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CHILDREN and ARMED CONFLICT ANNUAL REPORT of the SECRETARY-GENERAL SUMMARY · 2021

Children Affected by Grave Violations TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS 2021

Conflict and hostilities have continued to severely impact the protection of children in 2021.

The number of grave violations verified in 2021 remained high with conflict escalation, disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law, the multiplication of armed actors, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and of landmines or IEDs, cross-border conflicts and intercommunal violence, as well as coups and takeovers aggravating the plight of boys and girls and impeding verification in some situations.

The report [A/76/871-S/2022/493](#) is available at: undocs.org

Grave Violations¹

23,982 grave violations against children (of these, 1,337 occurred prior to 2021 but were only verified in 2021).

Situations with the highest numbers of children affected: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, Yemen, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Afghanistan, and Syria.

19,165 children affected by at least one of the four individual violations: recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction. **At least 1,600 children were victims of multiple violations.**

¹ Numbers include violations committed prior to 2021 and verified at a later date in 2021



Children and Armed Conflict: 2021 at a Glance

19,165 children affected by recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction
13,633 boys
5,242 girls
290 unknown

23,982 grave violations including attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access

24 country situations
Ethiopia, Mozambique and Ukraine new situations of concern
2 regions
Central Sahel new situation of concern

Most prevalent violations in 2021
killing and maiming, recruitment and use, denial of humanitarian access

2,864 children detained for their actual or alleged association with parties to conflict

27% of victims were girls
71% of victims were boys

Over 12,200 children released by armed groups & forces in 2021, following UN engagement with parties to conflict

20% increase in abductions of children
20% increase in rape and other forms of sexual violence

17 Action Plans currently under implementation, the most recent ones signed in Mali (2) with Platform and in Yemen with the Houthis

At least **40 new commitments** by parties to conflict such as command orders, roadmaps, mitigation measures during military operations, action plans

Perpetrators
55% of all grave violations committed by non-State actors
25% by State actors including International Forces

15% of violations were unattributed including as a result of crossfires between parties, ERW/IED, and landmines

● Situations with parties listed
● Other situations

MAP NOTES: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the Parties. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Details for each grave violation

⊙ **Recruitment and Use: 6,310 children recruited and used**

Situations with the highest numbers of children recruited and used:
DRC, Syria, Somalia, and the Central African Republic (CAR)



⊙ **Killing and Maiming: 8,070 children killed or maimed**

Situations with the highest numbers of children killed and maimed:
Afghanistan, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, and Yemen



⊙ **Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence: 1,326 children victims of sexual violence**

Situations with the highest numbers of children raped and sexually abused:
DRC, Somalia, CAR and Nigeria



⊙ **Attacks against Schools and Hospitals: 872 incidents (475 schools, 397 hospitals)**

Most affected situations:
Mali, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, Afghanistan, and DRC



⊙ **Abductions: 3,459 children abducted**

Situations with the highest numbers of children abducted:
DRC, Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin region, and Burkina Faso



⊙ **Denial of Humanitarian Access:¹ 3,945 incidents**

Most affected situations:
Yemen, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mali, CAR, and Iraq



¹ Not a listable violation

OTHER CONCERNING TRENDS AFFECTING CHILDREN

Detention: At least 2,864 children were deprived of liberty for their actual or alleged association with armed parties to conflict, including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations. The detention of children for alleged or actual association with parties to conflict makes them particularly vulnerable to torture, and sexual violence as well as other abuses and violations of their rights. The detention of children should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest period, age-appropriate alternatives to detention should be actively sought and reintegration support provided.

Situations with the highest numbers of children in detention: Iraq, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

Military use of schools and hospitals: With 299 incidents verified, the military use of schools and hospitals by both armed forces and armed groups remained a worrying trend in 2021, although the military use of hospitals remained marginal (25). Most cases of military use of schools were verified in CAR, Myanmar, Yemen, and Iraq. Overall, 222 million school-aged children are affected by crises globally in the beginning of 2022 including because of conflict, insecurity, attacks on schools or related personnel, or the military use of schools. Schools and hospitals should remain zones of peace to ensure that the right to education of all children is fully protected.

Measures to Better Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict



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In several country situations, enhanced engagement between the United Nations and parties to conflict has resulted in the adoption of measures to better protect boys and girls from hostilities.

In 2021, engagement with parties to conflict by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), her Office, and the United Nations on the ground included bilateral engagement; training and capacity building; advocacy and public awareness; development of commitments and action plans; setting up age assessment mechanisms within armed forces and groups; advocacy to review existing laws to strengthen the criminalization of the six grave violations; calling for accountability for perpetrators; issuance of command orders; screenings for the identification of children to be released from armed forces and groups; assistance to parties engaged in peace processes and national dialogues for the inclusion of child protection measures into discussions and peace agreements; development of prevention plans and measures including protocols for handover and release of children; advocacy for reintegration resources, for greater child protection capacity and for reinforcing the monitoring and reporting mechanism as well as strengthening CAAC focal points in country and regional organizations.

Such engagement produced, among others, the following gains for children in 2021:

- ① **12,214 children released from armed forces and groups** in countries on the CAAC agenda including in CAR, Colombia, DRC, Myanmar, and Syria
- ① The repatriation of **336 Iraqi families including 858 children to Iraq** from Hawl Camp in Syria
- ① The repatriation of **223 children from Iraq to their countries of origin**



ACTION PLANS AND OTHER COMMITMENTS SIGNED WITH PARTIES TO CONFLICT

MALI: Signature of Action Plans by two factions of the Platform in August 2021 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children as well as other grave violations against children

YEMEN: Action Plan signed with the Houthis in April 2022 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, attacks on schools and hospitals and other grave violations

DRC: Signature by six armed groups' commanders of unilateral commitments to protect children following United Nations advocacy

PREVENTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- ⊙ In the Philippines, signature by the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the United Nations of the Strategic Plan to Prevent and Respond to Grave Child Rights Violations in Situations of Armed Conflict in June 2021
- ⊙ In South Sudan, the Government organized a National Conference on Children and Armed Conflict as part of their commitment to better protect children from hostilities
- ⊙ In the Philippines, issuance by the Philippines National Police of its Child Protection Policy which incorporates provisions of the Republic Act 11188 and its Protocol, to prevent grave violations against children
- ⊙ In Syria, disciplinary measures against Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) personnel violating the commitments under the action plan have been taken
- ⊙ In cooperation with the League of Arab States, the OSRSG CAAC provided a training to the network of Arab Women Mediators on mediation guidelines

NATIONAL LEGISLATIONS

- ⊙ In CAR, development by the Government of inter-ministerial plans to implement the Child Protection Code
- ⊙ In Nigeria, signature into law in January 2022 of the Child Rights Act by the Borno State Government
- ⊙ In Colombia, launch of a strategy for the local implementation of the policy to prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children
- ⊙ In Iraq, adoption of the Yazidi Survivor Law by the Government of Iraq
- ⊙ In Syria, the Government issued law No. 21/2021 on the rights and protections afforded to children



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MEASURES TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC VIOLATIONS

- ⊙ In Mali, advances in the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and revision of the bill on the protection of education from attacks
- ⊙ In Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) disengaged 182 children from their ranks and screened out 568 boys through age assessment procedures
- ⊙ In Syria, issuance of a statement by the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) in September 2021 on measures to comply with international humanitarian law to protect children, including the prohibition of child recruitment and use
- ⊙ In Somalia, establishment of working groups on CAAC at the federal member state level
- ⊙ In South Sudan, increased access to barracks provided by the Government to the United Nations for age screening exercises

TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

- ⊙ In Syria, a joint workshop on child protection between the UN and the Government took place in March 2022
- ⊙ In Cameroon, training of police officers on child protection including in the North-West and South-West regions provided by the United Nations
- ⊙ In the Philippines, more than 3,000 child protection actors received enhanced training on child protection
- ⊙ In Chad, more than 1,000 Chadian National Army members received training on the protection of children in situations of armed conflict

Impacts of armed conflict on boys and girls

Children experience conflict differently based on their gender and boys, girls, and other children all present different vulnerabilities to grave violations perpetrated by armed forces and groups. A paper titled: *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict* was published in May 2022, shedding light on the importance of better understanding the gender dimensions of child rights violations during armed conflict to inform prevention and response strategies.



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- ⊙ In 2021, almost one in three children victims of grave violations were girls, an increase compared to 2022 (one in four)
- ⊙ At least 5,242 girls endured one of the four individual grave violations in 2021, compared to 13,633 boys for the same period
- ⊙ Girls were mostly affected by killing and maiming, followed by rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, and recruitment and use
- ⊙ The Lake Chad Basin region showed a significant increase of girls affected by grave violations
- ⊙ Grave violations against girls showed increases for killing and maiming, abduction, and sexual violence
- ⊙ 90% of children recruited and used were boys
 - » Girls are also recruited and used, but continue to be disadvantaged in accessing reintegration assistance, leaving them invisible & vulnerable after leaving armed forces or groups.
- ⊙ 98% of sexual violence was perpetrated against girls
 - *Sexual violence in conflict is the most underreported grave violation due to stigma and lack of legal protection among many factors
- » Girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage. Girls that are forcibly married and have children are often rejected by their families and communities and struggle to resume their education or socioeconomic activities.
- ⊙ 30% of abductions affected girls, an increase compared to 2020
 - » Abduction is one of the fastest-rising violation against children in armed conflict. Abduction is both a grave violation and a means, or strategy, for committing other grave violations, and often takes place for the purpose of recruitment and use or sexual violence.
- ⊙ Almost 30% of killing and maiming affected girls
 - » The different risk exposure to killing and maiming between boys and girls can be partly explained by socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding gender roles.
 - » Countries where the highest number of boys were affected by grave violations: DRC, Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan.
 - » Countries where the highest number of girls were affected by grave violations: DRC, Afghanistan, Somalia, and CAR.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

The plight of boys and girls affected by conflict is a tragedy beyond words. Each victim of grave violations represents a generation robbed of the right to a childhood in peace and dignity, but also a child with their own individual story. A daughter or a son, a sister, a brother, a student full of hopes. Statistics should never make us overlook the severe individual suffering.

Recruitment and Use

In the Philippines, a 16-year-old boy was recruited and used by an ISIS-inspired group in Lanao del Sur province. He escaped with 20 adults from his community. He was then handed over to local government child protection actors and received psychosocial support from a non-government organization. He is now living with his brother and attending school.

In Syria, a teenage girl disappeared in late 2021 after leaving her house for a class in Al-Hasakah Governorate. The family was informed by the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement that their daughter had been conscripted and were told not to look for her.

Killing and Maiming

In Afghanistan, a child found a mortar grenade inside an irrigation canal in Kunduz province in February 2021 and tried to sell it to a metal purchaser, who was also a child. The ERW exploded, killing the two children and wounding six more.

In the DRC, in February 2021, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) made an incursion into the locality of Ndalya and wounded seven children with machetes, who died as a result of their injuries.

In Yemen, on 4 March 2021, shelling, which could not be attributed to a specific party, hit a playground in Taizz governorate where people were gathered for a football match. Three children were killed, and 10 children were maimed as a result of the mortar shells and shrapnel.

Rape and other Forms of Sexual Violence

In Burkina Faso, in February, two 17-year-old girls and an adult woman looking for firewood were abducted by four armed individuals. The two children were raped, each by two armed men in the presence of the adult woman. One of the survivors received medical care and psychosocial support and the other one refused out of fear of stigmatization.

In Iraq, in an incident dating 2014 but that could only be verified in 2021, ISIL abducted and raped a 17-year-old girl in Ninewa. The girl was subsequently taken to Syria where she was held and bore a child while in captivity. The girl returned to Iraq in December 2020, having to leave her child behind.

Abduction

In Nigeria, in March, the Islamic State West Africa Province abducted 15 girls aged 9 to 17 in Borno state, while these girls were searching for firewood outside the IDP camps where they lived.

In Myanmar, a 15-year-old boy with a physical disability was abducted in August 2021 along with four other men and used as a human shield by the Tatmadaw during fighting.

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab abducted 12 boys aged 13 to 17 in the Bay region for the purpose of recruitment and use.

Attacks on Schools and Hospitals

In Afghanistan, in May 2021 a VBIED detonated outside Sayed Ul-Shuhada High School in Kabul. The explosions killed 3 boys and 42 girls and maimed 106 girls and 20 boys.

In Burkina Faso, in September, in the Sahel region, JNIM elements entered a health and social promotion centre and intimidated the health workers, ordering them to stop all family planning activities. As a result of the threats, all family planning services were immediately interrupted.

Denial of Humanitarian Access

In South Sudan, in February, five unidentified armed elements attacked an Outpatient Therapeutic Programme site in Pibor, Jonglei State, and looted humanitarian supplies, including nutrition supplies, soap, mosquito nets, and medicine.

In Syria, in March, multiple air-to-surface missiles impacted the road leading to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern Idlib. One missile struck a lot where trucks used for transporting humanitarian supplies were parked, leaving 4 trucks destroyed and 60 more damaged.

Recommendations

Ending but also preventing grave violations against children is at the heart of the children and armed conflict mandate, as the best way to protect children from hostilities is to minimize the push and pull factors leading to their involvement in armed conflict.

- ⑦ **To strengthen engagement with parties to conflict as a critical way to end and prevent grave violations against children.** Engagement can play a preventive role and lead to changes in behaviour and to significant improvement in the protection of children. Member States should support such efforts, including through the facilitation of UN engagement with non-State actors.
- ⑦ **To reinforce child protection provisions and capacity in all relevant mandates of the UN.** As children continue to face increasing risks, the number of child protection experts and advisors should be strengthened. Mainstreaming child protection concerns in early warning, conflict analysis, mediation, peace negotiations, etc. should also be prioritized.
- ⑦ **To join and implement International Instruments and Commitments to protect children from hostilities.** Member States are encouraged to join and implement the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), if they have not yet done so and to endorse and implement the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles.
- ⑦ **To respect international law.** All parties to conflict should respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international refugee law and immediately end and prevent grave violations. All Member States and parties to conflict must define a child as every human being below the age of 18 years.
- ⑦ **To pursue accountability.** Adopting and implementing legislation criminalizing violations and national accountability measures should be part of national and regional protection frameworks and action plans for the prevention of violations against children affected by armed conflict. Member States should further cooperate with international accountability mechanisms.
- ⑦ **To favor reintegration over detention.** Detention of children should only be a measure of last resort and



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for the shortest period, and alternatives to detention should be actively sought after.

- ⑦ **To assist child victims and survivors** and provide them with timely, gender- and age-sensitive, survivor-centred, and inclusive reintegration services and assistance programmes. As such, the donor community must continue to provide financial and technical support to ensure that ALL children affected by armed conflicts can receive such essential assistance.
- ⑦ **To safeguard humanitarian space.** All parties must allow safe, timely, and unimpeded humanitarian access to all children and ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel and assets. Hospitals and schools must be protected.
- ⑦ **To support the monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children.** This includes the promotion of best practices and the development of practical guidances, essential tools to build effective protection and prevention strategies for children affected by conflict.
- ⑦ **To engage with the United Nations** to improve analysis, develop strategies to prevent grave violations and foster partnerships at national, regional and international levels.

The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict has been awarded the Universities Network for Children and Armed Conflict International Award of 2021.

More information:

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org>