



## Addressing the needs of children in conflict

by Daniel White

*Old Dominion University Graduate Program in International Studies*

### Introduction

Military conflicts around the world today are negatively impacting the lives of children caught in the struggle. Either being forced to partake in the conflict as child soldiers, driven from their homes, or made victims like everybody else, conflicts in the world disrupt the healthy development of children.

A 2022 report states that in 24 conflicts affecting children, 8,831 children were killed or maimed, and another 7,622 were recruited by armed groups or forces.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, this is one of the few issues facing the UN that generally receives broad support from all member states. With a little more effort, these numbers can be drastically reduced.

Three regions in particular have seen an increase in violence involving children. While there are reports of children joining the fighting in Ukraine, it is known that 525 have died with another 1047 being wounded since the war began.<sup>2</sup> As the civil war rages on in Sudan, UNICEF reports that, it “has received allegations of more than 3,100 serious violations, including the murder and mutilation of children. While 7.4 million children have no access to drinking water, twice as many are in need of vital

humanitarian aid, and 19 million have not returned to school. This is the most serious education crisis in the world today.”<sup>3</sup>



The war between Hamas and Israel has made children prominent victims, Hamas killing and kidnapping and Israeli bombing. UN Secretary-General António Guterres recent remarked that Gaza had become a “graveyard for children” because thousands of civilians are being killed or missing underneath destroyed buildings with 1,400 of the missing assumed to be children.<sup>4</sup> These recently begun conflicts prove that war will continue to devastate the lives of children.

One area of concern in these conflicts that needs more attention is the impact they have on the children living in these zones of conflict. In 2020, the Secretary-General noted that, “Some 250 million children live in conflict-affected countries, and in 2018,

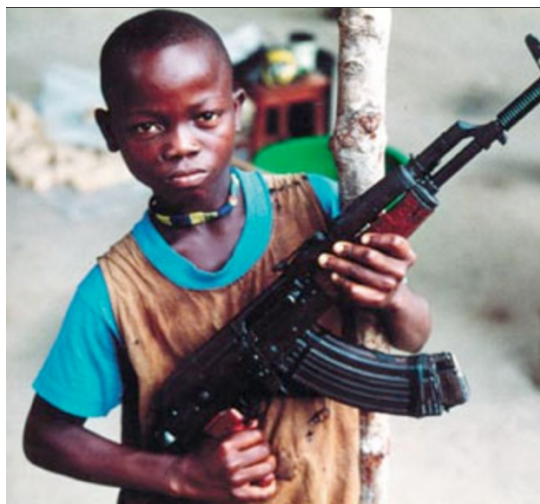
<sup>1</sup> “‘Dire Year’ for Children in Conflict, as Hospital and School Attacks Double.” UN News: Global Perspectives Human Stories. 27 June 2023.

<sup>2</sup> “Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine: Children in Armed Conflict.” Regional information Centre for Western Europe. 20 November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

more than 12,000 children were killed or maimed, and more than 24,000 violations were documented and verified, compared with 21,000 in 2017.”<sup>5</sup>



Child soldier with his Kalashnikov

With new conflicts breaking out, political tensions rising, and the potential for new conflicts to emerge, more children will be threatened by wars in the near future. The 2021 Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) reported:

- *The report highlights 23,982 verified grave violations against children overall. For 15 per cent of those violations, perpetrators could not be*

*identified, making subsequent accountability extremely challenging.*

- *At least 5,242 girls and 13,663 boys were victims of grave violations in 21 country situations and one region. At least 1,600 of those children were victims of multiple violations.*
- *8,070 children were killed or maimed, increasingly by explosive remnants of wars, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines, which affected some 2,257 children.*
- *Children continued to be recruited and used, with 6,310 children affected.*
- *3,945 incidents of denial of humanitarian access were verified.*<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of international law, children are defined as, “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”<sup>7</sup> There are many roles children are being used for in war. Children given weapons and being made to fight directly in combat is the most common perception of this issue. However, in addition to combat, children are also forced into combatant support roles. From cooking, laying mines, or spying, children are exploited into working for armed forces.<sup>8</sup> The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups classifies children associated with armed forces or groups as:

<sup>5</sup> ‘Children Simply Have No Role in Conflict’, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Launching New Protection Guidelines for Mediators, Negotiators. Security Council, Meetings Coverage, 8721<sup>st</sup> Meeting (AM), SC/14107, 12 February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), 2021.

<sup>7</sup> “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” General Assembly Resolution 44/25. 20 November 1989.

<sup>8</sup> The Paris Principles: The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. February 2007. 1.0.

*“any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls uses as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”<sup>9</sup>*

Even if children are not involved in working with armed forces, conflict in their home environment still disrupts their normal life and development. They can lose family members, be denied access to basic living necessities, be denied access to education, may become an injured bystander, may be forced to relocate, and live under constant fear and uncertainty.



