

Friends of CAAC Statement to Informal Meeting of the General Assembly on Children and Armed Conflict

8 February 2017

Mr. President,

I speak today on behalf of the Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, an informal network of 40 interested member states representing all five regional groups of the UN.

Twenty years ago, the UN General Assembly created a mandate dedicated to strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict. The normative and institutional framework on CAAC has been strengthened considerably since then. The General Assembly has adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, to which 166 States are now party. The Security Council has adopted eleven resolutions recognizing the deliberate targeting of children in armed conflicts as a threat to peace and security and setting up a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism. Twenty-seven action plans with parties to armed conflicts have been signed to address grave violations. Over 115,000 child soldiers have been released. A global consensus has emerged among Member States that children should not be recruited and used in armed conflicts. These achievements show that the UN can make a real difference in the lives of thousands of children affected by armed conflict.

Despite these achievements, the situation today remains grim for many children worldwide. Over 230 million girls and boys are living in countries and areas affected by armed conflicts. An unprecedented level of forced displacement caused by armed conflicts is taking a devastating toll on children. Furthermore, we are witnessing an alarming increase in grave violations being committed against children in several situations of armed conflict. Cases of sexual exploitation and abuse against children by UN peacekeepers and staff have had major long-term effects on the wellbeing of the victims, inflicted untold harm on already fragile communities and tarnished the reputation of this organization.

Beyond the devastating harm inflicted on the most vulnerable group in society, such violations are a barrier to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

How are we to ensure quality education, when classes are disrupted by armed conflicts, schoolchildren are kidnapped, and educational facilities are targeted?

How can we eradicate child labor and modern day slavery when tens of thousands of children are being recruited or abducted to serve as soldiers, spies, porters, or sex slaves? And how can we ensure children separated from armed groups are fully reintegrated and rehabilitated without adequate support?

How can we ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, when attacks against health facilities, hospitals, medical personnel, and transports or even denial of humanitarian access continue to have such a shocking effect on children?

Lastly, how can we ensure peace, justice, and strong institutions when children continue to be abused, exploited, and trafficked? Or when children born of rape in armed conflicts often find themselves abandoned, unwanted, or stateless?

In sum, how are we to build the peaceful and strong societies envisioned by the new development agenda without addressing the plight of children in armed conflicts?

Mr. President, the stakes could not be higher.

The CAAC mandate adopted by the General Assembly is more important than ever. Protection of civilians, especially children, along with respect for human rights and gender equality, remains essential to sustaining peace. Implementing the CAAC mandate will require strong and sustained support and cooperation from all the elements of the international system. This includes first and foremost member states, but also the UN.

To this end, we are grateful for the life-saving work carried out by UNICEF, the UN Secretariat, and other UN Funds and Programmes, in situations of armed conflict worldwide.

In particular, we applaud the courageous and tireless work of the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Leila Zerrougui and her predecessors. The SRSG is among the most effective advocates for the protection and well-being of children affected by armed conflict. This includes raising awareness, reporting violations, engaging with all parties to armed conflict, fostering international cooperation, and helping to develop and implement actions plans to halt and prevent violations against children. Ms. Zerrougui's efforts on the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign are an example of why her office remains an essential tool to achieving progress on this agenda.

In conclusion, we reaffirm our unwavering support for the CAAC mandate and to working collectively to address the urgent challenges ahead of us.

Thank you.