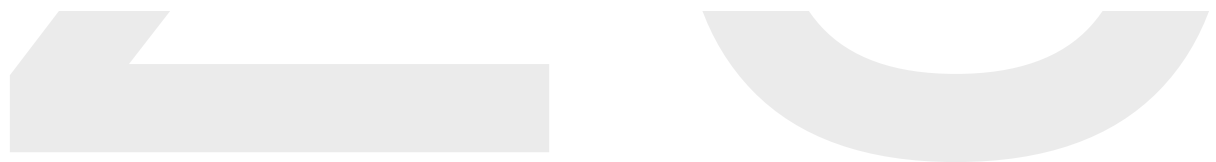




ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee
ISSUE Preventing the Recruitment and Exploitation of Child Soldiers
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Committee
APPROVED BY Zénó Draveczi-Ury, Deputy Secretary General and Her Excellency Anna
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Introduction

The recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers remains one of the most serious violations of children's rights in contemporary armed conflicts. According to UNICEF, children associated with armed forces or armed groups are used not only as combatants, but also as messengers, porters, cooks, spies, and are, in many cases, subjected to sexual exploitation. These practices violate the fundamental rights of children to safety, education and development, while exposing them to severe physical and psychological harm that usually leaves an everlasting scar.

Despite international legal frameworks prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in hostilities, the practice continues in both international and non-international armed conflicts. The United Nations identifies the recruitment and use of children as one of the six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, alongside with killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. Armed groups often exploit conditions such as poverty, displacement, lack of education, and the breakdown of state authority to recruit children, while in some cases children are forcibly abducted or compelled to participate.

In response to this ongoing issue, the international community has developed mechanisms aiming to prevent the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers, ensure accountability, and promote rehabilitation. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict establishes clear obligations for states to prevent the recruitment and use of children and to support their recovery and reintegration. Complementing this legal framework, the UN has introduced monitoring and reporting mechanisms, action plans with parties involved in such issues, and post-conflict programs such as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), which seeks to support the safe return of former child soldiers to civilian life.

Nevertheless, the persistent verification of child recruitment cases in recent years demonstrated that existing measures face significant challenges in implementation. Preventing the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers therefore remains a major issue for the United Nations and the wider international community. This matter of concern requires political commitment, international cooperation, and protection strategies that address both immediate and structural causes of child recruitment in armed conflicts.

Definition of Key Terms

Armed forces and armed groups - Armed forces are the official military institutions of a state while armed groups are non-state actors that engage in weaponised conflict. Both may be involved in the recruitment and use of underaged individuals in hostilities.

Recruitment - Refers to the enlistment of minors into armed forces or armed groups, whether forcibly or voluntarily.

Six grave violations against children - A framework established by the United Nations that identifies the most severe abuses committed against underaged individuals in armed conflicts. These include the recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access.

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) - An international legal instrument adopted in 2000 that strengthens the protection of children during armed conflicts by prohibiting the compulsory recruitment of persons under the age of 18 and compelling states to take measures to prevent the use of them in hostilities.

Reintegration - The process through which former underaged soldiers return to civilian life. It includes access to education and healthcare, family reunification, and community-based support to facilitate long-term recovery and social inclusion.

