February 2023; "Russia's Systematic Program of Coerced Adoption and Fostering of Ukraine's Children," Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, December 2024; and "Ukraine's Stolen Children," Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, September 2025.

⁷⁷ "Reintegration of Children Affected by Deportation and Forcible Transfers," pp. 13-14.

the return and reintegration process.⁷⁸ More effective coordination between the many governmental and civil society stakeholders involved in reintegration is necessary to fill gaps in the response and to avoid duplicate efforts.⁷⁹

- **Insufficiently Child-Friendly Justice and Accountability Processes.** The judiciary in Ukraine remains generally understaffed and under-resourced. Capacities are needed for prosecutors, investigative teams, and law enforcement personnel dealing with

traumatized children.⁸⁰ An additional concern has been public activities that feature and spotlight children impacted by armed conflict in public forums without putting appropriate safeguards in place, including provision of psychosocial support.⁸¹ In 2025, the Ukrainian government adopted the “National Strategy for Protecting Children’s Rights in the Justice System until 2028,” which aims to bring Ukraine’s child justice system into alignment with international standards.⁸²

⁷⁸ Megan Gittoes, “Stolen Generations: A Systematic Violation of Ukraine’s Future,” GLOBSEC, 2025.

⁷⁹ “Reintegration of Children Affected by Deportation and Forcible Transfers,” pp. 13-14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, at 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² “Government Approves National Strategy for Protecting Children’s Rights in the Justice System Until 2028: Key Objectives and Tasks,” Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, July 15, 2025.

V. KEY LESSONS

Lesson #1: Protecting children impacted by armed conflict requires an extensive legal and policy architecture. Domestic laws in each country included in this analysis serve as positive models for integrating international legal and policy instruments relevant to the UN’s CAAC agenda into the national level. Domestic laws in the DRC, Colombia, and Ukraine articulate rights, prohibitions, State obligations, and penalties for perpetrators, while also mandating robust support for children impacted by armed conflict in the form of social services for prevention, response, and recovery; victim participation; and reparations. Each government has also undertaken sustained implementation efforts in the form of policy development and strategic planning, dissemination and capacity building measures, and mandating institutional mechanisms responsible for protecting children impacted by armed conflict. These legal and policy measures constitute crucial steps toward preventing and addressing grave violations against children.

Lesson #2: Persistent legal and policy adaptations and innovations are necessary to grapple with emerging challenges. Each government included in this analysis has continually amended and reenvisioned domestic legal and policy frameworks in response to gaps and persistent challenges. Particularly notable innovations include mobile courts in the DRC, “interim reparations” for conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine, and robust focus

on children in transitional justice and accountability mechanisms in Colombia. These developments illustrate that feedback loops between laws and policies “on paper” and the realities “on the ground” are essential. New technologies (including drones and social media) are driving further vulnerabilities and harms for children, as evidenced in Colombia and Ukraine, indicating the need to explore legal and policy innovations to address these challenges.

Lesson #3: International and local civil society jointly play a crucial role in efforts to adopt and implement relevant laws and policies. Advances in law and policy in these contexts have been fueled by international and local advocacy. The 2012 UN action plan signed by the DRC and the Joint Prevention Plan that Ukraine signed with the UN in 2023 have been valuable mechanisms for pushing forward the CAAC agenda. A wide array of international stakeholders—including the Secretary-General, the SRSR-CAAC, the Security Council Working Group on CAAC, and UN country field teams—have persistently advocated for developing strategies, policies, and institutional capacities to prevent and address grave violations and to combat impunity, with a focus on crimes perpetrated against children and child-friendly justice. Local civil society organizations in all three countries have advocated for civilian protection, documented atrocities, and organized to provide social services to children impacted by armed conflict.⁸³

⁸³ See, for example, Megan Renior et al., “Escaping ‘Perpetual Beginnings’: Challenges and Opportunities for Local Atrocity Prevention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Peace Direct*, 2021; Oliver Kaplan, “Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection,” *Stability Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2013); and Gabrielè Chlevickaitė, “Documenting Conflict-related Crimes in Ukraine: Civil Society Innovations, Adaptations and Networks in the Accountability Ecosystem,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* (2025).