The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, studying the physical and psychological effects that living in

<sup>9</sup> The Paris Principles: The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. February 2007. 2.1.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, Jonathan and Abeer S. Ahmad. “Child Development and resilience in war, conflict and

regions of conflict have on children, identified that, “The early years of childhood represent the ‘window of opportunity’ that shapes the child’s whole development experience throughout life. Research shows that the development potential of 250 million children under five years (around 43 per cent) in low- and middle-income countries is at stake. Also, there is a high probability that children will experience delayed early childhood development with exposure to local conflicts, and this delay increases with chronic exposure.”<sup>10</sup> For the physical, psychological, and social health of children and their societies, more work is needed on this issue.

## International Background

Support for children in general has existed since the foundation of the UN. The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was created in 1946 to provide humanitarian and developmental aid to children.<sup>11</sup> The General Assembly passed the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* in November 1989. It reinterpreted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to apply specifically to children. In 54 articles, it broadly clarified how member states are guided to treat children around the world.

displacement. Stockholm International Peace Research institute. 9 May 2022.

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNICEF>



Among many general provisions guaranteeing human rights to children, Article 38 is the only article that concerns child in conflict. It declares:

*1. States Parties undertake to respect and to ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child.*

*2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.*

*3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.*

*4. In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.<sup>12</sup>*

Though this was a good first step, the issue of children in conflict became dormant and remained unaddressed until 1996 when Graça Machel's landmark report was released. The Impact of Armed Conflict brought international attention to the issues of child soldiers and the quality of life children have in conflict zones.<sup>13</sup> Her report mobilized the General Assembly into undertaking more work on this issue. The following year, The State of the World's Children report was released.<sup>14</sup> While it did reiterate many of the concerns found in the Convention of the Rights of the Child such as education, child labor, and economic stability, it made no mention of children in conflict zones.

Almost a decade after the 1996 report, the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) was created in 2005 to monitor the conditions of children in conflict zones and to highlight areas where more action is needed.<sup>15</sup>

Specifically addressing the rights of children in armed conflict, an optional protocol was added to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2000. It went into greater detail over the prevention of child soldiers and the care of children in conflict

---

<sup>12</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." General Assembly Resolution 44/25. 20 November 1989.

<sup>13</sup> "Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children." A/51/306. August 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Carol Bellamy, "The State of the World's Children," (London: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> "Progress and Challenges for Children Living in Armed Conflict." UNICEF Fact Sheet. 28 June 2022.



zones.<sup>16</sup> Although controversy arose over the acceptable age by which an individual could be labeled a “child,” most states preferred 18 years old while others 16 or 17, states overwhelming supported the protocol being added to the Convention with 173 being party to it.<sup>17</sup>

and justice against armed groups who utilize children.<sup>18</sup>

While work is progressing in the General Assembly, more effort has been made by the Security Council. Spurred on by the 1996 report, the General Assembly encouraged<sup>19</sup> the Secretary-General to appoint a special representative to investigate and produce reports on the issue.<sup>20</sup> This created the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) position.

**SHOW YOUR SUPPORT**  
TELL THE WORLD THEY ARE

**ACTION PLAN**  
HOW TO END THE RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT:

**ONE** Issue military command orders prohibiting the recruitment and use of children

**TWO** Release all children identified in the ranks of security forces

**THREE** Ensure children's reintegration into civilian life

**FOUR** Criminalize the recruitment and use of children

**FIVE** Integrate age-verification mechanisms in recruitment procedures

CHILDRENANDARMEDCONFLICT.ORG



Further work on the issue resulted in The Paris Principles in 2007. It not only reaffirmed previous UN resolutions but also added provisions for internationally displaced children, prevention of unlawful recruitment or use of children, reintegration of children after they leave conflict zones,

The responsibility of a Special Representative is to meet with heads of states on behalf of the Secretary-General to investigate human rights issues and coordinate the possible responses to address them.<sup>21</sup> In this case, the SRSG CAAC travels to regions where children are reported

<sup>16</sup> “Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.” A/RES/54/263.

<sup>17</sup> “Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optional\\_Protocol\\_on\\_the\\_Involvement\\_of\\_Children\\_in\\_Armed\\_Conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optional_Protocol_on_the_Involvement_of_Children_in_Armed_Conflict)

<sup>18</sup> The Paris Principles: The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” United Nations

International Children’s Emergency Fund. February 2007.

<sup>19</sup> “The Rights of the Child.” A/RES/51/77. 20 February 1997.

