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Instead of Detaining Children in Armed Conflict, Governments Must Help Reintegrate Them

*New Study Finds Handover Protocols Facilitate Children's Release from
Armed Groups and Reintegration into Society*

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 8, 2020 – Governments must end the detention of children affected by armed conflict and adopt agreements that allow them to quickly and safely transfer these vulnerable girls and boys to civilian agencies who can reintegrate them into their communities, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict said in a [report](#) released today.

In [at least 15 countries](#), children affected by armed conflict not only suffer at the hands of armed groups, but are harmed again when imprisoned for their suspected involvement with these groups. In some cases, security forces detain children in inhumane conditions and subject them to [torture](#). In 2017, the number of children detained in armed conflict reached a high of nearly 4,500 cases verified by the United Nations, a [five-fold increase](#) since 2012. In 2019, the reported figure [dropped to about 2,500](#), but the actual number is likely much higher.

To address this issue, a number of governments have signed handover protocols, which are agreements between government agencies, or the UN and governments, that allow children in custody of security forces to be transferred to civilian child protection agencies for much-needed reintegration support.

“Instead of detaining children in conflict and treating them like threats and criminals, states must recognize that these children are, first and foremost, victims,” said Adrienne Lapor, Watchlist’s director. “Governments should stop these children’s suffering and create a path to normalcy by ensuring they can return to school, attend vocational training programs, and receive the support they need to recover from these experiences.”

Countries with handover protocols include Chad, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. A non-state armed group in Yemen has also signed a directive for the handover of children in Yemen, while negotiations are under way in Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic (CAR). The UN has also initiated protocol negotiations in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Mauritania. Meanwhile, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, and Syria have detained many children, but have not adopted handover protocols.

While the protocols are not always consistently implemented, all countries that have them reported successful releases of children from detention. For example, in Mali, between July 2017 and March 2020, 79 out of 94 children were transferred to civilian child protection agencies.

Sweeping counterterrorism laws have increasingly led governments to treat children recruited or used by armed groups as threats or criminals, instead of victims of serious rights violations who are entitled to special protections under international humanitarian and human rights laws. Governments in several countries, including Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, and Syria, have detained children in areas controlled by armed

groups designated as terrorist, solely based on their perceived links to these groups, without evidence of crime or wrongdoing.

In some cases, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to restrictions on movement and access of humanitarian actors, leaving some children even more vulnerable. Some countries, such as Afghanistan, have excluded detainees charged with terrorism and national security-related offenses – including children – from [releases designed](#) to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

“Detaining children solely for their alleged involvement with armed groups can exacerbate grievances,” said Lapar. “In contrast, helping children rejoin their families and their communities can help break cycles of violence and promote long-term stability.”

Watchlist conducted 47 interviews between July and September 2020 for the 36-page policy note, [A Path to Reintegration: The Role of Handover Protocols in Protecting the Rights of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups](#). It includes a list of recommendations for governments, the UN Security Council, and other UN bodies.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a New York-based global coalition that works to end violations against children in armed conflicts and guarantee their rights. For more information, please visit: <https://watchlist.org/>.

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