



United Nations Security Council

Topic B: Children and Armed Conflict

Introduction

Since the founding of the United Nations (UN), the international community has sought to shield children from the worst excesses of armed conflict. These efforts, while notable, have not prevented new or continuing perpetrators of grave violations of international law surrounding children in armed conflict. In the past year, civilians globally have faced extreme levels of violence compared to previously observed periods. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which monitors global instances of conflict and political violence, rates 30 states as experiencing high or extreme levels of conflict, with another 20 rated as turbulent.¹ These ratings take into consideration events' deadliness, direct danger to civilians, geographic diffusion, and armed group fragmentation in rating countries. In a year period (July 2023 - July 2024) the ALCED recorded 165,273 instances of violence occurring globally, a 64% increase compared to June 2020 - July 2021.² Civilians directly experiencing conflict increased from 13% to 14%.³ This measurable increase in instances of violence and conflict emphasize the mandate of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to ensure international peace and security.

As state and nonstate actors engage in armed conflict, it presents a distinct challenge to the rules-based order of the international system, with children often left vulnerable as belligerents compete for power, control, resources, and legitimacy. These Intrastate and interstate conflicts have put children at a higher level of risk than they have experienced in the past 30 years.⁴ UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 450 million children live in conflict zones.⁵ Of these, 30.5 million are internally displaced. These children are often enslaved, trafficked, abused, and exploited by state and nonstate actors—all grave violations of international law.⁶ It is the responsibility of the UN Security Council, in line with its foundational mandate, to address grave violations and the insecurity of children in armed conflict in contravention of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Background

¹ ALCED. "Conflict Index: Ranking Violent Conflict Levels Across the World." ALCED. 2024

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ UNICEF. "Annual Report 2023." UNICEF. 2024

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

One of the first acts of the United Nations was the adoption of the Geneva Conventions (1949), centering the protection of civilians in times of conflict, especially children.⁷ The *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War* specifically addresses the rights of children to general protection, evacuation, access to supplies—including food—as well as guarantees to the upholding of their welfare including care and education.⁸ These rights are applicable to occupied territories and within the belligerent countries as well.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) expanded the responsibility to protect children.⁹ In 2000, *the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child* was adopted to cover areas of concern not covered by the original convention.¹⁰ These together formalized the principles laid out in the *Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict* (1974) that children living in exceptionally difficult conditions, like armed conflict zones, need special consideration and protection.¹¹

These, along with the *Convention Against Torture* (1988), *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (1998), and customary international humanitarian law and human rights law form the international legal basis for the establishment of the six grave violations. The six grave violations were formalized with the Security Council's adoption of S/RES/1261 (1999), the body's first resolution addressing the issue explicitly.¹² These are: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; denial of humanitarian access for children.¹³

The Security Council, with S/RES/1539 (2004) asked the Secretary General to devise a systematic and comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism to provide timely, accurate and reliable information on the recruitment and use of children and other violations and abuses committed against children affected by armed conflict¹⁴. A year later, they endorsed the plan presented by the Secretary General and created the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to review information provided with the monitoring and reporting mechanism with S/RES/1612.¹⁵ In totality, the Security Council has persistently attempted to strengthen the mechanisms to protect

⁷ United Nations General Assembly. "Proceedings of the Third Session of the UN General Assembly, Part II." 1949.

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross. "Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War." United Nations. 1949.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." GA/44/25. 1989.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly. "Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child." A/RES/54/263. 2002.

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly. "Declaration on Protecting Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict." A/RES/3318(XXIX). 1974.

¹² United Nations Security Council. S/RES/1261. 1999.

¹³ Office of the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. "Working Paper No. 1." 2013.

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council. United Nations. S/RES/1539. 2004

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council. United Nations. S/RES/1612. 2005.

Children in armed conflict and hold accountable actors violating international law and norms, though instances continue to rise.

Current Situation

The escalation of regional conflicts has put more children at a higher level of risk than they have experienced in at least 30 years.¹⁶ The increasing levels of violence are not confined to a single region, instead, expanding violence threatens to engulf children and other civilians in a variety of geographic areas.¹⁷ In the expansive nature of conflict and the corresponding grave violations toward children, there are particular areas of concern the international community is called to address.

