

Briefing Note: Children and Armed Conflict Concerns in Ukraine

March 2022

Since 2014, conflict has been ongoing between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed armed groups in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region with serious consequences for children's rights. Between April 2014 and August 2020, 39 children were reportedly killed and 137 injured due to mines and explosives, representing around a third of all reported child casualties, and many children have been left with disabilities and invisible psychological scars.¹ The UN estimates that more than 750 schools have been damaged since 2014, disrupting children's education.²

Hostilities seriously escalated last month, when Russia invaded Ukraine, following weeks of mounting tensions, build-up of Russian military presence along the border, and Russia's February 21 decision to recognize the independence of the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk.³ The significant escalation has already had devastating impacts on children, and immediate action is needed to protect children from further harm. Civilian-populated areas and infrastructure have been attacked, including schools and hospitals, and the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons, such as ballistic missiles and cluster bombs, has caused mass destruction.⁴ Civilian casualties, including children, continue to grow, with real numbers feared to be much higher than official tallies. An alarming scale of displacement raises further concerns for Ukraine's 7.5 million children.⁵

Since 2017, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) has called on the UN Secretary-General to add Ukraine as a 'situation of concern' in his annual report on children and armed conflict (CAAC) and reiterates its call ahead of the publication of the 2022 annual report.⁶ A global network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and guarantee their rights, Watchlist has developed this briefing note to highlight key ongoing and growing concerns for the protection of children in Ukraine one month since the escalation of hostilities began and provide recommendations to mitigate harm.

Grave Violations Against Children

Killing and Maiming

Between February 24 and March 20, 2022, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 2,421 civilian casualties, including 75 children (11 girls, 25 boys, 39 unknown sex) killed and 99 (22 girls, 17 boys, 60 unknown sex) injured.⁷ The actual number of casualties is believed to be much higher.⁸ According to OHCHR, most of these casualties were the result of the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects, such as shelling from heavy artillery, multi-launch rocket systems, and air strikes.⁹ On March 4, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called on the Russian Federation to immediately cease "aggression and military actions against Ukraine and [...uphold] its obligations under the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] as espoused by the United Nations Secretary-General to enforce the United Nations Charter to protect children's rights to the utmost degree and as the highest priority."¹⁰

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including cities, towns, and villages, poses particular risks to children and is already having devastating consequences for civilians in Ukraine.¹¹ Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) data shows that when these types of weapons are used in populated areas, 90 percent of the casualties are civilians, with children at particular risk of death.¹² Research by Save the Children across five of the deadliest global conflicts found an average of 72 percent of child casualties occurred as a result of the use of explosive weapons, with children particularly susceptible to head and burn injuries and more likely to die following blast injuries than adults.¹³ Cluster munitions are of particular concern, given their widespread indiscriminate effect and long-lasting danger to civilians, especially children.¹⁴

Attacks on Schools, Hospitals, and Other Civilian Objects and Infrastructure

In addition to the hundreds of schools already damaged in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, at least 233 educational facilities across the country have been damaged or destroyed between February 24 and March 7, according to preliminary reports from Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science.¹⁵ The UN reported that a kindergarten and orphanage were damaged by attacks in Okhtyrka on February 25, which killed six people, including a seven-year-old girl.¹⁶ On February 25, a missile struck a school in Gorlovka in eastern Ukraine, killing two teachers.¹⁷ Schools across Ukraine remain closed, impacting access to education for 5.7 million school-aged children.¹⁸

As of March 13, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA) had documented 31 attacks on health care, including medical facilities, health workers, and ambulances, killing at least 12 people and injuring 34.¹⁹ Reports by Human Rights Watch also allege that a Russian ballistic missile carrying a cluster munition struck just outside a hospital in Vuhledar on February 24. Four civilians were killed, and 10 civilians injured—six of whom were health care workers. The missile also caused damage to the hospital, an ambulance, and civilian vehicles.²⁰ On March 9, Russian forces attacked a hospital complex in Mariupol, reportedly wounding at least 17 civilians, including hospital staff and pregnant women.²¹ The maternity and children's wards were destroyed in the attack.²² In addition to education and health facilities, other civilian objects have also been subject to attack by Russian forces,²³ including homes, orphanages, places of worship, and water and sanitation facilities.