Lesson #4: Domestic laws require extensive implementation measures, adequate funding, and robust coordination between relevant stakeholders. Despite robust legal and policy frameworks in each of these contexts, severe implementation challenges persist. Lack of adequate resources and capacities, inconsistent buy-in from governmental personnel across national and sub-national levels, and ineffective coordination between government institutions all severely impede realizing the aspirations of laws and policies. Gaps

and persistent challenges across these contexts are particularly evident in establishing child-friendly justice processes, offering adequate levels of psychosocial support for children impacted by armed conflict, and creating sustainable reintegration programs. These issues indicate the need for an even more robust investment in implementation efforts across all levels of government to address the full scope of harms and vulnerabilities impacting children during armed conflict.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN Security Council, in its future thematic resolutions on CAAC, should:

- Continue to call for UN Member States to incorporate international legal and policy commitments relevant to preventing and addressing grave violations into domestic legislation, emphasizing that these efforts need to be comprehensive, encompassing areas of law that include child rights; labor law; penal codes; amnesty laws; legislation guaranteeing protection and essential services during emergencies, including armed conflict; child justice; and reparations.
- Emphasize the importance of redoubling efforts on issues that remain under-funded even in contexts with robust domestic legal and policy frameworks, such as protection and services for children from marginalized groups, sustainable reintegration programming, and psychosocial services for children impacted by armed conflict.
- Continue to call for all relevant stakeholders to support the development and strengthening of capacities of national institutions and local civil society networks for advocacy, protection, and the reintegration of children affected by armed conflict, particularly former CAAFAG, taking into account the specific needs of girls and boys, including children with disabilities, as well as national accountability mechanisms with timely, sustained and adequate resources, and funding, including through voluntary contributions.

The Security Council Working Group on CAAC should:

- Continue to call on relevant governments to strengthen legal protections for children in armed conflict at the domestic level, ensuring accountability for perpetrators and legal pathways for child survivors to safely access justice and reparations, in line with the best interest principle. In this regard, prioritize the timely adoption of its conclusions and systematic follow up on implementation of previously issued conclusions.

All UN Member States should:

- Ratify and fully implement international legal instruments relevant to the protection of children in war, in particular the CRC and its OPAC, the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, and the Rome Statute of the ICC.
- Endorse relevant soft law instruments, including the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Safe Schools Declaration, the Vancouver Principles, and the EWIPA Declaration. Those who have endorsed these frameworks should share lessons learned and good practices toward their implementation.
- Adopt or amend domestic laws to comprehensively articulate rights of children to be protected during armed conflict, ensuring that such legislation is consistent with States' international legal obligations—including for prevention and response to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes—and incorporating provisions that allow commanders/superiors to be held accountable for crimes against children while excluding defenses of superior order and official capacity.

- Commit sufficient resources—at national and sub-national levels—to ensure the effective implementation of laws relevant to the protection of children in armed conflict, including efforts to support effective coordination between different governmental entities engaging on issues relevant to CAAC; domestic-level capacity building on issues related to IHRL, IHL, international criminal law, psychosocial support for children, and victim-centered child justice processes; and social services, victim participation, reparations, and reintegration services for children impacted by armed conflict.
- Adopt domestic laws that guarantee universal birth registration, ensuring that processes and funding are in place to fully implement these laws, including by addressing practical and social complications that can impede registering births during armed conflict.
- Ensure that domestic laws and policies relevant to CAAC are regularly updated, amended, and improved upon in response to shortcomings, challenges, and obstacles encountered, especially in contexts of ongoing armed conflict.
- Exclude from amnesty provisions, and related legislation, acts relevant to grave violations against children, including acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.
- Adopt or amend anti-torture legislation to include specific reference to rights and protections related to children during situations of armed conflict.

Donors should:

- Redouble efforts to provide resources to support States' efforts to incorporate international legal and normative standards for the protection of children's rights in armed conflict into domestic law, paying particular heed to ensuring that programming, capacity building, dissemination efforts, and policy implementation are fully funded at not only national but also subnational levels.
- Ensure robust support for relevant UN offices and agencies, as well as civil society organizations—including the Office of the SRSG-CAAC, the MRM, country task forces on monitoring and reporting, and child protection advisors in UN missions—providing technical assistance and expertise to national and subnational actors on the development, adoption, and implementation of legal frameworks and policies to prevent and respond to grave violations against children.



Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

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