Preventing the Recruitment of Children as Armed Combatants

In the period stretching between 2005 - 2022, more than 105,00 children were verified to have been recruited and used as armed combatants in conflict.¹⁸ In 2023 alone, 8,655 children were confirmed and verified to have been recruited as armed combatants.¹⁹ Once recruited, children are not only forced to be perpetrators of violence, but are often subject to violence by the armed actors.²⁰ Some of the violence includes harrowing training or initiation ceremonies, dangerous labor, and situations that put them at significant risk of death, chronic injury, or disability.²¹ These experiences inflict severe trauma onto children causing psychological distress that makes it difficult to process and verbalize experiences.²²

Even after the conflict has ended, children who were recruited are subject to exclusion from their communities either from the suspicion among their community or from their own difficulty adjusting to peace.²³ While UNICEF attempts to ease reintegration through linking children and families to mental and physical health services, education, catch-up classes, and vocational opportunities, preventing the recruitment of children as armed combatants in the first place holds central importance in their work.²⁴

The Paris Commitments, adopted in 2007 and reaffirmed in 2017 with the *Paris Principles*, provide a roadmap to states for preventing the recruitment of children as armed combatants. The objectives listed are to: prevent unlawful recruitment of children, secure the release of recruited children, support their reintegration, and protect

¹⁶ UNICEF. “Children Under Attack.” United Nations. 2024.

¹⁷ United Nations Security Council. “Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.” A/77/895-S/2023/363. 2023.

¹⁸ UNICEF. “Children Recruited by Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” 2021.

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council. “Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.” A/77/895-S/2023/363. 2023.

²⁰ UNICEF. “Children Recruited by Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” 2021.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

boys and girls from recruitment and use. The framework also calls for states to monitor and report violations to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.²⁵ *The Paris Commitments and Principles* documents are a robust list of actions states could take, however the voluntary nature of the framework has not prevented grave violations, with the balance of grave violations toward children increasing by 21% in 2023 alone.²⁶

Ensuring Accountability for Grave Violations Among Member States

The six grave violations: killing or maiming of children; recruitment of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks on schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access for children are significant breaches of international law and norms. In 2023 alone, the UN has verified 32,990 grave violations of which 30,705 were committed in the same year. Each violation represents a child killed, maimed, forced into servitude, abducted, prevented from accessing humanitarian aid, and a school or hospital attacked by armed groups.²⁷ This is a statistically significant 21% increase from the previous measured year.²⁸

These actions, whether perpetrated by state or nonstate actors, are violations of Article 38, Section 3 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.²⁹ It is further banned by International Criminal Court Statute Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and (e)(vii)³⁰. Violations of ICC statutes can be referred to the court by individual states, investigated by the ICC Prosecutor, or referred to the ICC by the UN Security Council.³¹ Once referred or initiated, the ICC requires the cooperation of international partners to hold accountable violations when identified.³²

The Security Council created the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to review the reports of the monitoring and reporting (MPR) mechanisms it established, review progress on development and implementation of action plans to halt recruitment of children, and consider other relevant information.³³ In creating the annual report on Children and Armed conflict, the Secretary-General uses that data to name violating states, identify the nature of the violations, and urge the states identified to take specific actions.³⁴ The Working Group has been further empowered by the UN Security Council to make recommendations to the body on potential protection measures for children in

²⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. “Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions.” A/RES/48/134. 1994

²⁶ United Nations Security Council. “Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.” A/77/895-S/2023/363. 2023.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ United Nations General Assembly. “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” GA/44/25. 1989.

³⁰ International Criminal Court. “Rome Statute.” 1998

³¹ International Criminal Court. “How the Court Works.” 2024.

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Security Council. S/RES/1612. 2005.

³⁴ Report of the Sec. Gen on C&ARC

armed conflict including appropriate peacekeeping mandates and relations with parties to the conflict.³⁵ It additionally monitors and communicates with states of concern with respect to grave violations.³⁶ In recent years, the UNSC has strengthened the accountability framework and resolved to consider grave violations when establishing, modifying or renewing the mandate of relevant sanctions regimes. The UNSC additionally relies on UN bodies (UNICEF, OHCHR), as well as regional and subregional organizations to identify, prevent, and hold accountable actors for violations and abuses against children in armed conflict.³⁷

Future Outlook

The international community continues to grapple with a world in which armed conflict is measurably increasing with children caught in the metaphorical and literal crossfire.³⁸ Cooperation in the upholding of international law—especially with respect to the six grave violations—should be a primary concern of the Security Council within its mandate for the maintenance of international peace and security. The UNSC has already established various monitoring and reporting mechanisms that apprise it of who is committing violations, and can use that in promoting accountability. The changing complexity and intensification of armed conflict, use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and blatant disregard for international humanitarian law and international humanitarian law emphasize the need for significant action from this body.

³⁵United Nations Security Council. United Nations. S/RES/1612. 2005.

³⁶Ibid

³⁷United Nations Security Council. United Nations. S/RES/2601.2021

³⁸ALCED. “Conflict Index: Ranking Violent Conflict Levels Across the World.” ALCED. 2024

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