<sup>20</sup> “About Us.” Children and Armed Conflict. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/about/>

<sup>21</sup> “Special Representative of the Secretary-General.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special\\_Representative\\_of\\_the\\_Secretary-General](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Representative_of_the_Secretary-General)

to be affected by conflict. After discussing the situation with local leaders, the SRSO CAAC returns to brief the Secretary-General and report the findings to the Security Council. After this office was created, yearly or regular resolutions by the Security Council to mitigate instances of children in conflict have been produced.

The SRSO CAAC's efforts culminated in the 2014 "We are Children, Not Soldiers" campaign as initiated by their office and UNICEF to raise awareness of children in zones of conflict. Its goal was to raise enough awareness so that states would be motivated to undertake measures to remove children from conflict areas and prevent the use of children in combat.

While being a world-wide project, it was particularly aimed at Afghanistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. Though the campaign ended in 2016, it was successful in swaying most of the aforementioned states to implement UN child protection measures.<sup>22</sup> Upon the completion of the campaign, the Security Council continues to pass resolutions.

### Regional and State Positions

The **African Union** has worked closely with the UN and the SRSO since 2013 to

strengthen protection mechanisms to ensure that child protection is a critical component of the peace and security agenda for the continent.<sup>23</sup> The AU has also partnered with the EU to enact the recommendations of Security Council Resolutions and the ACT to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict campaign.<sup>24</sup>

**China** holds that the most effective way to remove children from conflict is to resolve the conflict. International mediation can resolve conflict, but states themselves are primarily responsible for protecting the children within their borders. International oversight can be made to ensure state compliance with UN resolutions. While providing financial aid to African states, China has also called upon the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers.

While China is generally supportive, it is very hesitant about any action that would get the UN involved in the domestic affairs of any Member States. Above all, China seeks to strengthen the sovereignty of all Member States, worried that any precedent for involvement in domestic affairs could be used against China itself.

**The European Union (EU):** the 27 Member States of the EU and their allies like Australia and Canada, strongly support universal rule of law, norms and principles

---

<sup>22</sup> "Children, Not Soldiers"

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers/>

<sup>23</sup> "African Union Summit: SRSO for Children and Armed Conflict Calls for Increased Cooperation in

Preventing Grave Violations Against Children." 11 February 2020.

<sup>24</sup> "ACT to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict"

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/act-to-protect-children-affected-by-armed-conflict/>



that extend to all countries, even themselves and their allies. They strongly support new initiatives and are willing to fund them, within limits of currently budgeted funds. But they demand that any assistance programs must be fully accountable, conditional on proper and through accountability and evaluation. They will not just throw money away on corrupt or poor performing practices.

**France** has praised efforts already undertaken to confront this issue, particularly the Paris Principles. Work still needs to be undertaken to raise awareness to generate more state interest. The MRM should be given more authority to monitor areas of conflict.

**The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** the 120 Member States of the UN's largest voting bloc, dominating Africa, Asia and Latin America, welcomes action to help all victims of armed violence, especially children. NAM states are especially supportive of financial assistance from former colonial and wealthy countries, assistance that will allow them to meet their needs for children. But they oppose donor restrictions on how such aid can be used, what they view as an infringement on their sovereignty. Many NAM Member States are highly supportive of measures to help the people and children of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

**Russia** maintains that while respecting national sovereignty, international assistance is needed to help states remove children from conflict. Russia has already taken care of its own children affected by

conflict and supports other states to undertake the same actions. Above all, efforts should be taken to reintegrate the children into society.

Russia is extremely supportive of measures directed against Israel in its illegal occupation and war in Palestine. But Russia will oppose measures that could be used against its own freedom of action in its Special Military Operation in Ukraine.

**The United Kingdom** stress that the impact of war upon children needs to be included within any discussion of conflict resolution. More work is needed on the *post-conflict reinterrogation of children*.

**The United States** acknowledges that children are often overlooked in a discussion on conflict resolution. Conflict resolution in general will remove children from harm, but more work needs to be completed to find ways to assist children during conflicts. The United States favors measures to investigate victimization of children by Russia in its war in Ukraine. But the United States will strive to ensure that any UN response cannot be used against Israel.

### Possible Proposals for the UN General Assembly

While the UN Security Council works on specific conflict and their specific effects on children, there is a need for more general work of the kind the General Assembly specializes in. The general Assembly is best establishing universal principles for all 193



## Addressing the needs of children in conflict



Member States, and general mechanisms all can apply.

As such the General Assembly can increase its efforts to advance the cause of removing children from conflict and preventing them from becoming child soldiers. This can be accomplished by incorporating the stances of member states on the issue into new resolutions.