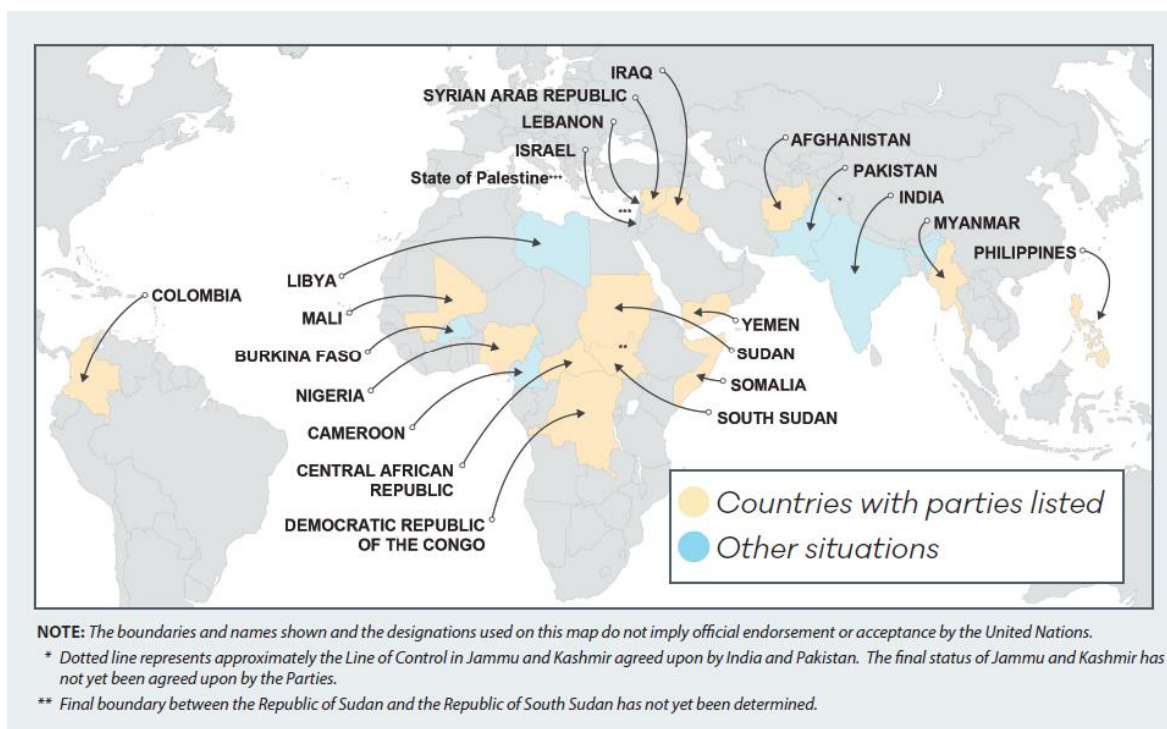
Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) - Refers to a set of UN-supported processes aimed at disarming former combatants, formally releasing them from weaponised forces or groups, and supporting their reintegration into civilian society. DDR programs focus on rehabilitation, education, and psychosocial support for former child soldiers.

General Overview

THE RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

In weaponised conflicts, children are recruited and used by both armed forces and armed groups in numerous roles. Their involvement is not limited to direct participation in hostilities, minors are frequently used as messengers, porters, cooks, guards, or spies. In many instances, particularly in the case of girls, recruitment is accompanied by sexual exploitation and forced domestic labour. The use of children in these roles exposes them to continuous violence and obligation while depriving them of protection, education, and stable social environments.

Recruitment arises through various mechanisms, such as forced abduction, intimidation, and coercion. In other cases, these young people may be manipulated into joining armed groups through manipulation or promises of security, income, or belonging. Regardless of the method, the involvement of children in armed conflict reflects systematic exploitation rather than voluntary participation.



Countries where one or more grave violations against children (including, but not limited to recruitment/use) have been documented and verified.

PATTERNS AND CAUSES OF RECRUITMENT

The recruitment of child soldiers is driven by a combination of immediate and structural factors. Immediate factors arise directly from active conflict, including widespread insecurity, the collapse of law enforcement, and the presence of armed actors within civilian communities. Children who are displaced, separated from their families, or living in areas where schools and social services have been destroyed are particularly vulnerable to recruitment.

Structural causes arise from long-term conditions such as persistent poverty, lack of access to education, weak state institutions, and prolonged political instability. In environments where economic opportunities are scarce and social protection systems are absent, armed groups can exploit grievances and normalize the use of violence. Over time, repeated cycles of conflict erode community resilience, and increase the likelihood of child recruitment across generations.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND UN RESPONSE

The recruitment and use of child soldiers is recognised by the United Nations as one of the six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. These violations are monitored through UN-mandated mechanisms that document abuses and engage with parties to conflict in order to promote compliance with international legal frameworks.

A central legal instrument addressing this issue is the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which obligates states to take measures to prevent child recruitment to support the recovery and reintegration of affected children. In addition to legal obligations, the UN has implemented action plans with weaponised entities aimed at ending and preventing violations.

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION, AND REINTEGRATION

Post-conflict responses play a critical role in addressing the long-term consequences of child recruitment. Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programs support former child soldiers in the transition back to their civilian lives by focusing on psychosocial assistance, education, family reunification, and community-based reintegration. These measures are intended to reduce the risk of recruitment and contribute to long-term peace and stability.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Despite the existence of legal frameworks and international mechanisms, the recruitment and use of children continue to be verified in multiple conflict settings. The persistence of the issue highlights the challenges related to effectively enforcing these mechanisms, limited access to affected areas, and the difficulty of addressing underlying causes. Preventing the exploitation of child soldiers therefore requires sustained international engagement, long-term investment in child protection systems, and coordinated strategies that address both immediate and structural drivers of recruitment.

