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CHILDREN and ARMED CONFLICT ANNUAL REPORT of the SECRETARY-GENERAL

SUMMARY · 2023

Children affected by grave violations

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS 2023

The changing nature and complexity of armed conflicts, the expansion and intensification of conflicts, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects led to extreme levels of violence against children in armed conflict in 2023.

The full report [A/78/842-S/2024/384](#) is available at: undocs.org.

Grave violations¹

32,990 grave violations against children: Of these, 2,285 occurred prior to 2023 but were only verified in 2023.

Situations with the highest number of children affected: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, Nigeria and the Sudan.

22,557 children affected by at least one of the four individual violations: Recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and abduction.

Highest numbers of verified violations: Killing and maiming (11,649 children), recruitment and use (8,655 children) and denial of humanitarian access (5,205 incidents).

¹ Numbers include verified violations committed prior to 2023 and verified at a later date, in 2023.



Children and armed conflict: 2023 at a glance

22,557 children affected by recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and abduction (individual violations)
 15,847 boys
 6,252 girls
 458 sex unknown

32,990 grave violations including attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access (collective violations)

25 countries + 1 regional situation (Lake Chad basin region)

Most prevalent violations in 2023: killing and maiming, recruitment and use, and denial of humanitarian access

2,491 children detained for their actual or alleged association with parties to conflict

Grave violations against children increased by **480%** in the Sudan, **155%** in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory and **123%** in Myanmar

1 in 4 victims were girls

21% increase in the total number of grave violations

10,600 children formerly associated with armed forces or groups provided with protection or reintegration support during 2023 in countries on the children and armed conflict agenda

21 Action Plans currently under implementation, the most recent ones signed in the Syrian Arab Republic with the opposition Syrian National Army

35% increase in killing and maiming, **32%** increase in denial of humanitarian access and **25%** increase in sexual violence

Perpetrators: Although non-State armed groups were responsible for almost **50%** of grave violations, government forces were the main perpetrator of the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian access

At least **50 new commitments** by parties to conflict such as command orders, road maps, mitigation measures during military operations, action plans

● 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.

⊙ **Recruitment and use: 8,655 children**

Situations with the highest numbers of children recruited and used: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Mali, Nigeria



⊙ **Killing and maiming: 11,649 children**

Situations with the highest numbers of children killed and maimed: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Sudan, Myanmar, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo



⊙ **Rape and other forms of sexual violence: 1,470 children victims**

Situations with the highest numbers of children raped or sexually abused: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, the Central African Republic, the Sudan



⊙ **Abductions: 4,356 children**

Situations with the highest numbers of children abducted: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Mozambique, Burkina Faso



⊙ **Attacks on schools and hospitals: 1,650 incidents (752 schools, 714 hospitals in 2023 and 184 in previous years)**

Most affected situations: Ukraine, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan



⊙ **Denial of humanitarian access:² 5,025 incidents**

Most affected situations: the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Mali



OTHER CONCERNING TRENDS AFFECTING CHILDREN

Detention: At least 2,491 children were deprived of liberty for actual or alleged association with armed parties to conflict, including groups 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 violations of their rights, such as torture and sexual violence. The detention of children should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest period. Age-appropriate alternatives to detention should be prioritized and reintegration support provided.

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

Military use of schools and hospitals: A 25 per cent decrease in the military use of schools and hospitals by armed forces and armed groups was verified. Most of the 362 cases were verified in Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Millions of children were out of school in conflict situations because of 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 for all children is fully protected.

² Not a listable violation

Measures to Better Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict



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Throughout 2023, sustained engagement between the United Nations and parties to conflict in several country situations led to the adoption of measures aimed at providing better protection for children affected by armed conflict.

This engagement – facilitated by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, her Office and United Nations personnel on the ground – included bilateral dialogues, capacity-building initiatives, advocacy campaigns and raising public awareness. Efforts were also made to develop and endorse commitments and action plans; establish age assessment mechanisms within armed forces and groups; advocate for legal reforms to strengthen the prosecution of grave violations against children; and ensure accountability for perpetrators. Additionally, actions were taken to issue command directives; conduct screenings to identify children eligible for release from armed groups; support parties engaged in peace processes to integrate child protection measures; and develop prevention strategies and protocols for the safe handover and reintegration of children. Advocacy for increased resources for reintegration, enhanced child protection capacities and fortified monitoring and reporting mechanisms, along with the strengthening of children and armed conflict focal points in regional and national organizations, led to positive outcomes for children in 2023.