All new resolutions should follow these principles:

- **Future discussion of conflict and conflict resolution** need to ensure that the plight of children are given account. Decisions should not be made assuming all of the parties are adults. Children need more representation when examining conflict.
- **A greater emphasis on the reintegration of children into their societies.** After children are removed from conflict zones, they need support to heal their physical and psychological scars. Educational and social support needs to be provided for them so they can reach their fullest potential. The General Assembly can form new strategies to encourage states to provide rehabilitative care.
- **The General Assembly should supplement the Security Council's work** by continuing to research this issue. In the decades between reports, more conflicts begin, and another generation of children are thrown into jeopardy. The research should be goal oriented with the aim of drafting new resolutions based on the findings.

Some specific possible proposals to be considered:

- **Establish a new, dedicated UN investigatory office** to ensure that all allegation of victimization of children in armed conflict are thoroughly investigated. This could join or replace the existing *Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism*, with greater powers to bring issues to the attention of Member States, the UN Secretary-General or even the International Criminal Court.

The terms of reference for the new office—the guidance on where and when it works—will be especially important and could be controversial. This will be strongly supported by Member States who feel their people, or the people they support, have been victimized by attacks. It will be opposed by Member States who fear the office could be used against them or their allies. For example, supporters of Russia will not allow an office that could be used against Russia, just as supporters of Israel will try to block an office that could harm Israeli interests.

- **Create a new UN agency responsible for serving the special needs of children affected by armed conflict.** It could provide services like medical and psychological treatment of victims,





## Addressing the needs of children in conflict



help parents reunite with children separated in conflict, and direct aid where it is needed most.

After children are removed from conflict zones, they need support to heal their physical and psychological scars. Educational and social support needs to be provided for them so they can reach their fullest potential. The General Assembly can form new strategies to encourage states to provide rehabilitative care.

A major problem to be resolved is where the new agency will be allowed to work. Formally

declared wars are few. Can it work in any conflict it sees fit? Or can the member States control when it works it on their territory, allowing host countries a veto over its operations?

Another major question for a new office is funding. Where will the money come from? If the new agency is delivering humanitarian assistance, Member States must find the money. Will it come by reducing funding to current humanitarian programs? Will specific member States offer to support it? Without funding, not much can be done.



### Bibliography

“About Us.” Children and Armed Conflict. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/about/>

“ACT to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict”  
<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/act-to-protect-children-affected-by-armed-conflict/>

African Union Summit: SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict Calls for Increased Cooperation in Preventing Grave Violations Against Children. 11 February 2020.  
<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2020/02/african-union-summit-srsg-for-children-and-armed-conflict-calls-for-increased-cooperation-in-preventing-grave-violations-against-children/>

Bellamy, Carol. “The State of the World’s Children.” London: Oxford University Press, 1997.  
<https://www.unicef.org/media/84761/file/SOWC-1997.pdf>

“Children, Not Soldiers” <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers/>

‘Children Simply Have No Role in Conflict’, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Launching New Protection Guidelines for Mediators, Negotiators. Security Council, Meetings Coverage. 8721<sup>st</sup> Meeting (AM), SC/14107, 12 February 2020.  
<https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14107.doc.htm>

“Convention on the Rights of the Child.” General Assembly Resolution 44/25. 20 November 1989. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

“‘Dire Year’ for Children in Conflict, as Hospital and School Attacks Double.” UN News: Global Perspectives Human Stories. 27 June 2023.  
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1138137>

“Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine: Children in Armed Conflict.” Regional information Centre for Western Europe. 20 November 2023. <https://unric.org/en/gaza-sudan-ukraine-children-in-armed-conflict/>

Hall, Jonathan and Abeer S. Ahmad. “Child Development and resilience in war, conflict and displacement. Stockholm International Peace Research institute. 9 May 2022.  
<https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2022/child-development-and-resilience-war-conflict-and-displacement>



## Addressing the needs of children in conflict



“Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.” A/RES/54/263. 25 May 2000. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/optional-protocol/>

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optional\\_Protocol\\_on\\_the\\_Involvement\\_of\\_Children\\_in\\_Armed\\_Conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optional_Protocol_on_the_Involvement_of_Children_in_Armed_Conflict)

Progress and Challenges for Children Living in Armed Conflict. UNICEF Fact Sheet. 28 June 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/media/123091/file/25%20Years%20Children%20in%20Armed%20Conflict%20fact%20sheet%20EN.pdf>

“Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.” A/51/306. August 1996. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N96/219/55/PDF/N9621955.pdf?OpenElement>

“Special Representative of the Secretary-General.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special\\_Representative\\_of\\_the\\_Secretary-General](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Representative_of_the_Secretary-General)

“The Paris Principles: The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.” United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. February 2007. <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>

“The Rights of the Child. A/RES/51/77. 20 February 1997. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N97/768/37/PDF/N9776837.pdf?OpenElement>

UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122262>

UNICEF. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNICEF>