WATCH LIST ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Statement Delivered by Watchlist Director Bethany Ellis to the UN Security Council on the 30th Anniversary of the Children and Armed Conflict Mandate

October 26, 2026

Thank you, Mr. President.

On behalf of Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, I would like to thank Greece for hosting today's event to mark this significant anniversary for the CAAC mandate.

Excellencies,

Thirty years ago, civil society organizations were among the leading voices calling for the establishment of the CAAC mandate and for the impact of armed conflict on children to be systematically addressed by the Security Council. Child protection and child rights experts recognized the need for improved monitoring and reporting on violations against children and for coordinated action to protect children in armed conflict at the highest political levels.

In 2001, a group of these organizations together formed Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. Over the next 25 years, our global NGO network has brought expertise, experience, and insights from civil society working on the ground in humanitarian settings, -- and when possible, from children themselves – to help shape, refine, progress, and push for implementation of the CAAC agenda.

We have continued to support and partner with the CAAC mandate and agenda, rooted in the conviction **that its unique tools have the capacity to facilitate concrete action to protect children living in war**. Already this morning we have heard some of the results that have been achieved over the past 30 years:

Children released from armed groups and forces and receiving reintegration support; Action plans implemented, grave violations stopped, and parties successfully removed from the annexes. Security Council Working Group conclusions adopted, providing targeted recommendations and follow up on action plan progress. Child protection capacity embedded in UN missions. Handover protocols implemented. And peace agreements incorporating child protection provisions, to name a few.

The CAAC agenda has contributed to the development of a robust legal and normative framework – including through the 15 Security Council resolutions – the most recent of which adopted just last week under Greece's leadership, complemented by commitments

like the Paris Principles, the Safe Schools Declaration, Vancouver Principles – and most recently the Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism has provided reliable, systematically gathered and verified data on grave violations, alerting us to persistent perpetrators, and allowing us to more effectively target resources, make recommendations, and proactively take action towards prevention and accountability.

Civil society organizations have been critical to implementation of the CAAC agenda on the ground, contributing to documentation of and response to grave violations against children – running child-friendly spaces, providing humanitarian assistance, offering reintegration programing, undertaking case management, connecting children who have experienced violence with appropriate resources for their support and recovery, and working with communities and across sectors to strengthen the protective environment for children.

Yet as we mark this important milestone for the mandate, **the gains of the past 30 years and our collective ability to meet the growing protection needs faced by children in war are under serious pressure**.

UN monitors continue to verify record-breaking numbers of grave violations. Government forces have overtaken non-state armed groups as the primary threat to children.

Armed conflicts continue unabated. International law – including special protections for children – is selectively applied, ignored, or blatantly disregarded by warring parties. Humanitarian aid is obstructed or denied – restricting children's access to essential services with consequences for their survival, recovery, growth, development, and long-term health and livelihood prospects.

Fast-evolving weapons technology, including unmanned drones, and artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons systems are enabling faster and more frequent attacks while widening the distance between human decision makers and the use of force. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is disproportionately impacting children – who are as much as seven times more likely to die from blast injuries than adults, and who if they survive, still face complex, long-term physical and mental health recovery needs.

In the midst of all of this, impunity for grave violations is rampant and the political will to address these threats appears insufficient.

While children's protection needs continue to rise, resources to meet those needs are shrinking. The abrupt, severe, and continuing global funding cuts have not spared child

protection actors. In addition to the strain on MRM and UN child protection capacity, civil society organizations have been severely impacted with local country offices, programming staff, and community-based interventions particularly hard hit. Fewer children are receiving services, mental health and psychosocial support, reintegration programs, and case management have all faced cuts, and the child protection workforce faces technical gaps, excessive workloads, and reduced specialized services.

It is clear that urgent steps must be taken if we are to retain the progress made over the past three decades and genuinely turn our commitments into impact for children today. I offer three areas for action:

First, defend and re-invest in what we already have that works.

- Reiterate support for the CAAC mandate, the MRM, the Country Task Forces, child protection components in UN missions, and civil society child protection actors.
- Urge parties to develop, sign, and implement time-bound action plans and consistently follow up on progress.
- Rigorously defend civic space and humanitarian access.
- Back up commitments with resources – providing predictable, long-term funding across both UN and civil society actors, including local and community actors, at the scale needed to meet the challenges facing them.

Second, impunity must become unacceptable, and accountability should be recognized as critical to preventing future violations.

- All parties must be held to the same standards when it comes to children, without exception.
- International humanitarian and human rights law must be upheld with swift investigations and meaningful accountability for violations, including when relevant prosecution for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.
- Cooperation should be fostered with international investigative, justice, and accountability mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court, and dedicated child rights expertise should be systematically included in such mechanisms.
- Parties committing patterns of grave violations should be listed in the annexes of the Secretary-General's report and only delisted when an action plan has been implemented and the violation has stopped.

Finally, Member States should evaluate their own national positions, policies, and relationships with parties to conflict to ensure that they consistently align with and meaningfully reflect their CAAC commitments.

- This means incorporating commitments made under the Paris Principles, Safe Schools Declaration, Vancouver Principles, and the Political Declaration on EWIPA into relevant legislation, policy, military doctrine, protocols, and training.
- This means prioritizing funding for child protection, education, and mental health in humanitarian budgets.
- This means leveraging diplomatic relationships to urge the signing and implementation of action plans to end and prevent grave violations.
- And this means ending weapons transfers to parties violating international law and re-evaluating favorable economic relationships with governments whose forces are listed for grave violations or who are directly supporting parties committing grave violations.

The Children and Armed Conflict mandate exists for a reason – and it isn't about numbers or statements. It's about the safety and wellbeing of children – children with names, friends, and dreams for their future. It's about a refusal to accept their suffering as an inevitable consequence of war. We owe them more than words. We owe them protection, accountability, a childhood without fear, and the opportunity to realize their rights in a peaceful future.

Thank you.