Save the Children

STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN

KILLED AND MAIMED:
A generation of violations
against children in conflict

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their potential.

In more than 100 countries, we help children stay safe, healthy and keep learning. We lead the way on tackling big problems like pneumonia, hunger and protecting children in war, while making sure each child's unique needs are cared for.

We know we can't do this alone. Together with children, partners and supporters, we work to help every child become whoever they want to be.

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Previous reports on the war on children
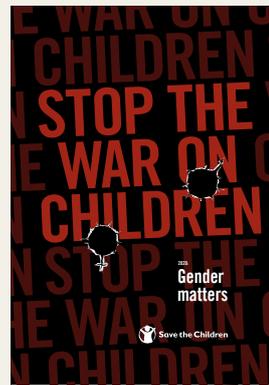
Stop the war on children – gender matters, 2020

Stop the war on children – protecting children in 21st century conflict, 2019

The war on children – time to end grave violations against children in conflict, 2018

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FOREWORD

In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 has marked another defining moment for children living in conflict. UN data revealed that in the past decade more than 93,000 children have been killed or maimed in conflict. While the causes of these deaths and injuries are manifold,[1] one dominant trend has been the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.

In 2021 states will come together to agree a new political declaration, led by Ireland, to recognise the humanitarian harm of these weapons and how increasingly they define modern conflict. Much hinges on these kinds of initiatives. Their relative success or failure helps determine whether or not in the decade to come another 100,000 children will be killed and maimed. It is our hope that all governments will fully engage with the new declaration. And that they will champion its aspiration to turn international humanitarian law into a lived reality for millions of children around the world.

Killing and maiming are visible and obvious consequences of conflict. But they are not the only ones. In 2020 the UN reported the highest-ever number of verified grave violations against children, with more than 26,000 incidents recorded the previous year. And in the 15 years since the UN started recording in 2005, more than 250,000 violations against children have been verified. Let's not lose sight of the fact that each violation represents a child killed, maimed, recruited, abducted or sexually abused, or large groups of children denied aid or whose schools and hospitals have come under attack.

Yet in 2020 the Children and Armed Conflict agenda at the UN fell far short of delivering greater scrutiny of those responsible for these violations.

Despite evidence and verification of violations against children, parties to conflict in Myanmar and Yemen found political pressure on them ease rather than increase, as they were removed from the UN Secretary-General's annual report.[2] And despite the UN Secretary-General's call for a COVID-19 inspired global ceasefire, in many places fighting escalated.[3]

Never in history has there been such awareness of children's rights, nor more knowledge of how to prevent harm and support children to recover from conflict. However, this awareness has yet to translate into sustained, collective action. Never in history have there been so many verified violations perpetrated against children.

The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest global upheaval of our generation. But children's rights, in conflict and in peace, are non-derogable – they are not contingent on COVID-19 and its impacts. They cannot be cancelled or paused.

At the same time, the pandemic is having an impact on every child. Those most affected are the children who are most marginalised. And as we have seen in 2020, for children displaced by or living in conflict, who are among the most vulnerable children in the world, the impact of COVID-19 on economies, humanitarian access, education, protection, and health and nutrition can be dramatic. Their rights are a cornerstone of our collective humanity and litmus test as to the state of our civilisation.

Together we must do everything we can to stop this war on children.

Inger Ashing
Chief Executive Officer,
Save the Children International

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today millions of children are on the frontlines of conflict. Despite progress in some areas, the trends over recent years are of increasing violations, increasing numbers of children affected by conflict and increasingly protracted crises. While 2020 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that should not be allowed to mask the red flags signalling the devastation conflict is having on children's lives.

This report sets out the full extent of the war on children:

- Since 2005, more than 250,000 violations against children have been verified in the UN's annual reports on the situation of children in armed conflict. Of these, 106,000 (42%) related to the killing and maiming of children.
- Since 2010, the equivalent of 25 children a day have been killed or maimed in conflict.
- The number of children living in high-intensity conflicts in 2019 rose by 2% from 2018 to stand at 160 million. A total of 426 million children were found to be living in conflict zones overall in 2019 – the second highest total ever recorded.
- The number of children living in close proximity to the most intense conflict zones rose significantly – up from 4 million to 9 million in 2018–19.
- Explosive weapons[4] accounted for 3,842 (37%) of the 10,294 incidents of killing and maiming of children in 2019 – with the proportion much higher in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

The world must act to stop the war on children. And there's no excuse not to. In 2021 there will be critical opportunities for states and parties to conflict to take concrete actions to better protect and support children in conflict. Governments will be able to lend their support to a declaration avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Donors can ensure that child protection work in conflict is funded in line with other life-saving interventions. Security Council members can use their power to hold perpetrators of grave violations to account. Save the Children calls on states to:

- uphold standards and norms in the conduct of conflict – including protecting education from attack, avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and enabling unimpeded humanitarian access
- hold perpetrators of violations against children to account – including through resourcing international investigative mechanisms, supporting the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism for grave violations against children, and consistently applying political, legal and financial sanctions on perpetrators
- take practical action to protect children and support their recovery – including adequate funding for child protection work, ensuring children have access to quality mental health and psychosocial support and education, and embedding child rights expertise within peacekeeping and political missions.

A full set of recommendations can be found on page 31.

OLEKSANDER, UKRAINE

Oleksander, age eight, lives in a small village close to the frontline of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Five years ago, while he and his family were sleeping, their home was hit by artillery shells. The roof was blown off and Oleksander's older brother was badly hurt when shell fragments were embedded in his hand.

Oleksander was two when it happened. The shelling has had a lasting impact. His father says Oleksander still wakes up at night screaming sometimes during shelling.

Coronavirus has made life even harder. With schools shut, Oleksander has to wait for his mother, who works as a nurse, to return home around 9pm before he can do his homework.

PHOTO: OKSANA PARAFENIUK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

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SHOGOFA, AFGHANISTAN

Shogofa, age nine, was critically wounded when her home in Fayrab province in Afghanistan was hit by a rocket. She suffered severe head injuries and lost several fingers in the blast. Three of her brothers were killed by shrapnel.

Now Shogofa lives in a tent in a camp in Mazar province with her mother, father, sisters and remaining brothers. Her mother suffers from mental illness from the trauma of what she witnessed.

Before the attack, Shogofa used to go to school and she enjoyed playing outside with her friends. Her family had "everything", she says. Now they are very poor. She says they don't even have a plastic bag to burn in their clay oven to cook food.

If the fighting in her home town stops, Shogofa hopes her family will move back and her sisters and brothers can play on the street again. If there is peace, she wants to go back to school to study to become a doctor so she can treat sick people.

PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

CHILDREN IN CONFLICT TODAY

Over the past decade we have witnessed the outbreak of conflict in Syria and Yemen, two waves of horrifying violence in Myanmar, and protracted conflicts in Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Iraq. The conflict in Ukraine has escalated, and the situation for children in the occupied Palestinian territory has continued to deteriorate. Despite a peace accord in 2016, violence in Colombia persists. As we write, children are at the forefront of escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Sahel.

As this litany of conflict suggests, the overall trajectory of violations against children is cause for great alarm. The world must take notice – and act.

In truth, there have been some positive developments. More than 100 states have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration[5] and 110 the Paris Commitments,[6] at least 170 countries have ratified the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict[7] and nearly 100 states have adopted the Vancouver Principles focused on child protection in peacekeeping operations.[8] Clearly, where there is political will, states can come together to set – and deliver – an agenda for protecting children in conflict.

There is evidence too that parties to conflict can change their practice and behaviour and better protect children. Successful UN action plans have been signed and delivered in some conflicts – reducing and eliminating the recruitment and use of children. Handover protocols to limit the military detention of children associated with armed groups have been signed in several places. There is opportunity for change.

Mahmoud, Syria

Mahmoud, age 10, is originally from a village in north-east Syria. His mother says they fled their village ten years ago due to shelling. They have lived in several makeshift shelters ever since.

When Mahmoud was nine, he was injured in an airstrike and he lost both his legs, one just above the knee and the other just below. Six months later, his father was killed when the hospital where he was being treated for wounds was shelled.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

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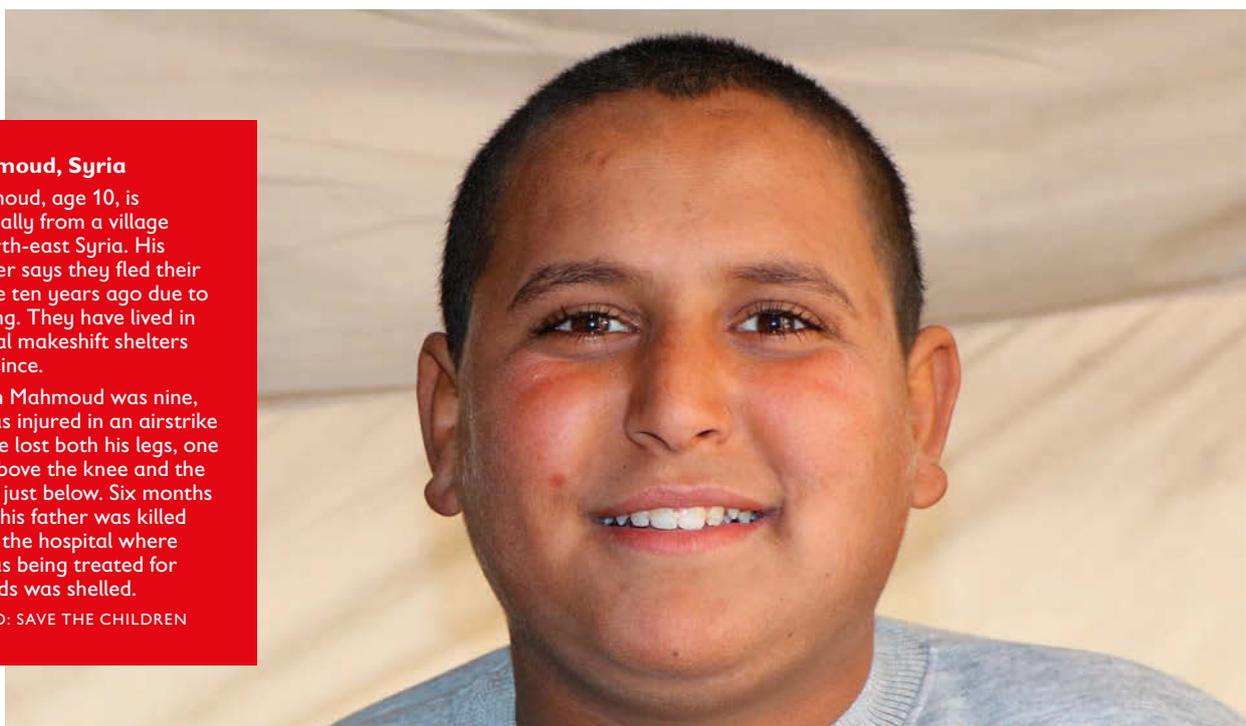
THREE LESSONS IN TACKLING VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

Millions of children in conflict zones around the world are at risk, and tens of thousands of war-time violations affect children every year. Yet the last 20 years have provided some lessons for where to invest resources and energy to protect children.

