



Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict
Statement on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the
United Nations' Children and Armed Conflict Mandate

January 18, 2022

Excellencies, Special Representative Gamba, colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a global network of human rights and humanitarian organizations committed to protecting children in war.

Since its establishment 25 years ago, the UN's Children and Armed Conflict mandate has made great progress in protecting children from the impacts of war. The UN has signed more than 30 action plans to end and prevent grave violations, and 13 parties to conflict have fully complied with their commitments, leading to their delisting from the Secretary-General's annual report. Over the past 20 years, 170,000 children have been released from armed forces and armed groups.

Yet even as we celebrate this progress, more children are living in conflict zones today than at any time in the previous two decades. The rapid expansion of the global counterterrorism agenda threatens to undermine existing laws and norms for protecting children's rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated children's vulnerability to rights violations and abuse. Parties to conflict exploit these vulnerabilities, targeting children in distinct ways on the basis of their gender, age, and disability.

Today, as we celebrate the important progress made, we should also reflect on existing gaps and emerging challenges. We must redouble our efforts to create a brighter future for all children, especially those affected by war. We urge stakeholders to continue to build upon this progress, highlighting three key areas.

First, ***we must defend and uphold existing protection frameworks***. Governments that have not yet signed or ratified the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict should do so without delay. Similarly, those that have not yet endorsed the Paris Principles, Vancouver Principles, or Safe Schools Declaration should do so and take steps to incorporate the corresponding guidelines into their national military doctrines, trainings, and policies. Governments must ensure that efforts to counter terrorism and address national security concerns are consistent with their obligations to children. Children—including those allegedly associated with designated terrorist groups—should be treated primarily as victims.

Second, ***we must strengthen efforts to prevent conflict before it starts and before it turns into protracted crisis***. Data on grave violations, including in countries not on the CAAC agenda, should inform early warning and prevention efforts. Wherever there is credible information that parties are committing grave violations against children, the Secretary-General should alert the Security Council by including such "situations of concern" in his annual CAAC report. Better monitoring and reporting on grave violations and related abuses—including disaggregating data by gender, age, and disability—is needed to effectively protect *all* children.

Third, ***we must promote accountability for and to children***. Governments should bring all perpetrators to justice, including through prompt investigation and prosecution for grave violations, the inclusion of child-specific expertise in investigative mechanisms, and support for national and international justice mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court. The listing and delisting of perpetrators in the Secretary-General's annual CAAC reports remains one of the most unique and powerful tools for promoting accountability. Member States should continue to call on the Secretary-General to publish a credible, evidence-based list in his annual report.

Promoting accountability also means ensuring that programs and policies are accountable to the children they are designed to protect. Children's meaningful participation is not only a right, but also helps build their capacity for active citizenship, contributes to breaking cycles of violence, and promotes long-term, sustainable peace. Children are subjects with agency who can contribute to the protection of themselves and their communities. Governments, the UN, and civil society should promote children's participation in decision-making processes affecting them, including peace processes, and provide accountability and response to their inputs, in line with children's best interests.

In closing, we congratulate SRSB Gamba and her predecessors—Olara Otunnu, Radhika Coomaraswamy, and Leila Zerrougui—the dedicated staff in the office, and other essential stakeholders without whom this progress would not be possible. As civil society, we stand united with the SRSB, Member States, and the UN in the conviction that no child should suffer the horrors of war, and we will continue to support the mandate and work towards that end.