Humanitarian Access

Access and security constraints continue to hinder the ability of humanitarian organizations to reach those most affected.²⁴ Damage to water and sanitation infrastructure has left millions without safe drinking water, and shortages and insecurity are limiting civilians' access to food, medicine, heating, and other essentials.²⁵ Stores of critical medical supplies are dwindling, including medicines, first aid kits, midwifery kits, and surgical equipment, and efforts to curb a polio outbreak have been halted.²⁶ Humanitarian workers, along with local authorities, NGOs, and civil society actors, need safe, rapid, and unimpeded access for humanitarian relief, along with access to streamlined additional funding, to sustain and expand life-saving response activities.²⁷

While some evacuations have gone forward successfully, many have repeatedly been hindered by continued fighting in the most affected areas,²⁸ and some civilians, including children, have been killed while trying to flee.²⁹ Warring parties need to ensure and facilitate safe passage for civilians who wish to leave, as well as provide protection for those who remain.

Other Child Protection Concerns

Displacement

Since February 24, more than 3.4 million people have fled Ukraine for neighboring countries, including over 1.5 million children, according to a March 21 estimate.³⁰ Displacement poses additional risks for children's safety, including vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation, and other abuse, particularly for those children who are unaccompanied or have been separated from their parents or caregivers.³¹ Specific protection concerns must also be addressed for the nearly 100,000 children living in institutional care or boarding schools in Ukraine, half of whom have disabilities.³²

Mental Health

In a March 4 statement, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that "as a consequence of the military attack on Ukraine, children are exposed to extreme violence and unbearable levels of fear and anxiety."³³ A spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described the level of

psychological fear and trauma experienced by families arriving at the Moldovan border as “extremely clear,” describing families and their children as “visibly shaken.”³⁴ Research has shown that exposure to conflict, violence, and insecurity can have major psychological effects on children, and unless appropriate support is provided, children’s distress can have serious and enduring negative consequences on their cognitive development for years to come.³⁵

Recommendations

- All parties to conflict must abide by their obligations under international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law, taking all feasible precautions to avoid—and in any event to minimize—harm to civilians, including children, and civilian objects such as schools, hospitals, and water, sanitation, and electrical facilities. The use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas should be avoided. It is essential that children are protected from participation in armed conflict, and from recruitment and use for military purposes at all times.
- All parties to the conflict should urgently facilitate safe and unimpeded access for all frontline medical and humanitarian workers and supplies in order to ensure the provision of necessary humanitarian assistance.
- Humanitarian actors and governments should ensure children’s best interest is respected and facilitate, as appropriate and with thorough safeguarding measures, direct engagement with children impacted by the conflict, in order to ensure that protection programming meets the needs of affected children. Consideration should be given to the specific needs of girls, children with disabilities, and maintaining family unity.
- All civilians fleeing harm should be provided access to asylum, protection, and assistance, regardless of their nationality or visa status. Furthermore, specific protection should be put in place to support displaced children, many of whom require access to basic services, psychosocial support, and reunification with family members.
- Neighboring and host countries should ensure that unaccompanied or separated children arriving in their territories are immediately identified and registered, offer children and families safe spaces that are linked to national child protection systems, and expand capacity of emergency care arrangements with screened caregivers, as well as other critical services for the protection of children.
- The UN Secretary-General should add Ukraine as a ‘situation of concern’ in his upcoming 2022 annual report on children and armed conflict in light of grave violations committed against children in eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2021, as well as evidence of an alarming increase in grave violations across the country, amid the rapid escalation of hostilities since late February 2022.
- Member States should support accountability for crimes committed against children in the conflict in Ukraine. Specifically, Member States should call for the inclusion of child-specific expertise in international accountability mechanisms, including the investigation into the situation in Ukraine recently announced by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Commission of Inquiry recently established by the UN Human Rights Council, and ensure adequate, sustainable funding for these experts.

About Watchlist

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, the Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national, and international 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 to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children. For more information, please visit: www.watchlist.org.

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- ⁶ See, for example, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict’s “Credible List”: Recommendations for the Secretary-General’s 2021 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-credible-list-policy-note-april-2021-final.pdf>; “Credible List”: Recommendations for the Secretary-General’s 2020 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-credible-list-report-2020-final.pdf>; Recommendations for the 2019 Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, <https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-submission-to-sg-guteres-20190522.pdf>; A Credible List: Recommendations for the 2018 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict Listings, https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2258-watchlist-policy-note_web.pdf; 2017 Annual Report: Putting Children’s Rights Up Front; https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist_2017-annual-report-putting-childrens-rights-up-front_lr.pdf.
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