One lesson is that specific commitments by warring parties – whether binding or voluntary – can have significant impact. For example, the treaties banning landmines and cluster munitions have propelled dramatic changes in the use of these weapons, which disproportionately kill and maim children. No state party to the cluster munitions treaty has used the weapon since the treaty's adoption in 2008, and casualties due to cluster munitions in 2018 were just a third of the 2016 number. Similarly, the mine ban treaty has achieved nearly universal compliance among states, saving since its adoption in 1997 tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of lives. The 2015 Safe Schools Declaration, though non-binding, has also prompted positive change. Since its adoption, the UN has recorded each year a decrease in the number of incidents of military use of schools globally.

Similarly, action plans negotiated by the UN with parties to armed conflict – a centrepiece of the UN's children and armed conflict agenda – have prompted state and non-state actors alike to cease violations against children. Of the 32 action plans signed to date, 12 have been fully implemented. One recent example is the Nigerian government's Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which signed an action plan to end its recruitment and use of children in 2017. Since then, no new cases of child recruitment or use by the group have been verified, and the CJTF has separated more than 2,200 children from its ranks.

Cynics sometimes dismiss such agreements as little more than "words on paper", but these examples underline the importance of concrete commitments to protect children – whether through international treaties, political declarations or bilateral agreements negotiated through the UN. Given the devastating toll explosive weapons with wide-area effects have on children in populated areas, efforts to achieve a declaration to prohibit the use of such weapons could be a crucial investment to save the lives of many children.

A second lesson is that individual governments can exert strategic influence over warring parties, particularly in relation to their security relationships. The United States Congress, for example, adopted a ground-breaking law in 2008 to prohibit military assistance to governments implicated in the recruitment or use of child soldiers. Although neither President Obama nor President Trump fully utilised the law, the actual or threatened withdrawal of US military training and other assistance helped reduce child recruitment and use by Congolese and Chadian national forces, as well as Rwanda's support for the abusive armed group M23.[*] If all countries prohibited security assistance to parties that commit grave violations against children, violators would have a strong incentive to change their behaviour.

Finally, individuals need to be held accountable for violations against children. Until the late 1990s, it was virtually unheard of for authorities to prosecute or punish individuals responsible for child recruitment or other violations against children in armed conflict. Some governments now discipline or prosecute individuals for child recruitment or sexual violence against children. The International Criminal Court and Special Court for Sierra Leone have convicted high-profile individuals, such as the Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga and former Liberian president Charles Taylor, for the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Yet accountability efforts are often still too weak or too few to ensure effective compliance with international law, and rarely focus on the senior commanders most responsible.

There is no magic formula to end all violations against children in war. But as described above, three strategic interventions can make a big difference:
- securing concrete commitments by warring parties to end violations against children, including the use of the most harmful weapons in populated areas
- applying strict conditions on security assistance
- stepping up efforts to hold individual perpetrators accountable.

By Jo Becker, Child Rights Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch

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[*] Human Rights Watch (2013) 'Unbroken Violence in Congo: A brutal militia has surrendered in Congo – but is the wartorn country any safer?' (webpage) https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/25/unbroken-violence-congo

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

While leaders, policymakers, practitioners and armed actors themselves must not lose sight of the progress – and sometimes lack of it – of recent decades, in this specific moment it is hard to look much further than the impact of COVID-19 on children in armed conflict. While the numbers of grave violations discussed in this report relate to 2019 and pre-date COVID-19, it is essential to situate a collective response to violations of children's rights in conflict in the context of the pandemic.

While as a direct health concern COVID-19 may not affect children to the extent it does adults, the reverberating effects – including loss of life within households, economic shocks, access to services, movement restrictions, and political and financial reprioritisation from donors and governments – have significant implications. For example, a recent Save the Children global study found that in nearly a fifth of households that lost most or all of their income as a result of the pandemic, violence against children was reported.[9] In July, the UN Secretary-General warned that COVID-19 was quickly becoming a protection crisis.[10] There has been a simultaneous rise in risks to children everywhere – not just in conflict – and a limiting effect on the response systems in place to protect and support them.[11]

Equally, more violence was reported in households where children were not in school – with 17% of households reporting some violence where children were not attending any education compared with 8% where schools were open.[12] Reduced access to services – particularly education – is arguably the most widespread and concerning effect of COVID-19 for children. As a result of lockdowns, limits on movements, repurposing of education facilities and the economic impact of COVID-19, Save the Children estimates as many as 10 million children may never go back to school. This will disproportionately affect girls and those already in crises.[13]

COVID-19 has also exacerbated food insecurity – both in its impact on income and on food systems more broadly. This is especially the case for countries affected by armed conflict. Currently four countries face the prospect of famine – Nigeria, Yemen, South Sudan and DRC. Globally 6.7 million more children than otherwise anticipated could experience wasting by the end of 2020.[14]

While some of these effects are universal, COVID-19 has had a unique impact on children in conflict. Out of 26 Protection Clusters,[15] 21 reported escalating conflict or political instability since the outbreak of the pandemic.[16] This includes a 30% increase in targeting of civilians by state forces and a marked rise in violent activity by non-state armed actors, including a 70% increase in East and West Africa, most particularly DRC, Burkina Faso and South Sudan.[17] Protection Clusters are also reporting an 11% increase in gang and mob violence across multiple countries since the start of the pandemic. Children are particular victims of increasing violence and instability, with 17 Protection Clusters reporting an increase in forced labour, with recruitment and use of children by armed groups particularly marked in Mali, Afghanistan and Colombia.[18]

Beyond the impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of the 426 million children living in conflict-affected countries, the pandemic could also have a significant impact on the ability of those monitoring and reporting grave violations to scrutinise parties to conflict. While the extent of this is not yet known, its importance is clear. In March 2020, the UN Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire in response to the pandemic.[19] Despite this, from the 14 ceasefire initiatives that were started following the Secretary-General's call, only five ceasefires were agreed – and two of these were breached within weeks.[20] And over the course of 2020, in some of the worst-affected conflict zones, the number of violent incidents is known to have increased. It is therefore essential that monitoring and reporting are supported, protected and enabled.

HOW CONFLICT AFFECTS CHILDREN'S PROTECTION FROM HARM[21]

In peaceful, stable and resourceful societies, children are surrounded by protection mechanisms. Families have the opportunity to protect their children from harm, communities respect children's rights and the wider society limits the dangers children are exposed to. In this scenario, illustrated in the diagram opposite, serious threats to children's rights and wellbeing are, for the most part, not able to penetrate the protective circles surrounding children.
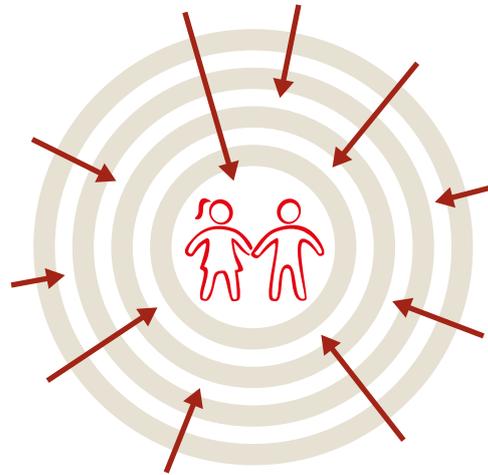
In situations of conflict, growing humanitarian needs, displacement and insecurity weaken the shields surrounding and protecting children. At the same time, threats increase.
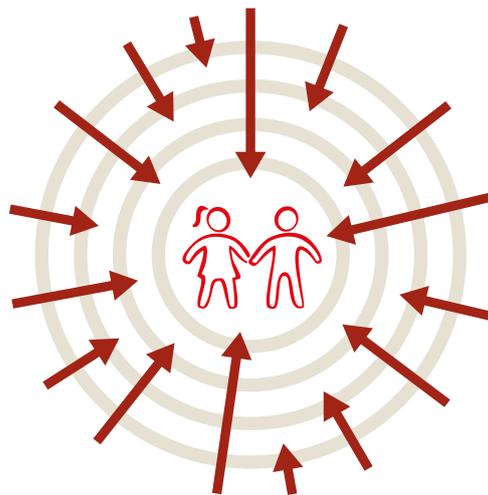
The COVID-19 crisis further stretches protection mechanisms, with families, communities and societies weakened, while the threats to children have become stronger. This trend is particularly prominent in high-intensity conflict and where humanitarian needs are increasing.

GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

While acknowledging the huge impact of COVID-19 in 2020, international attention must also focus on the deteriorating situation regarding grave violations against children in conflict – as reflected in the reporting for 2019. Yet again, the number of UN verified violations[22] reached a new high at 26,233 – up from the previous record total of 25,451 in 2018.[23] Since 2010, the total number of violations is more than 200,000. Each of those violations represents a failure to uphold the laws, norms and standards that exist to protect children. Repeated violations and the impunity of those responsible constitute greater failures still. Worryingly, while some of the increase is a result of better reporting, the verified cases are still likely only the tip of the iceberg.

In 2019, incidences of two out of the six violations increased from 2018 – the recruitment and use of children, and denial of humanitarian access. There were slight decreases in verified incidents of sexual violence, abduction, and attacks on schools and hospitals. The sharpest decline from the year before was in killing and maiming. Nevertheless, at 10,294 reported incidents, it remains appallingly high. The highest number of violations overall were verified in the occupied Palestinian territory, Yemen, DRC, Somalia and Afghanistan.

In addition to the total number of violations since 2010 exceeding 200,000, 2019 saw another dismal milestone. Between 2005 and 2019, more than 100,000 children were killed or maimed. Over the decade from 2010 to 2019, the total was 93,236. That represents 25 children killed or maimed every day for 10 years.

In 2017, Save the Children analysed the available data for civilian harm in five of the deadliest conflicts for children. We found that approximately a quarter of child casualties were the result of explosive weapons.[24] According to the UN Secretary-General's 2020 annual report on children and armed conflict, a third of all incidents of killing and maiming were the result of explosive weapons, with the use of these weapons especially prominent in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Further, according to open source reporting, 90% of people killed in populated areas by explosive weapons from 2011–19 were civilians.[25]

Abdul, Afghanistan
Abdul, age nine, witnessed his mother and sister get injured when their family home in Afghanistan's Faryab province was caught in crossfire between government forces and insurgents. The family was displaced and settled in Mazar-e Sharif. Abdul has to join his father when he finds work, or work with wool at his family home. He doesn't go to school.

PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

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WHY THE UN'S LIST OF SHAME WORKS

The UN Secretary-General has presented an annual report on the situation of children affected by armed conflict to the UN General Assembly since 1998 and to the Security Council since 2000. The main purpose of the report has been to draw the attention of UN Member States to grave violations against children and the perpetrators. With its Resolution 1379 and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, the Security Council mandated the Secretary-General to include in his annual reports a list of warring parties that have committed grave violations against children. This has become known as the list of shame.

Not surprisingly, most parties to conflict – especially government forces – do not want to be included on the list, and it has served as a powerful tool for protecting children in armed conflict. It provides a key first step towards accountability by clearly identifying those parties responsible for committing grave violations. The mechanism also serves as a foundation for the UN to dialogue with warring parties, secure concrete commitments to end and prevent violations through the signing of action plans, and create positive, tangible changes for children in the throes of war.

The mechanism derives its power to influence change from the premise that the listings be grounded on evidence collected and rigorously verified by the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), and that the same criteria for listing and de-listing be applied evenly to all perpetrators – whether they are government forces, non-state armed groups, international coalition forces or even peacekeepers – across all country situations.

In recent years, however, the process for determining which perpetrators are included in the Secretary-General's list of shame has become increasingly politicised. In 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres removed the coalition led by Saudi Arabia from his list, despite the UN's own findings that the coalition had killed or maimed 222 children in Yemen in 2019 alone. Similarly, the Tatmadaw was de-listed for recruiting and using children in Myanmar, although the UN had recorded the recruitment and use of at least 205 children by the government forces in 2019.

The Secretary-General's failure to apply the same standards across all perpetrators who commit grave violations not only undermines the credibility of the report, it undercuts its power to influence parties to conflict, promote compliance with applicable international law, and create meaningful impact for affected children. Without an accurate and evidence-based list, the Security Council is hampered in its efforts to protect children and hold perpetrators accountable.

Secretary-General Guterres and his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, should resist political pressure and ensure that the list of shame is based on the UN's findings on the ground. In order to restore its credibility, they should initiate a rigorous and transparent due diligence procedure to ensure that in future the annexes of the annual report accurately and consistently reflect the evidence collected and verified by the MRM. They should communicate to stakeholders, including member states, UN entities, and civil society, how this procedure will be implemented in order to avoid the disparities and inconsistencies seen in the 2020 report and previous years. Only with a credible, evidence-based list can the UN effectively address grave violations against children in armed conflict and hold all perpetrators to account.

By Adrianne Lapar, Director,
Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

1

KILLING AND MAIMING OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

BOYS AND GIRLS
(total 10,294 in 2019)

Girls **22%** Boys **72%** Unknown **6%**
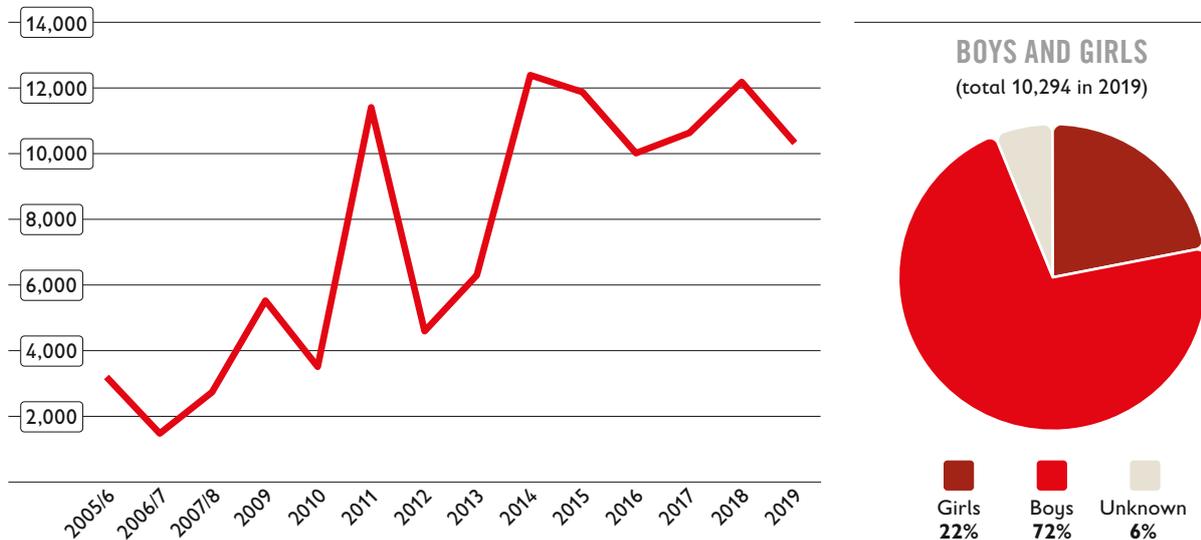
No other grave violation has been verified at the scale of killing and maiming. Although the 2019 total of 10,294 is lower than the highest recorded years (2011, 2014 and 2018), it takes the total number since 2005 to 106,000. This is more than 40% of all the violations ever verified by the UN in the annual reports on Children and Armed conflict.

Of the incidents of killing and maiming verified in the UN Secretary-General's 2020 report, more than a third were caused by explosive weapons (37%) – with the number dramatically higher in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – and 72% related to boys. The reasons for the high proportion of boys could include both different reporting behaviours and gender norms that mean boys and girls are exposed to different risks. For instance, boys may be more likely to be associated with armed groups or may spend more time in public spaces, increasing their exposure to armed conflict. By contrast, girls may find themselves more restricted to the private sphere, in turn affecting both the nature and the visibility of violations against them.[26]

Afghanistan accounts for the greatest number of killing and maiming violations, with 874 children killed and 2,275 children maimed in 2019 – 30% of the total number of children killed and maimed across all the conflict situations covered in the report. This total of 3,149 – a 3% increase from 2018 – takes the number children killed or maimed in Afghanistan since the UN started collecting this data in 2005 to 26,025. The annual total has now been above 3,000 for four consecutive years. Of those killed and maimed in 2019, more than two-thirds were boys (71%), and 72% overall were as a result of ground engagements between pro- and anti-government forces or of improvised explosive devices in both suicide and non-suicide attacks.

FIGURE 1

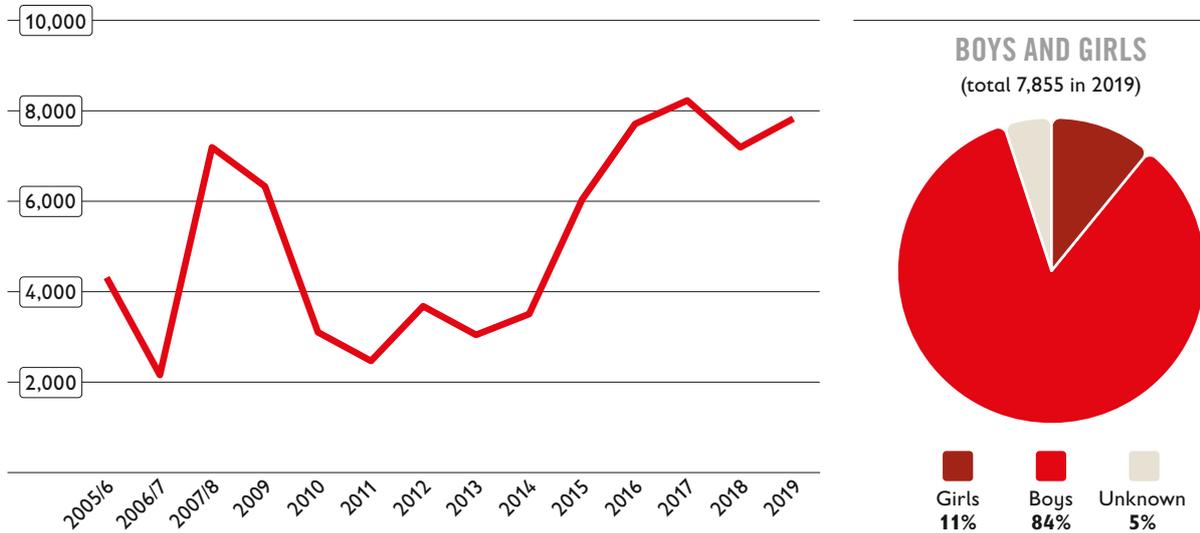**The verified number of children killed and maimed in conflict has risen dramatically over the last 15 years**

One of the greatest increases of verified incidents of killing and maiming in 2019 was in Mali where there was a 130% rise in the number of children killed and maimed. The number of children killed rose more sharply than those maimed, more than doubling from 77 to 185 between 2018 and 2019.

As in Afghanistan, a higher proportion of the children killed and maimed in Mali were boys (60%). This was also the case for Myanmar (67%), where child casualties nearly tripled in 2019 and children as young as six months were verified by the UN to have been killed or maimed. There was also an increase in Iraq, albeit smaller, from 132 in 2018 to 141 in 2019. Of these almost half were due to explosive remnants of war in areas previously under the control of ISIL – testament to the long-reaching, serious harm these weapons can have.

Some of the greatest decreases in child casualties were in Nigeria and bordering regions in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Here there was a large drop from 432 in 2018 to 239 in 2019. Similarly, in Somalia and Sudan the number of child casualties also decreased significantly (by 30% and 35% respectively).

A smaller decline was seen in Yemen and Syria, but numbers remain high. In Syria 897 children were killed and 557 were maimed, taking the total number of child fatalities there since 2012 above 9,000. Nearly 1,500 children were killed and maimed in Yemen in 2019. Similarly, in the occupied Palestinian territory, the number remains persistently high, with 1,539 children maimed and more than 30 killed. ●

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2

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN BY ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS

BOYS AND GIRLS
(total 7,855 in 2019)

Girls **11%** Boys **84%** Unknown **5%**

■ Although the number of children recruited and used by armed forces in 2019 rose by 639 from 2018 to 7,845 in 2019, this was still slightly below the highest recorded number in 2017 (8,235). 90% of these violations were carried out by non-state armed actors. These violations occurred in 16 out of the 20 conflict situations reported on in the UN Secretary-General's annual report.

The youngest child reported to have been recruited in 2019 was 6 years old. And in Yemen 20% of recruited children were under the age of 15. Across all countries, 6,632 (84%) of the verified violations in 2019 involved boys, with 866 (11%) involving girls. For 357 cases (5%) the children's gender was unknown.

Geographically, the largest number of verified cases of recruitment and the use of children was in African countries, which accounted for approximately 66% of cases. Within the region, 3,107 were verified for DRC – the highest-ever recorded number for a single conflict-affected country and representing 40% of the global total. However, it is important to note that many of these cases occurred in earlier years but were only verified upon the children's release – sometimes as adults – in 2019. This pattern of recruitment and use occurring before 2019 but only reported in that year can be seen across a number of countries. This includes Central African Republic (CAR), where cases more than doubled from 75 in 2018 to 208 in 2019, and Mali, where the number of children rose from 114 to 215. In Nigeria, 516 of the 667 incidents verified in 2019 were for previous years.

FIGURE 2

The verified number of children recruited and used by armed forces is rising

Despite this, reported cases also show that the recruitment and use of children continued at scale in many countries in 2019. Nearly 20% of the global total occurred in Somalia, where in 2019 there were 1,495 verified cases. While an extremely high figure, it represents a significant reduction from 2,300 in 2018 and is the lowest number of cases since 2015, when 903 cases were reported. Similarly, in Myanmar cases tripled in 2019 from 88 to 247 – the highest total since 2013, and including children as young as 12. South Sudan saw a 65% increase in 2019 – up to 161 cases. While much lower than the 2015 total of almost 2,600 cases, the rise in cases in 2019 is alarming.

In Lebanon there was almost a doubling in the number of verified cases, with 43 children aged 11–17 recruited by armed groups, the country's highest-ever recorded number. In Yemen, there was a rise of 316 in 2019 to a total of 686. The majority of these children were used in combat roles – as was the case in Syria, where 97% of the 820 children recruited were used in combat roles.

Two positive developments took place regarding this violation in 2019. In Iraq there was a reduction of 90% from 2018. And in Colombia the number more than halved from 293 to 107 – the lowest recorded number for Colombia since 2013. ●

BOYS AND GIRLS
(total 749 in 2019)

Girls
98%

Boys
2%
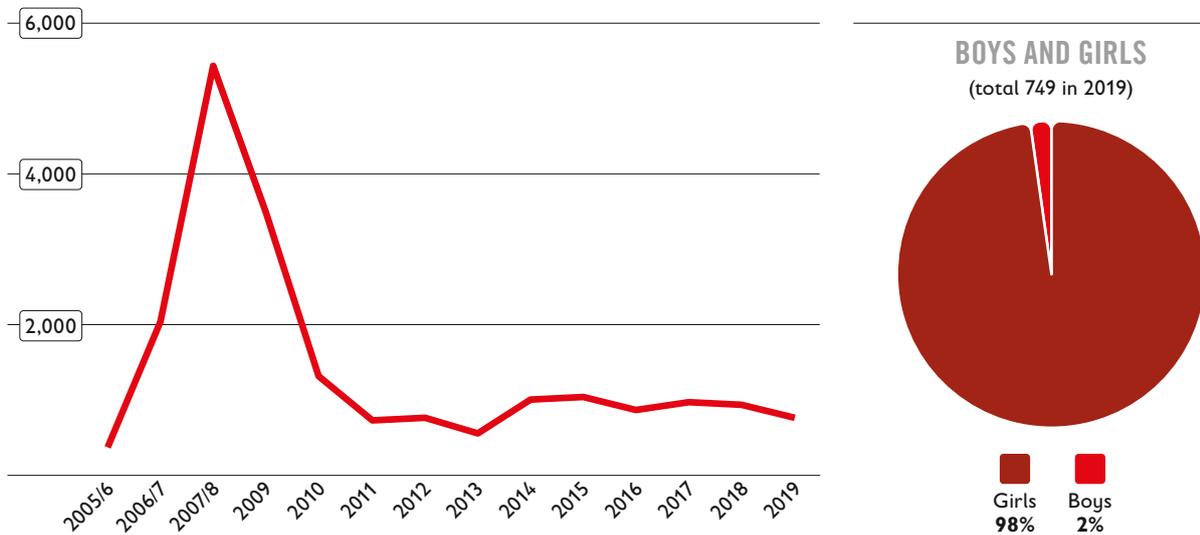
■ Perhaps more than any other violation, the number of verified incidents of rape and sexual violence against children in the UN Secretary-General's annual report is likely to represent only a fraction of total cases. Access, stigma and difficulty monitoring and reporting such violations mean that many incidents are not captured and/or recorded. Despite this, 749 cases were verified in 2019. Of these, 98% were committed against girls, and the cases attributed to state actors almost doubled from 2018.

The highest number of verified violations in 2019 were in DRC where 249 cases were reported – one-third of the global total. All of these involved girls, some of whom were used for sexual slavery. Since 2005, 9,858 verified cases – almost half of the total cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence across the conflict situations – have taken place in DRC.

FIGURE 3

Verified cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict are far higher among girls

Somalia had the second highest number of these cases in 2019, with 227 verified violations. As with DRC, this was a reduction from 2018. Most cases involved girls.

The greatest rise of verified cases was in Afghanistan where there were 18 cases in 2019 affecting 13 boys and 5 girls. Further increases were seen in Colombia and CAR, with decreases in Nigeria, Mali, Sudan and South Sudan. A small number of cases were verified in Syria (11) and Yemen (4), and three violations committed in 2014 were verified in Iraq during this reporting period.

"I WAS IN PAIN AND SORROW" LYDIA'S STORY

"The rebels caught me and raped me. I was 15 years old.

"When I came home from school and I couldn't find my mother, I started searching for her. This is when the group found me and defiled me. Two rebels raped me. After that I told my neighbours that my mother was missing. I left and didn't carry anything from the house. I was in pain and felt sorrow.

"I feel so bad, remembering those things."

Lydia fled from DRC to Uganda. She later found out that, following the rape, she was pregnant. She is now living in a refugee camp with her baby son, Bintu.

PHOTO: ESTHER RUTH MBABAZI/SAVE THE CHILDREN
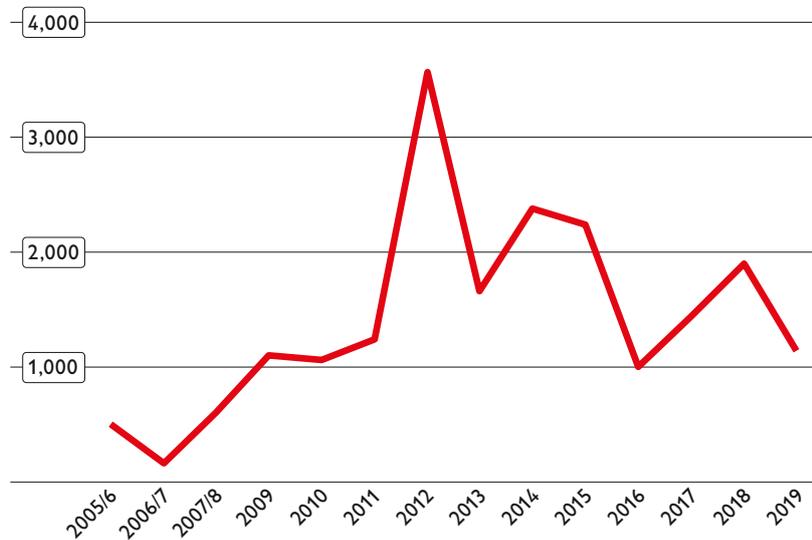
ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

FIGURE 4

2019 saw more than 1,000 verified attacks on schools and hospitals

■ There was a near 40% reduction in the verified number of attacks on schools and hospitals in 2019, falling from 1,892 in 2018 to 1,139. However, attacks by state actors nearly doubled from the previous year, a common feature across a number of the grave violations in the latest report. In total, the report verifies 469 attacks on schools and education personnel, 478 attacks on hospitals and medical personnel, 181 incidents of military use of schools, and 11 incidents of military use of hospitals and medical facilities.

The highest number of attacks on schools and hospitals were verified in Syria with 296 incidents. This is an increase of 44 from 2018, with most of the attacks occurring in Idlib. In the occupied Palestinian territory, 15 schools and 193 hospitals were attacked, and four schools used by military forces. In Afghanistan, 70 schools and 75 hospitals were attacked, and 6 schools and 2 hospitals were used for military purposes.

There was a large increase in attacks on schools and hospitals in Myanmar, up from 8 in 2018 to 63 in 2019. Of these, 12 schools were attacked, and 51 used for military purposes.

The numbers of attacks on schools and hospitals remained relatively constant in Yemen (75), Nigeria (26) and in Sudan (18) in 2019. DRC, Colombia, Iraq, the occupied Palestinian territory, the Philippines, CAR, Mali and Libya saw decreases in these violations. ●

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5

ABDUCTION

BOYS AND GIRLS
(total 1,804 in 2019)

Girls **13%** Boys **80%** Unknown **7%**
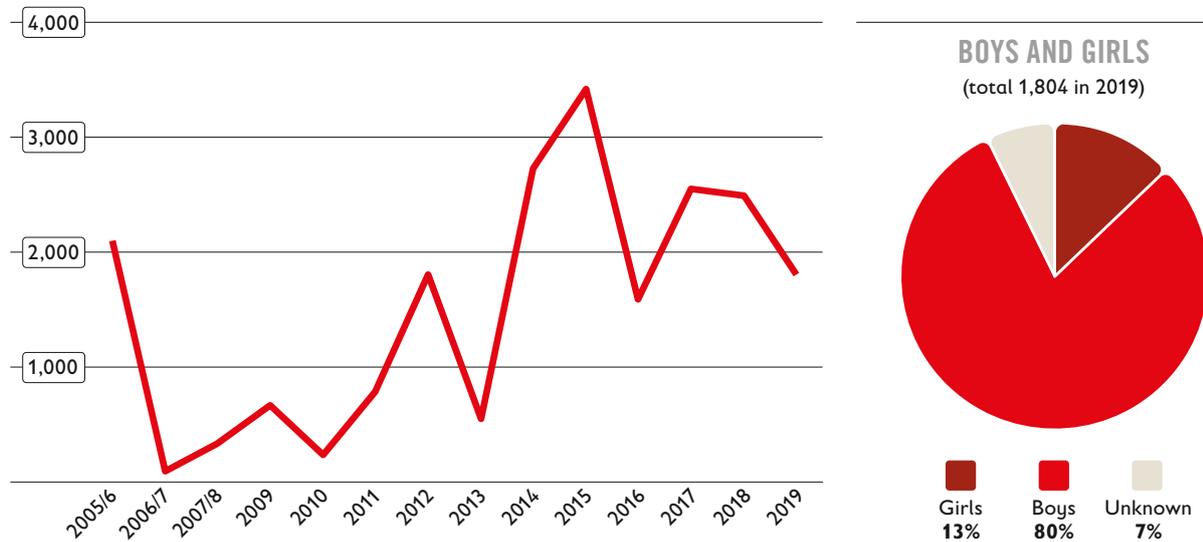
■ In 2019, a total of 1,804 children were abducted[27] across 13 conflict contexts covered by the report – a substantial fall from the 2,500 reported in 2018 and the second consecutive annual reduction. The only increases were in Iraq, Mali and Myanmar.

Over 95% of cases were perpetrated by non-state actors, and the children were abducted for recruitment, sexual violence or ransom – highlighting the intersectionality of the grave violations. Rarely do the violations happen in isolation from each other.

As with many of the other violations, the reported cases overwhelmingly involved boys (80%), with just 13% affecting girls. However, given the challenges of reporting,[28] it is more likely that incidents involving girls are not adequately reflected in these figures rather than not happening.

FIGURE 5

More than 1,800 children were abducted in conflict in 2019

As with the recruitment and use of children, Somalia (1,158), DRC (305) and Nigeria (165) have some of the highest numbers, but in all three cases the numbers fell from 2018. Somalia – which accounts for approximately one-third of all abductions since 2011 – saw the biggest reduction, with the 2019 total 30% lower than the previous year (down from 1,609 in 2018). Of these, the majority were abducted by non-state armed actors for recruitment and use. Similarly, in DRC 70% of cases of abduction were linked to recruitment. ●

6

DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

6,000

4,000

2,000

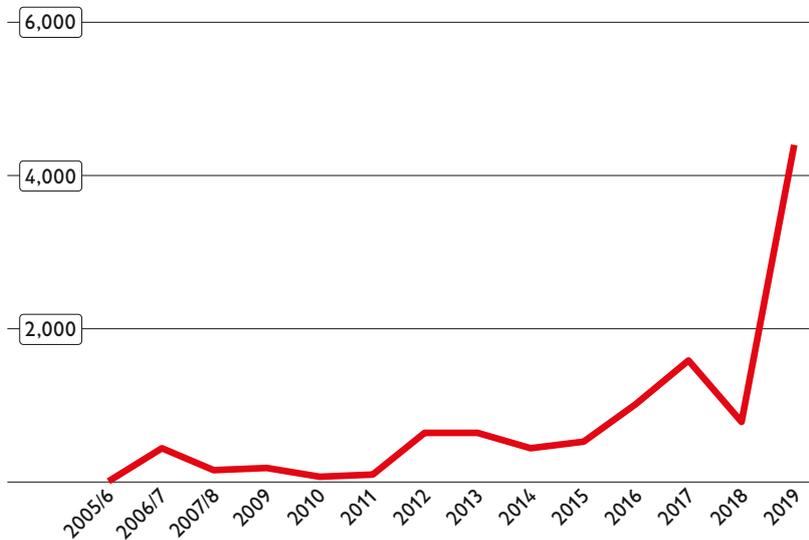2005/6 2006/7 2007/8 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019

FIGURE 6

2019 saw a six-fold rise in the denial of humanitarian access

■ Incidents of humanitarian access being denied to children were almost six times higher in 2019 than 2018 – up from 795 to 4,402. This is by far the highest number ever recorded, and almost three times higher than the previous peak of 1,579 in 2017. The majority of incidents were perpetrated by non-state armed actors. However, bureaucratic barriers and denials – which are not included in these figures – are routinely imposed by states.

The enormous rise in 2019 is largely a result of a six-fold increase in these incidents in Yemen and the inclusion of three additional countries in the UN Secretary-General's 2019 report. In Yemen, the number rose from 275 in 2018 to 1,848 in 2019. These violations in Yemen included restrictions on movement both into and within the country, interference with humanitarian assistance, and violence against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities.

Of the new countries included, the occupied Palestinian territory contributed almost half the global total, with 2,127 children denied or delayed access to specialised care. The other two additional countries to be included for the first time were Sudan, with 3 incidents, and Libya, with 12.

Although decreasing from 2018, verified incidents of denial of humanitarian access remain high in Mali (129), and in Syria (84) where incidents included attacks on water facilities, the removal or blocking of humanitarian supplies, and attacks on humanitarian facilities, transport and personnel.

In Colombia there was a small rise, with 5 verified incidents in 2019, affecting indigenous communities in particular. Armed groups imposed severe movement restrictions, leaving those affected confined and with limited access to crops, health and schools. ●

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DETENTION

■ While not one of the six grave violations, the detention of children for actual or perceived association with armed groups is documented and verified in the UN Secretary-General's annual report for 14 of the 20 countries included. The complexity and severity of these children's experiences warrants specific attention.

The 2019 total of 2,530 violations is a small decrease from 2,574 in 2018. In Iraq, 984 cases were verified and included in the 2019 report, with some of those relating to children as young as nine being detained for their actual or alleged association with armed groups. In Palestine, 527 children were detained for alleged security offences by Israeli forces, and 2 by the de facto authorities in Gaza. 166 of the children who had been detained testified and reported ill-treatment by the Israeli forces, including physical violence and one threat of sexual violence.

High numbers of incidents of detention were also reported for Somalia (236) and Syria (218). In Syria, a group of 172 boys were detained for their alleged association with ISIL. Of these, the youngest boys were nine years old. 150 of this group were Syrian, with 22 of other nationality. In Afghanistan, 146 boys were detained for national security-related charges, and in DRC 111 children were detained for alleged associations with armed groups. Detention of children was also verified in Yemen (97), India (68), Mali (56), Pakistan (35), Lebanon (20), Myanmar (18), Libya (8) and CAR (4). The overwhelming majority of cases related to boys. ●
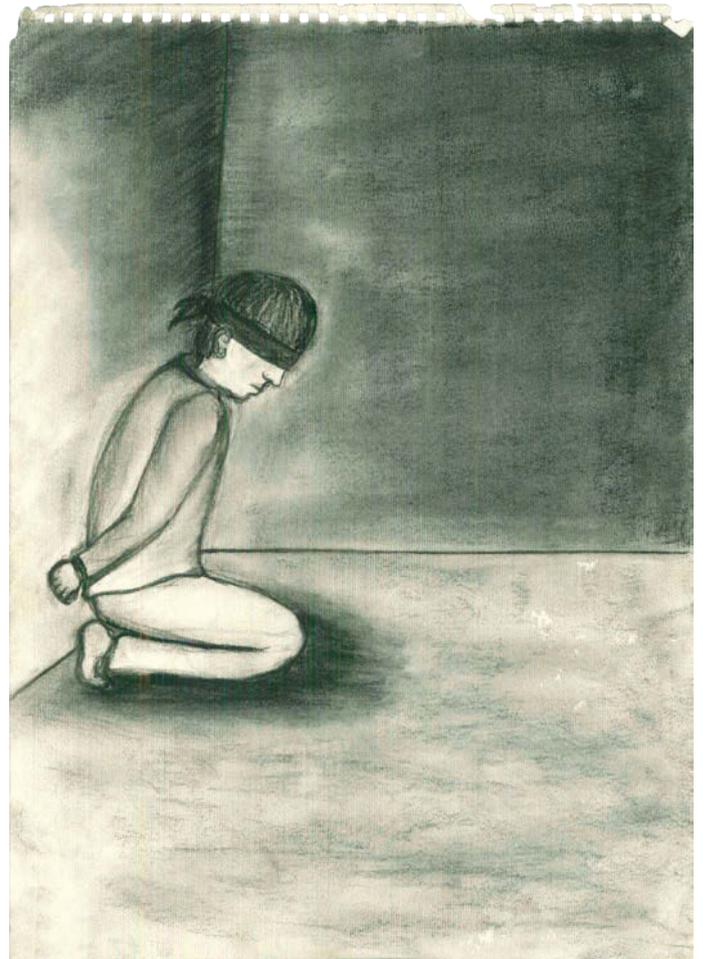
Drawing by a young man from the occupied Palestinian territory portraying his experience of being arrested, aged 17, and held in prison for three and a half months.

"WE SHOULD NOT BE TORTURED": ISSA'S STORY

In 2020, Save the Children surveyed 470 children across the West Bank, to hear about their experience of military detention and to understand its impact on their lives after release.[29] Children reported distressing or violent arrests, a coercive interrogation environment, and physical and emotional abuse in detention – all of which constitute a breach of international law.[30]

Issa, who was arrested when he was 15, said: *"I was arrested when there were clashes outside the school gates. I tried to walk through the clashes quickly, but I was shot in my right leg by a soldier. It hurt so much that I collapsed to the ground. Three soldiers came over and started beating me while I was on the ground bleeding.*

"I was taken to an interrogation centre instead of hospital and I asked to speak to my parents and to have legal advice as I know my rights – but again, they said no. While I was being interrogated, they kept shouting at me, and they put a gun on the table in front of me to intimidate me. They said bad, bad words. I don't want to think about those words. They then pressed on the wound, saying that they wouldn't stop until I confessed. It was the worst pain I've ever felt. I then decided to confess to stop the pain. I said that I threw two stones. I was finally taken to get medical treatment two days after I was shot. They stitched up the wound and gave me a new bandage. It still hurts to this day, two years later.

"After my 'confession', I was sentenced to seven months in prison. Prison was an ugly, ugly place. I don't like to think about it. They would also set off alarms at midnight, 3am and 6am so we could never sleep for long. If you're not awake at these alarms, you will be beaten. I was beaten with wooden sticks a few times. I still have back pain now because of a particularly bad beating.

"Children who have been arrested still have rights, and these rights should be protected. We shouldn't be tortured. We should be allowed an education and a future. All I want is peace and a future. I will work as hard as I can to make both things possible."

2

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED BY CONFLICT?

In 2019, the number of children living in high-intensity conflict zones[31] increased to 160 million – up from 157 million the year before.[32] Similarly, in 2019 the total number of children living near conflict increased by 9 million from 2018 – up to 426 million.[33] This is the second highest number ever recorded[34] and represents nearly one-fifth of the world's children. Within these numbers, the total number of children living in close proximity to the most intense conflict zones more than doubled, from 4 million in 2018 to 9 million in 2019.[35]

Any increase in the number of children at risk of grave violations and the harmful impacts of conflict should be of great collective concern. However,

perhaps even more troubling is the rising, and disproportionate, intensity of conflict for children specifically. While the numbers of grave violations and children living in conflict are increasing, battle-related deaths in general are decreasing. As shown in figure 7, there is no relationship between a year-on-year fall in battle-related deaths and the number of children affected by conflict. Given we know that casualty recording often fails to capture child fatalities,[36] these battle-related deaths likely predominantly relate to adult civilian and combatant deaths. While by this measure conflict is becoming less deadly, the threat to children has dramatically increased.