Major Parties Involved

Democratic Republic of Congo: The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the countries most affected by the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Armed groups within the country have repeatedly recruited children for combat and support roles, despite international prohibitions. The DRC has been listed in United Nations reporting mechanisms on children and armed conflict due to the scale and persistence of verified violations. While the government has formally committed to ending child recruitment and has cooperated with UN action plans, continued instability and the presence of non-state armed groups have limited the effectiveness of the efforts.

Somalia: Prolonged armed conflict and weak state institutions have contributed to the recruitment of children by armed groups. Children have been used in combat, intelligence gathering, and logistical support roles. The situation has been documented by the United Nations multiple times, and Somalia is listed as a country of concern under UN monitoring frameworks. Efforts to address recruitment are complicated by ongoing insecurity and limited access to affected regions.

South Sudan: South Sudan has experienced widespread child recruitment since the outbreak of civil conflict. Children have been recruited by both government-aligned forces and armed opposition groups. Although commitments have been made to release children from armed forces and to cooperate with UN-supported reintegration programs remain inconsistent and frequently fail to meet established benchmarks. Political instability and humanitarian crises have increased children's vulnerability to recruitment.

Haiti: In Haiti, the recruitment of children has increased significantly in recent years due to escalating gang violence and the collapse of public security. Armed groups have recruited children for roles including combat, surveillance, and intimidation. The rise in recruitment reflects the deterioration of social services, education systems, and state authority. The Haitian government has faced serious challenges in preventing recruitment and protecting children during the ongoing instability.

Columbia: Despite the large-scale internal conflict having ended formally, children continue to be recruited by armed groups and criminal organisations. Recruitment increasingly occurs through coercion, social pressure, and manipulation, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. The situation shows that child recruitment can last even after peace agreements, especially where armed actors continue to operate and state presence remains limited.

Timeline of Events

1989 - Adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1990 - Convention on the Rights of the Child is implemented

2000 - Adoption of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC)

2002 - Optional Protocol is implemented

2005 - Establishment of the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)

2010s - Expansion of UN action plans with parties to conflict

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Over the past decades, the international community has undertaken several legal, political, and operational measures to address the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers. These actions have focused on the prevention of the recruitment and exploitation of underaged

individuals, and holding parties involved accountable, and post-conflict rehabilitation, primarily within the framework of the United Nations.

One of the most significant steps taken to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers was the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which established the principle that children require special protection during armed conflicts. Building on this foundation, the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) was adopted in 2000, raising the standards of protection by prohibiting the compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 and obliging States Parties to take actions with great effort to prevent their direct participation in hostilities. OPAC also emphasises the responsibility of states to support the recovery and social reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

While these instruments have been widely ratified, their effectiveness has been limited by challenges in implementation, particularly in non-international armed conflicts involving non-state armed groups, which are not formal parties to international treaties.

The development of action plans with state armed forces and non-state armed groups listed for violation against children has also been key to solving this issue. Through action plans, parties commit to end the recruitment and use of children, release children already associated with armed forces or groups and prevent future violations. In numerous cases, successful implementation of action plans has led to the removal of parties from the UN's list of perpetrators. Despite these successes, action plans remain difficult to negotiate and enforce, particularly with fragmented armed groups or in situations of ongoing instability.

Post conflict strategies have also played a crucial role in addressing the long-term consequences of child recruitment. Disarmament, Demobilisations and Reintegration (DDR) programs aim to help the transition of former child soldiers back into civilian life. These programs focus on psychosocial support, access to education, vocational training, and family reunification, with the goal of reducing the risk of re-recruitment and promoting sustainable peace. DDR initiatives often face challenges such as insufficient funding, stigma faced by former soldiers, and weak national institutions, which can limit their long-term effectiveness.

Efforts to address child soldier recruitment have also included international criminal accountability. The recruitment and use of children under 15 have been recognised as war crimes under international criminal law, and prosecutions before the International Criminal Court, such as the case of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, have established an important legal precedent. These cases have reinforced the principle that individuals responsible for recruiting

child soldiers can be held accountable. However, international prosecutions are often rare and slow, limiting their deterring effect.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

Community-based warning and intervention networks may be a viable solution. Local communities are often the first to observe signs of recruitment, such as increased presence of armed groups around schools and the sudden disappearance of children. Empowering locals through secure reporting systems and providing special training for them could result in a rapid intervention before recruitment occurs.

The development of digital child protection and conflict-prevention tools for at-risk regions could help as well. This could include mobile applications that provide children and families with reliable information, access to emergency assistance, and confidential reporting options when the threat of recruitment arises. In areas where armed groups increasingly exploit technology and social media to lure children, using digital solutions for prevention could stop the spread of misinformation.

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