



UN Security Council High-Level Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict

Monday, 28 June 2021 – 8.00 A.M. (EDT)

Concept Note

During its presidency of the Security Council Estonia will organise a high-level open debate on Children and Armed Conflict on 28 June 2021.

The open debate will consider the findings of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (to be issued as A/75/873-S/2021/43). It will also be an opportunity to focus on issues related to the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda, including the mid- and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the protection of children in conflict as well as the importance of a gender perspective in child protection, considering the specific risks faced by girls in armed conflict.

Equally it will allow for the consideration of ways to strengthen the mainstreaming of child protection in the Council's agenda, and by the UN and Member States in all relevant activities, including conflict mediation and prevention. This objective is also linked to ensuring sufficient UN child protection capacity. The protection of children in armed conflict is underpinned by compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and supported by international initiatives alongside further prevention measures at national or regional levels.

Background

In 2020 the situation of children in armed conflict was marked by a sustained high number of grave violations. Verified cases of abduction and sexual violence against children were of particular concern. Abduction continued to occur in conjunction with other violations such as the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence. Children continued to be denied humanitarian access. Attacks on schools endangered children and infringed on their right to education. The protection of children was strongly affected by the escalation of conflict, armed clashes and disregard for international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Children were also affected by the spill-over of conflict across borders and intercommunal violence.

2021 marks the 25th anniversary of the creation of the Children and Armed Conflict agenda, including the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, by the UN General Assembly. This provides an opportunity to reflect on the advances made in the protection of children in armed conflict and to explore ways to further strengthen the efforts in this regard.

The impact of the COVID-19 on the protection of children in armed conflict. The pandemic exacerbated the dire situation of children affected by armed conflict. It increased children's vulnerability to grave violations and posed challenges to the monitoring and verification of grave violations and child protection responses. It underlined the importance of protecting schools,

hospitals, and other civilian infrastructure as well as protected personnel and ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access. The pandemic has also had a strong impact on the functioning of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict, with technologies and existing child protection networks critically supporting the capacity of UN teams on the ground to collect information on grave violations and to engage with parties to conflict despite access and movement restrictions. The COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to have a long-term impact on the socio-economic situation of the communities affected by conflict, which can lead to negative coping mechanisms and an increase in recruitment and use and other forms of exploitation due to lack of accessible alternatives. In this regard, the implementation of the Secretary-General's Call for a global ceasefire and the implementation of resolutions 2532 and 2565 remains of key importance.

Gender perspective in child protection. Girls and boys each face particular risks in conflict, requiring gender-sensitive approaches and responses. Girls – especially refugee, internally displaced, migrant, and indigenous girls and girls with disabilities – can be particularly vulnerable to certain violations. Sexual violence, which overwhelmingly affects girls, remains vastly underreported due to stigmatisation, social and cultural norms, the absence of services and possibilities for redress, and safety concerns. There are growing concerns linked to the abduction of children, which often, especially for girls, is followed by sexual violence. With increasing attacks on schools and abduction of children from schools and along school routes, girls in particular are usually the first to drop out of school and find it more difficult to return. These specific risks have underlined the importance of comprehensive services tailored to the needs of girls as well as of gender-sensitive reintegration activities.

Mainstreaming child protection in the Security Council's work as well as into all relevant activities at national, regional and international level. The protection of children is important for all situations under the Council's consideration. Ensuring that child protection considerations, with the aim of ending and preventing grave violations against children, inform all activities linked to peace and security contributes to breaking the cycles of violence. Mainstreaming child protection also entails considering child protection concerns in all phases of the conflict cycle from early warning to post-recovery, including in peace, Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes. Cooperation with all stakeholders, including community networks and civil society organisations on the ground, supports these efforts.

The role of sufficient UN child protection capacity. The ability of the UN to monitor and prevent grave violations against children and to deliver on their mandated child protection tasks is dependent on ensuring, sustaining and strengthening sufficient child protection capacity, including in UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions and UNICEF. The risks posed by gaps in child protection capacity are heightened in the context of mission transitions and drawdowns with a need for careful planning to ensure that child protection activities are transferred without disruption. Sufficient child protection capacity in situations of armed conflict can also be key for resilience of child protection activities in crisis, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compliance with international law, including international humanitarian and international human rights law, in order to prevent and end grave violations against children. International instruments, including those related to international humanitarian law as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed

conflict, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, have played an important role in preventing and ending grave violations against children. Member States' efforts in this regard have also been accompanied by various international initiatives, e.g. Paris Principles, Vancouver Principles, and the Safe Schools Declaration, as well as by national accountability mechanisms for grave violations alongside prevention measures such as national legislation, early warning analysis, planning and tools, establishment of dedicated child protection focal points, and awareness rising and training – which are equally key in ensuring that the grave violations are no longer perpetrated.

Issues for consideration

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- How to address the risks added by the COVID-19 pandemic for children in armed conflict? How can the long-term negative effects of the pandemic on children and on the monitoring and reporting be prevented?
- How can practical solutions, including through the use of information and technology, support the documentation and verification of grave violations during a pandemic or other similar emergency?

Gender Perspective in child protection

- What are the specific risks faced by girls affected by armed conflict? How to ensure their right to education and health and protection from gender-based violence, including in the context of COVID-19?
- How can the analysis of the impact of armed conflict on girls be better incorporated in the work of the monitoring and reporting mechanism at the field level? How can partnership with other UN and non-UN entities support the gender analysis of grave violations against children?
- How to better address the specific impact that grave violations have on girls and take into account their specific needs in providing assistance to victims of grave violations?

Mainstreaming child protection

- How to ensure that child protection is systematically mainstreamed in the work of the Council as well as all relevant activities at national, regional and international level?
- What added value can regional and sub-regional organizations have in mainstreaming child protection in their work and activities?

Child protection capacity

- What steps are necessary to ensure sufficient child protection capacity in situations of armed conflict, including in peacekeeping operations and special political missions?
- How can Member States support training and development of child protection capacity in their capacity as troop contributing countries within their own armed and security forces?

Accountability, prevention

- How can the international community support national accountability efforts for grave violations against children as well as the development of child-sensitive national investigation and judicial systems?
- How can different actors active in mediation, cease-fire negotiations and peace talks ensure that child protection concerns are effectively included in these initiatives, using the Guidance issued in 2020?
- How can child protection be integrated as part of early warning systems, and be an integral part of prevention efforts? What practical measures can be taken at national level to ensure violations against children are prevented?

Format and briefers

The open debate will take place on Monday, 28 June 2021 at 8.00 A.M. (EDT) via Open VTC. The meeting will be chaired by H.E. Ms Kersti Kaljulaid, President of the Republic of Estonia.

The following speakers will address the Security Council:

- *H.E. Mr António Guterres*, Secretary-General of the United Nations;
- *Ms Henrietta Fore*, Executive Director of UNICEF;
- *Mr Forest Whitaker*, Advocate for Children Affected by War with the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Peace and Reconciliation;
- Civil society representative, TBC;

All Member States of the United Nations that are not members of the Security Council and permanent observers to the United Nations are invited to participate by submitting written **statements through the e-Speakers module on the e-deleGATE+ platform**. Member States should transmit their statements in Microsoft Word format with a cover letter signed by the Permanent Representative/Chargé d'affaires and addressed to the President of the Security Council no later than the date of the meeting, 28 June 2021. The statements will be published as part of an official compilation document containing the interventions submitted in connection with this open VTC.