To add to the complexity, children's exposure to
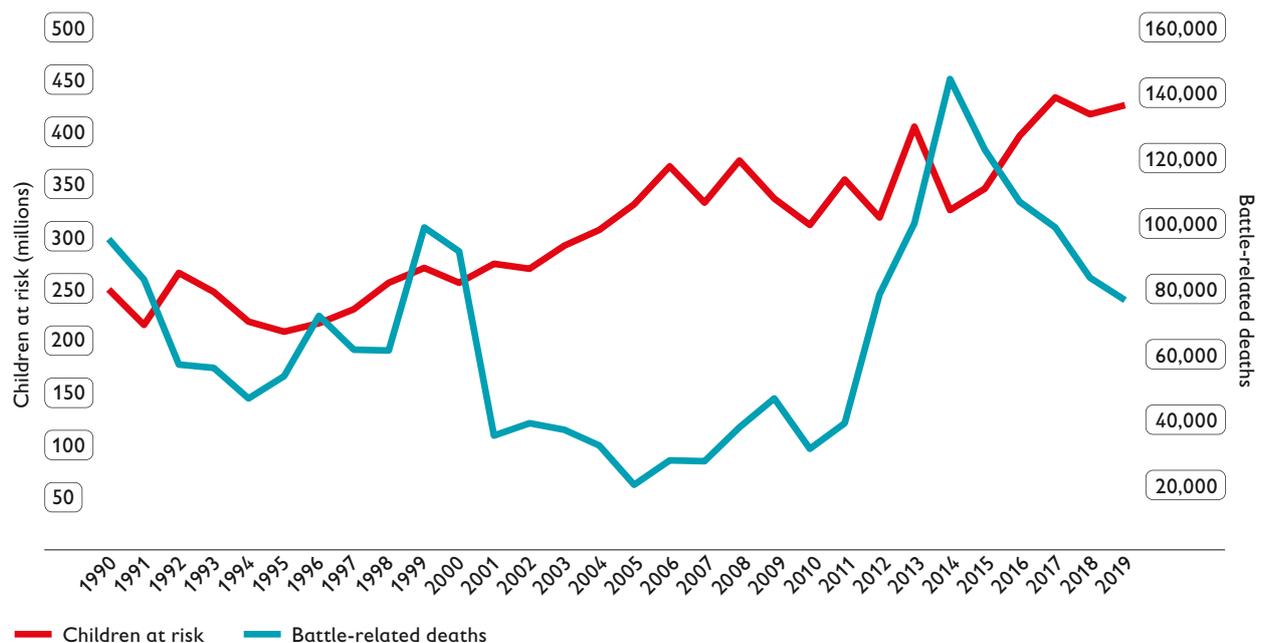

Children at risk   Battle-related deaths

FIGURE 7

While fewer adults are dying in conflict, the number of children at risk has dramatically increased

SOURCE: PRIO'S CALCULATION BASED ON UCDP GED DATASET V.20.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION ESTIMATES

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conflict is not only becoming more prevalent and more intense, it has become far more protracted. Of the most intense conflict zones in 2019,[37] the average duration of conflict was more than 18 years. They range from five years in Burkina Faso to 29 years in Afghanistan.[38] In 2019, more than 3 million children were living in close proximity to violence that had, uninterrupted, been raging for 18 years or more.

Just as within each country there will be variations, there are differences between regions when it comes to the number of children living in conflict zones. While the highest overall number of children living in conflict zones is on the African continent (179 million), the Middle East has the highest proportion of

children – almost 40% – living in a conflict zone. Although this has been the overall picture for a few years, the proportions are fluctuating. In the Middle East there was an 8% rise in the proportion of all children living in conflict in 2019. Similarly, the proportion for Africa has been steadily rising since 2011. The most notable shift in the last three years is in the Americas, where the proportion of children living in conflict has risen from 8% in 2016 to 16% in 2019. In Europe, Ukraine continues to have the most significant number of children – more than 1 million – living in conflict.
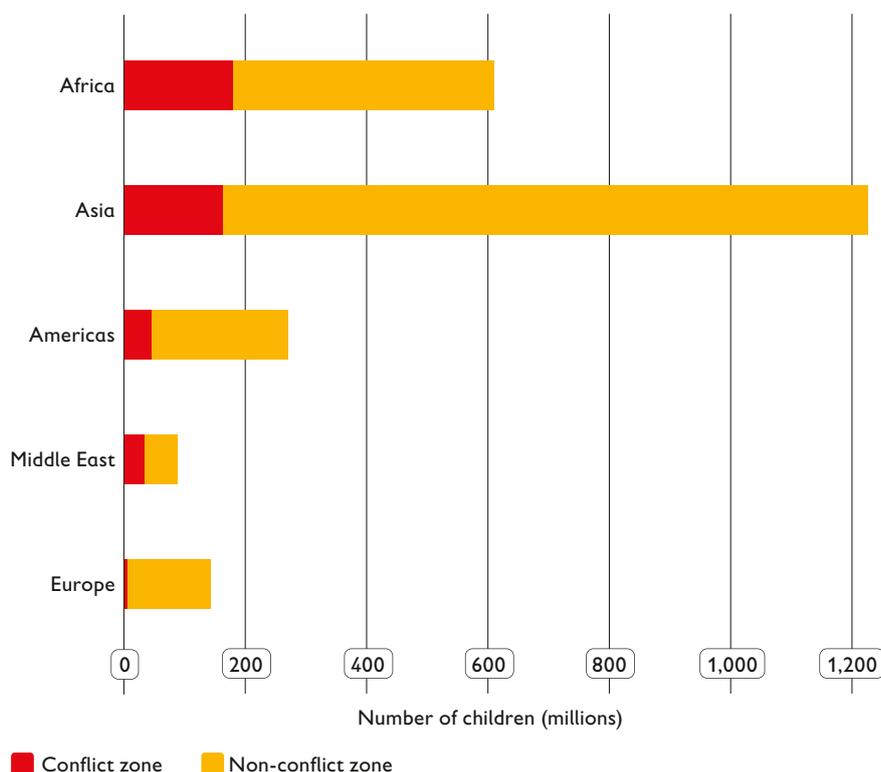

FIGURE 8

While more children in Africa live in a conflict zone than any other region, children in the Middle East are most likely to live in one

SOURCE: PRIO'S CALCULATION BASED ON UCDP GED DATASET V.20.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION ESTIMATES

Number of children (millions)

■ Conflict zone   ■ Non-conflict zone

THE MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES FOR CHILDREN

Children's experience of conflict is not homogenous. Depending on their age, gender, income, mental health, identity and whether they have a disability they will face different risks and have access to different support. Equally, as mentioned earlier, there are regional differences and differences between countries. While we know 160 million children live close to conflict in countries experiencing high-intensity conflicts (see figure 9), we can also see differences within countries. Figure 10 shows some of this difference, with 9 million children close to the most intense conflict zones within countries,[39] 40 million living in medium intensity zones, and 82 million in less intense zones. The remaining 295 million children living in conflict zones are in the least intense zones.

Despite this, taking the number of violations against children verified by the UN, the number of children exposed to conflict, and the number of battle deaths nationally (and as such the intensity of conflict), it is possible to identify the highest-risk countries for children.[40] In 2019, according to our analysis, the 11 most dangerous countries for children in alphabetical order[41] were:

- Afghanistan
- Central African Republic
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Iraq
- Mali
- Nigeria
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
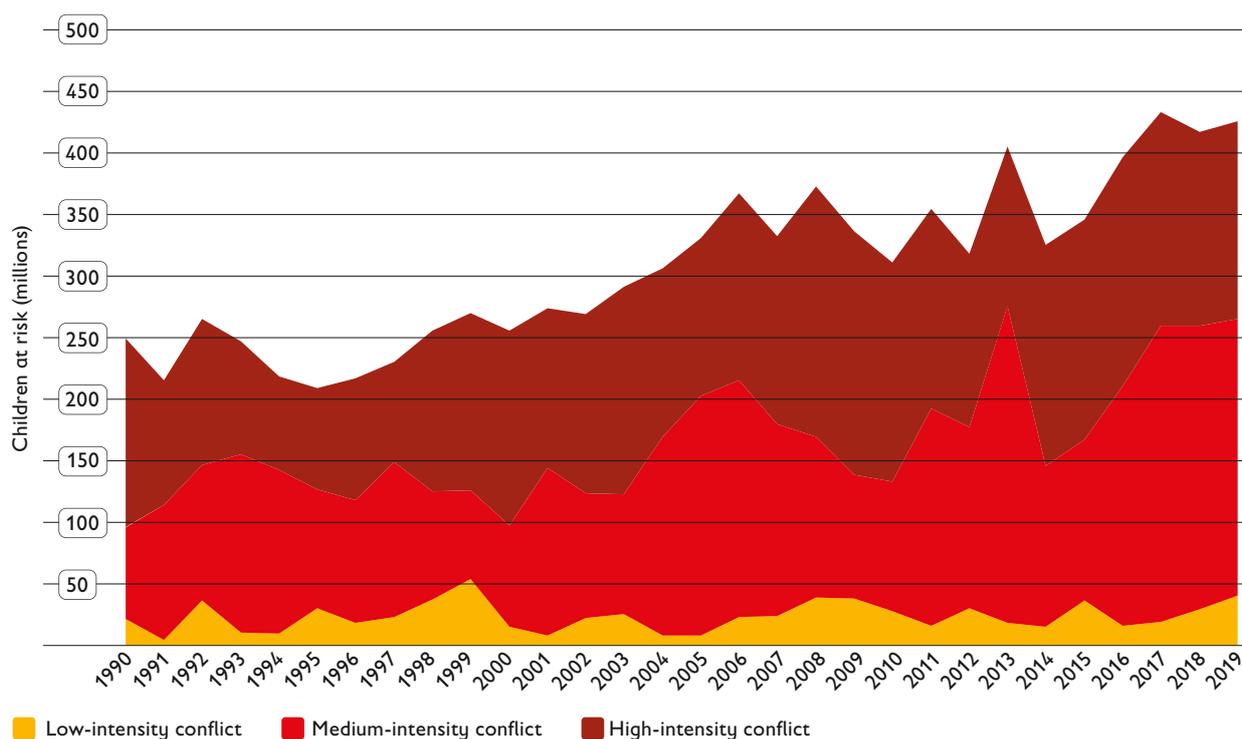- Syria
- Yemen

FIGURE 9

In countries experiencing high-intensity conflicts, 160 million children live close to conflict

SOURCE: PRIO'S CALCULATION BASED ON UCDP GED DATASET V.20.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION ESTIMATES

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Legend:

- Conflict zones, 1–24 battle deaths
- Conflict zones, 25–99 battle deaths
- Conflict zones, 100–999 battle deaths
- Conflict zones, more than 1,000 battle deaths
- Share of children in zones with over 25 deaths
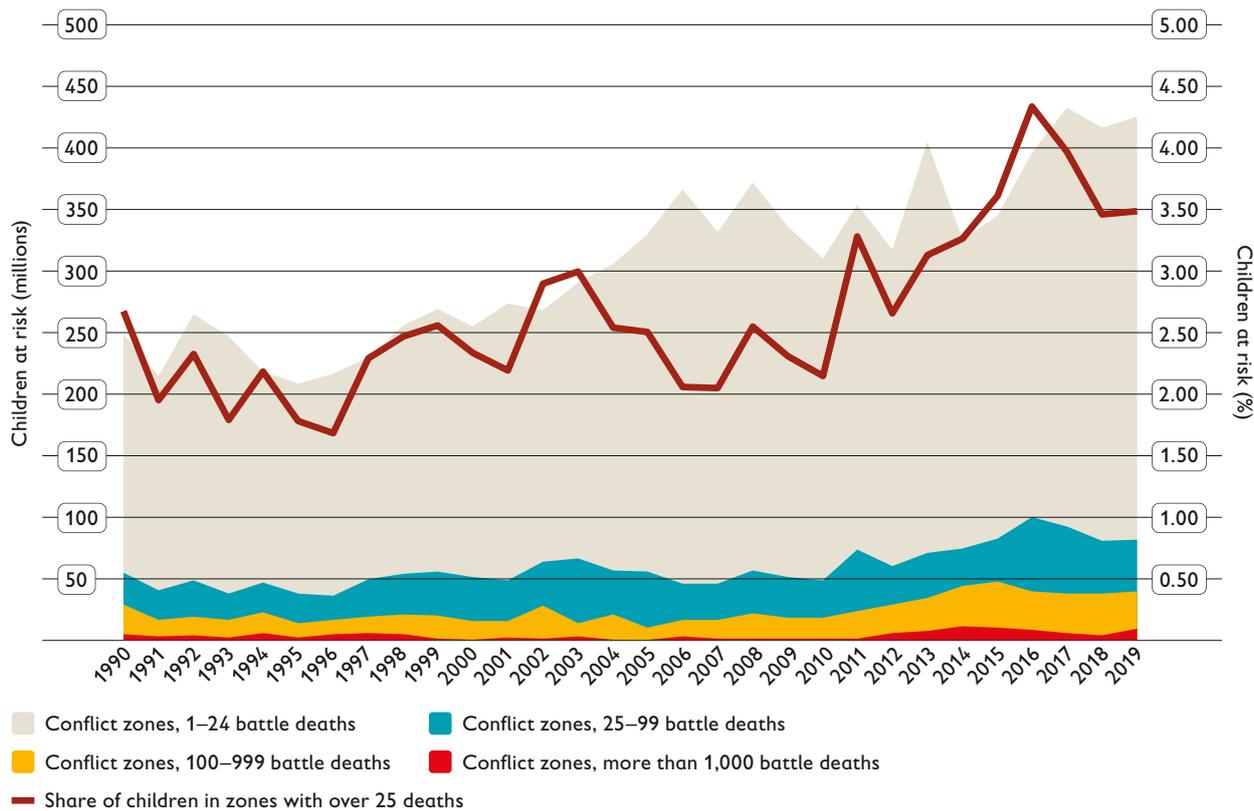
FIGURE 10

9 million children live close to the most intense conflict zones

SOURCE: PRIO'S CALCULATION BASED ON UCDP GED DATASET V.20.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION ESTIMATES

Hana, Gaza

Hana, age 14, holds up a photo of herself with her mother and four young brothers, who were all killed in an airstrike in 2014. Hana was thrown 200 metres by the blast and sustained a serious head injury. She later suffered from severe insomnia, flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hanna has been supported by Save the Children's partner, MA'AN Development Centre. She wants to become a doctor to help the people of Gaza.

PHOTO: ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

3

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN

In 2019, Save the Children marked its centenary year. As part of this, the organisation launched its Stop the War on Children campaign – a rejuvenated and integrated approach to addressing the causes and effects of violations against children in conflict. We identified three dimensions to the crisis of harm to children in conflict.

First, states and armed actors are failing to uphold standards in conflict – this includes both their own conduct and the expectations they demand of others. While not perfect, international humanitarian, human rights and criminal law is clear that children are afforded protection from the worst of armed conflict. The conduct of hostilities must have civilian protection – especially for children – at its core. However, far too often children find themselves targets of attacks or merely collateral damage.

Second, perpetrators of violations against children are seldom held to account for their actions. Even where crimes have taken place in the public eye or are widely known to have occurred, meaningful political, economic or legal consequences are few and far between.

Third, there is not enough practical action undertaken to protect children and support their recovery. The toll of conflict on children – physically, mentally and socially – is profound. As highlighted in this report, the increasing number of violations against children, often in even more protracted conflict zones than the past, is unrelenting.

Each of these dimensions is visible through the microcosm of single violations as well as in the overall trends of increasing risk for children in conflict. The response should mirror this – a truly global and collective ambition to combat the problem, and specific, targeted approaches to issues.

We call on the world's leaders to ensure we are able to go to school, play and feel protected… in every circumstance.

We ask leaders to change weapons for books, bullets for pencils, confrontations for games, cries for smiles, and hatred for love.

We ask leaders to put a smile on every child's face.

We ask leaders to turn to peace, to pledge to protect us and promise us development.

We ask leaders to offer us the opportunities that will enable us to become the best versions of ourselves.

Our common future is at risk. We demand that you act now.

Message composed in January 2019 by children from Colombia, Mali, Sudan, Syria and Yemen[42]

Save the Children

A damaged residential building in Donetsk region, Ukraine.
PHOTO: OKSANA PARAFENIUK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

THE IMPACT OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

One such specific and targeted approach should be tackling the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. As this report highlights, in just under ten years there have been more than 93,000 incidents of killing and maiming of children. Of these, we estimate a large majority are a result of explosive weapons – and as noted above, 37% of all verified child casualties in 2019 were due to explosive weapons. This proportion appears to increase the more severe the fighting.

In 2018, Save the Children estimated that in the five deadliest conflicts for children, nearly 75% of child casualties were due to explosive weapons.[43] While disproportionately affecting children in conflicts in the Middle East – including Iraq, Syria and Yemen – their use is not geographically exclusive. In Ukraine, Somalia, DRC, Nigeria, Myanmar and Afghanistan explosive weapons have routinely killed and maimed children.

While all violations against children should be treated with urgency and commitment, the proportion of verified incidents relating to killing and maiming (40% since 2005), and within that violation the proportion of incidents specifically relating to explosive weapons, demand attention. Equally, beyond the immediate deaths and injuries, explosive weapons have lasting and profound – or 'reverberating' – effects. Attacks on homes, schools, hospitals, markets, water infrastructure and roads can prevent children accessing education, lead to starvation, cause displacement, drive economic crises and exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities, particularly for girls and children with disabilities.

While the scale of the impact of explosive weapons is extensive, their effect on children is intensive. Physically, emotionally and socially, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas affects children differently from adults. The blast waves of such weapons have a greater intensity on children's organs

and bones, and their stature often means they are likely to suffer injuries to more critical parts of their bodies – especially their heads. Head and burn injuries are a significant cause of death in young children.[44]

Children are also more likely to experience injury to a greater proportion of their body than adults – for instance, in the case of burns. Given the design of these types of weapons – often to cause the greatest possible damage to military targets, objects and personnel – it should come as no surprise that they cause devastation when used against children.[45]

The psychological impact of explosive weapons is equally severe. With an increased likelihood of head injuries overall, children under ten are more likely to experience traumatic brain injuries than their older peers. In these cases, without adequate support, there can be long-term and serious implications as a result of nerve damage, hearing loss and concussion.[46]

Beyond the direct impact on children's brains, whatever their age children may experience a range of emotions as a result of their exposure to explosive weapons, ranging from fear and anxiety to grief, shame, disbelief, anger and self-blame.[47] These can either be a result of the experience of the explosion itself or the related separation from friends and family and the physical harm and changes caused by explosive weapons. Common reactions to stress will vary by age, but include separation anxiety, difficulties with sleep and eating, loss of concentration and confusion, intrusive thoughts, difficulty forming social connections, and becoming irritable and aggressive.[48]

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas disproportionately affects civilians.[49] When this includes children, the consequences on them individually can be long-lasting, complex and severe.

THE DEVASTATING – AND DISPROPORTIONATE – IMPACT OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS ON CHILDREN

80% of paediatric blast patients experienced penetrating injuries to the head. By comparison, 31% of adult blast patients experienced the same injury.

65–70% of child blast patients had injuries to multiple body parts, particularly the torso and limbs.

In children under seven, limb injuries account for 20% of the known total of injuries from landmines and unexploded ordnance; for infants, it is just 11%. In adults, the majority of these injuries are to limbs.

Children under two have thinner skin than older children and adults. They are therefore more likely to suffer full-thickness burns, with resultant rapid loss of heat, fluid and protein.

Primary blast injury results from blast-overpressure damaging tissues through compression and expansion.

Tertiary blast injury relates to bodily displacement – where the force of a blast can hurl children into the air or into other objects.

Secondary blast injuries are due to the creation of fragments – such as casing, shrapnel, soil and rubble.

Quaternary injuries include burns, inhalation injuries and exposure to toxic material.

SOURCE: *BLAST INJURIES: THE IMPACT OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS ON CHILDREN IN CONFLICT*, SAVE THE CHILDREN, 2019

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THE FORTHCOMING POLITICAL DECLARATION ON TACKLING EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

Save the Children is a proud and active member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons, a coalition of 25 non-governmental organisations from all corners of the world that have been engaged in the push for action to prevent human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The impact of blast injuries is at the hard end of the spectrum of consequences conflict has on children, but is emblematic of the global erosion of norms, standards and accountability within which harm to children has become normalised.

The good news is that there is an opportunity to act.

There is an opportunity right now for states to show leadership and commitment to addressing this challenge. They can take part in the ongoing negotiations, led by Ireland, to develop an international political declaration that will require states to address the harms caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, committing states not to use heavy explosive weapons in towns and cities.