Such engagement produced, among others, the following gains for children in 2023:

- ① **10,600 children formerly associated with armed forces or groups** were provided with protection or reintegration support during 2023 in countries on the children and armed conflict agenda, including in the Central African Republic, the Niger and Yemen.
- ② **2,255 Iraqi children** from the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic were repatriated.

ACTION PLANS AND OTHER COMMITMENTS SIGNED WITH PARTIES TO CONFLICT

- ⊙ **IRAQ:** Signature in March 2023 of an action plan by the Government to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces.
- ⊙ **SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC:** Signature in June 2024 of an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment, use, killing or maiming of children by the opposition Syrian National Army, including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam.
- ⊙ **YEMEN:** Completion of the 2019 memorandum of understanding and the related programme of time-bound activities by the Coalition.

PREVENTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- ⊙ **HAITI:** Signature in January 2024 of a handover protocol by the Government for the transfer of children allegedly associated with armed gangs to civilian child protection actors.
- ⊙ **IRAQ:** Establishment by the Minister of Labour of the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Rights Violations and Preventing Future Violations.
- ⊙ **UKRAINE:** Signature between the Government and the United Nations of a joint prevention plan to prevent grave violations against children.

NATIONAL LEGISLATIONS

- ⊙ **LIBYA:** Commitment made by the Government of National Unity to increase the minimum age of recruitment into security forces to 18 years.
- ⊙ **SOMALIA:** Endorsement by the Federal Government of the Age Assessment Guidelines and its Standardized Checklist.
- ⊙ **PHILIPPINES:** Finalization by governmental departments of the Protocol on Handling Children in Situations of Armed Conflict.



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MEASURES TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC VIOLATIONS

- ⊙ **CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC:** Appointment of focal points for child protection in the Forces Armées Centrafricaines (FACA) État-major and the Ministry of Defence.
- ⊙ **COLOMBIA:** Launch of the national action plan to implement the Safe Schools Declaration.
- ⊙ **NIGERIA:** Establishment of seven child protection units by the Civilian Joint Task Force and provision of child protection trainings.

TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

- ⊙ **BURKINA FASO:** The transitional authorities organized trainings on child protection for the Defense and Security Forces (FDS) and the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP).
- ⊙ **CAMEROON:** Training of law enforcement officers by the Government on child protection.
- ⊙ **YEMEN:** Appointment and training of 80 military focal points within the Yemen Armed Forces.

Impacts of armed conflict on boys and girls

Reliable information on the nature, scope and push factors of grave violations against children in armed conflict is essential. Factors – including gender, age, ethnicity, race and disability – play a crucial role in adversely shaping the vulnerability of children to grave violations. There is a need to find synergies to better understand the multifaceted challenges of today. To that end, research studies and papers focusing on gender, sexual violence against boys, impact on children with disabilities and climate security impacts have been published in recent years to better inform prevention and response strategies.

- In 2023, at least **6,252 girls** endured one of the four individual grave violations, compared with **15,847 boys**.
- Girls were mostly affected by **killing and maiming**, followed by **abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence** and **recruitment and use**.
- Grave violations against **girls** showed increases in **all individual violations**, namely recruitment and use; killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; and abduction.
- **Over 90 per cent of sexual violence was perpetrated against girls** and in 2023, the number of **boy victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence increased by 25 per cent**. Such violence continued to be vastly underreported for both boys and girls owing to stigmatization, fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence or lack of access to services, impunity and safety concerns.
- The number of **child victims of multiple grave violations increased by 15 per cent**, with an increase in the targeted recruitment and use of girls, as well as sexual violence.
- In **Nigeria**, the number of all grave violations increased, and **girls** were more affected than boys by all individual violations.
- **Almost 90 per cent of children recruited and used were boys**
- Sex, age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion, geopolitical location and economic status are the primary determinants of a child's risk of recruitment, how they are exploited and the violations they experience.
- **Almost 40 per cent of abductions affected girls**
- The abduction of children in situations of armed conflict is mostly perpetrated by non-State armed groups and occurs in a variety of settings, including from children's homes, schools and public spaces, often preceding or following other abuses and violations.
- **Almost 30 per cent of killing and maiming affected girls**
- Parties to conflict continue to deploy landmines and other explosive ordnance, and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (including in dense urban areas) causes widespread destruction leaving children maimed, mutilated and scarred by serious, permanent or disabling injuries.



BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Children affected by armed conflict are the silent casualties of a world torn by violence. They bear the brunt of unimaginable suffering, robbed of the innocence that should define their childhood. Their education is disrupted, their homes destroyed and their futures shattered. They often face displacement, recruitment, abuses, maiming and sometimes death. The scars they carry, both visible and hidden, serve as a haunting reminder of the atrocities they endured.

Recruitment and use

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab recruited 10 children aged 15 to 17 during a community recruitment mobilization event in Lower Shabelle region, and then transported them to a training camp.

In Myanmar, the Myanmar Armed Forces abducted three girls from a village for use as a human shield in Kachin State during a military operation.

Killing and maiming

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, four Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces in their homes during an attack in Gaza, and in Bethlehem an Israeli soldier shot and killed with live ammunition a Palestinian boy who was standing unarmed in his house.

In Israel, 10 Israeli children were shot and killed with live ammunition by Hamas' Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and other armed groups in Kibbutz Be'eri.

In Nigeria, while grazing animals, three children picked up an object and took it home. While playing with it, the device exploded, killing the three children and maiming another five children.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, four girls were gang-raped by unidentified perpetrators while collecting firewood in South Kivu. Communities and local partners transferred the victims to a hospital, where they received medical treatment.

In Iraq, Da'esh abducted one girl in 2014 at the age of 5. She was taken to the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye and sold between Da'esh members for sexual exploitation. Da'esh continued to sexually abuse the girl until she was rescued in June 2023 at the age of 14 and brought back to Iraq.

Abduction

In Libya, the Central Support Apparatus abducted a 10-year-old boy and four of his nephews, aged 10 to 13, and brought them to its headquarters.

In South Sudan, three 15-year-old boys were abducted by the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) in Western Equatoria state. The boys were deceived by an alleged "Youth empowerment group", taken to SPLA-IO barracks and were intended to be trafficked to an armed group of the Azande community operating in the Central African Republic.

Attacks on schools and hospitals

In Afghanistan, a health-care clinic in Paktika Province was set ablaze by unidentified perpetrators. The incident necessitated relocating the facility to ensure continuity of provision of medical services, affecting hundreds of families, especially those in need of nutritional support.

In Ukraine, a school in Dnipropetrovsk region was destroyed as a result of a missile attack attributed to Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups. Four school workers were killed, and two civilians were injured in the attack.

Denial of humanitarian access

In Burkina Faso, two United Nations vehicles were shot at and hijacked in the Centre-Nord region, leading to a temporary suspension of the United Nations mission in Bam Province. In the same period, two trucks belonging to a United Nations supplier were intercepted and hijacked by Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) on their way to Dori, and 100 tons of food for humanitarian assistance were stolen.

In the Sudan, a humanitarian convoy sent to evacuate vulnerable civilians from Khartoum came under attack upon entering the evacuation area. The incident killed two people and injured seven, including three humanitarian staff.

Recommendations

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

- ① **To respect international law.** All parties should comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law, and immediately end and prevent grave violations.
- ② **To strengthen engagement with parties to conflict as a critical way to end and prevent grave violations against children.** Member States should continue to support engagement with the United Nations, including by facilitating engagement with non-State actors.
- ③ **To support the monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children.** The Security Council should ensure that child protection provisions and capacity are included in all relevant mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions, in line with the 2017 policy on child protection in United Nations peace operations, and ensure that child protection data and capacity are preserved and transferred during mission transitions and reconfigurations. Donors should provide funding for monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children, in particular for child protection capacities on the ground.
- ④ **To join and implement International Instruments and Commitments to protect children from hostilities.** Member States should become parties to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, if they have not yet done so, and endorse and implement the Paris Principles, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles.
- ⑤ **To ratify and fully implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, including OPAC.** Member States and parties to conflict should consider every human being below the age of 18 years as a child, in line with article 1 of the Convention, and consider the right to identity and birth registration as a prerequisite for claiming other rights, including in counter-terrorism measures on children.



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- ⑥ **To allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access.** Parties to conflict must guarantee access by children to assistance and protection, irrespective of their age, gender, diversity characteristics, nationality or legal status, and ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and assets.
- ⑦ **To pursue accountability.** Member States should adopt national accountability measures and cooperate with international accountability mechanisms. The inclusion of accountability provisions should further be included in action plans signed between the United Nations and parties listed.
- ⑧ **To support mine action operations and child-sensitive risk education.** All parties should undertake clearance of explosive ordnance, explosive ordnance risk education and victim assistance, and Members States should become parties and implement all conventions on landmines, explosive remnants of war and cluster munitions.
- ⑨ **To refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas.** Member States should endorse the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.
- ⑩ **To assist child victims and survivors.** The international community should provide long-term financial support for sustainable, timely, gender- and age-sensitive, survivor-centred, and disability inclusive programmes, including reintegration for victims of grave violations.