When used in cities, towns and other populated areas, it is civilians who suffer the most severe consequences, accounting for 90% of deaths and injuries. Explosive weapons, including aircraft bombs, rockets and artillery, were designed for use in open battlefields, and are completely inappropriate for use in towns and cities and among the civilian population.

Not only do explosive weapons kill and injure people, but such attacks, especially if repeated or prolonged, severely affect people through damage to infrastructure and psychological distress, leading to social and economic exclusion. Destruction of infrastructure vital to the civilian population – such as water and sanitation,

STATES THAT HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED HARM AND COMMITTED TO ACTION

- 🟧 States that have acknowledged harm
- 🟥 States that have committed to action

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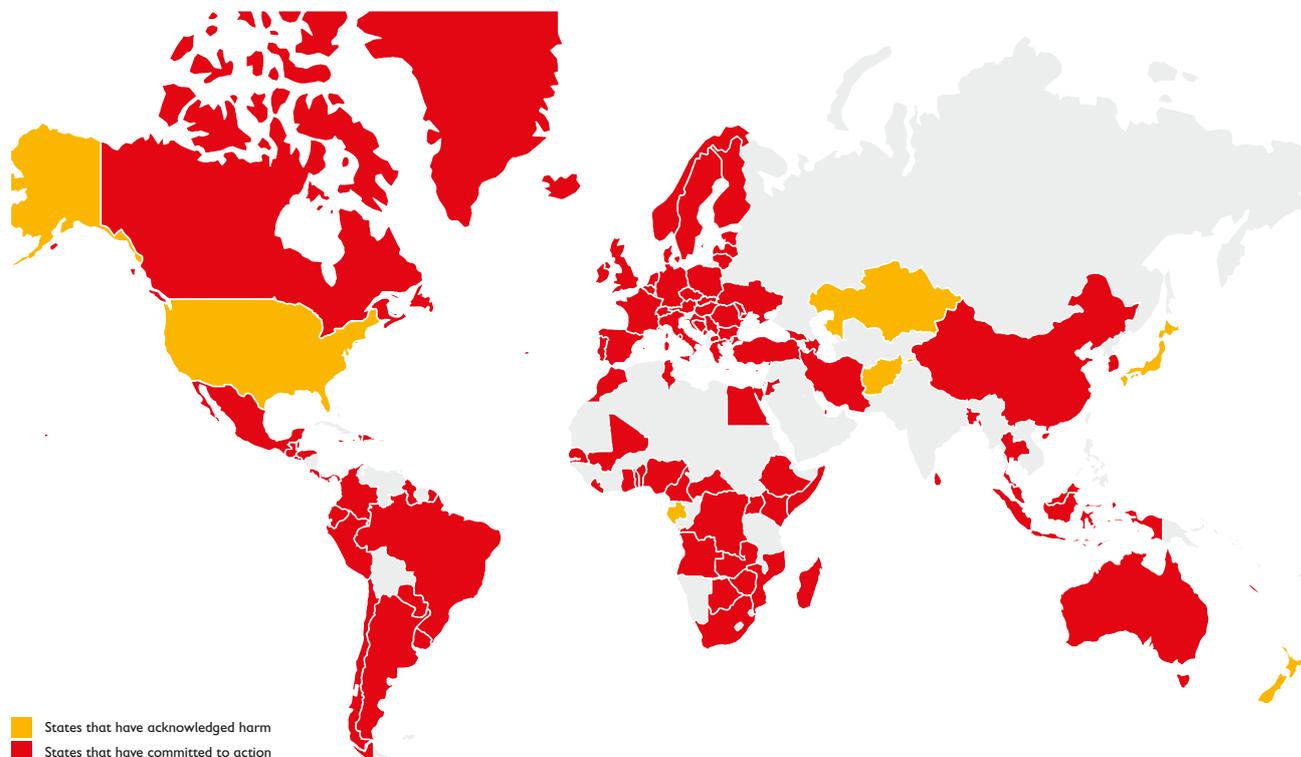
housing, schools and hospitals – deprives civilians of access to basic needs and results in wide and long-term suffering.

The UN Secretary-General has called on states to develop an international political declaration. This would commit states to a stronger international standard of behaviour, serving as a tool to drive forward progressive policies and practice at a national level and building a community of positive practice.

A political declaration would commit states to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, as recommended by both the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The declaration is expected to be finalised in 2021, and all states will then be invited to endorse it. The declaration will mark a significant milestone in the development of international humanitarian policy, and in the quest to better protect civilians from armed conflict.

Laura Boillot, International Network on Explosive Weapons

"YOU HAVE THE POWER TO HELP STOP THIS"

Statement by **Mahpekay Sidiqi** of the Kabul Orthopedic Organization on behalf of the International Network on Explosive Weapons to the UN General Assembly's First Committee on International Security and Disarmament, New York, 13 October 2020

"I am speaking from Kabul to share my own experience of how the bombing and shelling of cities and towns like mine, impacts people like me. It has devastating impacts on our bodies, to our minds, it destroys our family homes, and it forces us to flee for fear of our lives and that of our loved ones.

"The terrifying sounds of explosions, of buildings collapsing, of people screaming and the trembling earth are vivid memories from being as young as six years old. It was terrifying. The bombing of my village forced my family to leave. Bombing and shelling was happening everywhere: from the air and on the ground.

"Even though the city is several kilometres away from our village, we walked to Kabul. It was me, my two sisters and my two brothers. It took us a full day to get to a safe place in Kabul. While we were walking to the city, airplanes above our heads dropped bombs. Our hair and our eyes were full of dust and with every explosion we thought we might lose each other. Luckily, on this day that did not happen and we all reached the city safe and sound.

"My family never returned to our village again because our home was destroyed. In Kabul however, I lost both of my legs in an explosion near the airport. After that, going to school became difficult as it was not accessible. I felt excluded because I was not able to walk like the others and I was depressed. At that time life didn't feel like it had any meaning.

"Sadly, I am not the only one impacted by explosive weapons in Afghanistan. There are thousands of people like me, including many children who lost their limbs or their life from the use of these weapons in my city, where we lived.

"Today, I work as an orthopaedic technologist and I provide physical rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities. Every month, every day, I help to treat and heal patients in our centre and let me tell you – explosive weapons are still amongst the key causes of impairments. Just last month, I treated three patients that had lost legs, family members and their homes due to accidents from explosive remnants of war.

"One of them is a young woman who lost her leg and six family members. Her mental health and well-being has been heavily shaken. Bombing and shelling damages and destroys civilians lives and livelihoods. But explosive weapons do not only affect individuals. They can ruin towns and cities, impact entire communities, destroy our homes, schools, hospitals, roads and bridges.

"You have the power to help stop this. States in this room can stop harming civilians by agreeing not to use heavy explosive weapons in towns and cities. I urge all of you to finalise the political declaration on explosive weapons as soon as it becomes possible, and approach this with the aim of developing stronger humanitarian standards that will protect people from harm."

4

CONCLUSIONS

The reality for children living in conflict cannot be reduced to one violation, one experience or one risk. Action to tackle the use of explosive weapons must not come at the cost of complacency regarding the recruitment and use of children in armed forces, nor the use of rape and sexual violence against girls and boys. Violations against children are interrelated, gendered, mutually reinforcing and cumulative. As such, the response of governments, donors, armed actors, and all those with influence locally, nationally, regionally and globally must be holistic.

This response must include commitment and resources to increase the scale and impact of operations and programming in conflict – for instance, of child protection programming, mental health and psychosocial support, education in emergencies, and vital health and nutrition work. Especially now, amid the COVID-19 crisis, donors must resist the urge to retreat from endeavours to provide critical resources to protect and support children in conflict zones.

It must include political and practical action to strengthen accountability for violations against children – ranging from referrals to and support for accountability mechanisms, to greater collaboration between local, national and international actors.

The response must also include a re-assertion in the upholding of norms, standards and laws which protect children from harm.

"Save the Children is often told that its aims are impossible – that there has always been child suffering and there always will be. We know it's impossible only if we make it so. It's impossible only if we refuse to attempt it."
Eglantyne Jebb, co-founder of Save the Children

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5

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call upon all leaders, governments, armed non-state actors, humanitarian NGOs and relevant bodies to re-commit to protecting children in conflict and to set out their own practical agendas for action.

The following recommendations are aimed specifically at governments, since it is governments that have the primary responsibility for upholding children's rights and the greatest potential influence on the protection of children in conflict. In developing their agendas for action, we therefore call on governments to:

Uphold standards of conduct in conflict

- Commit to sign and implement in full the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to endorse the Paris Principles and the Paris Commitments, which include the principle of 'straight 18' for recruitment into armed forces.
- Commit to endorse and fully implement the Safe Schools Declaration and to encourage other states to follow suit.
- Strengthen doctrine, training and other measures to ensure armed forces and allies:
  - understand and take into account the reverberating effects from military actions in collateral-damage assessments and take measures to reduce them
  - record casualties according to internationally agreed standards
  - commit to a political declaration on avoidance of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Facilitate dialogue between states, the UN, NGOs and non-state armed groups to protect children; support efforts to engage non-state

armed groups to develop policies, codes of conduct and action plans to protect children; and ensure that humanitarian and human rights work is not impeded by restrictions on organisations' interaction with armed groups.
- Immediately suspend arms sales and transfers to parties to conflict where there is an overriding risk that such weapons will be used to commit or facilitate violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law or other serious crimes against civilians, including children. States should also sign and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty and improve transparency of national arms control regulatory frameworks.

Hold perpetrators of violations to account

- Support international mechanisms to prosecute cases of violations of children's rights in conflict, including through resourcing dedicated gender-sensitive, child-specific expertise in international investigations and through support for the International Criminal Court and ad hoc judicial mechanisms.
- Support financially and diplomatically the UN's systematic monitoring and reporting of violations of children's rights in conflict, including the tracking of age- and sex-disaggregated data on casualties and other violations, and the complete, accurate and impartial naming of perpetrators.
- Develop and use national systems – such as sequestering property, freezing bank accounts and imposing travel bans – to take action against individual perpetrators of violations of children's rights in conflict and resource national crime agencies to investigate grave violations of children's rights in third countries and to prosecute through national courts.

- Support children to raise complaints of violations of their rights in conflict directly – in Africa through the complaints procedure of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child – and globally by committing to sign and ratify the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which enables children to hold parties to the UNCRC to account for failing to uphold their rights.
- For members of the Security Council: refrain from impeding UN action against perpetrators of grave violations of children's rights in conflict.

Take practical action to protect children and support their recovery

- Fully fund appeals for child protection across the Humanitarian Response Plans and Refugee Response Plans. As a start, ensure that child protection is funded at the same level as the overall appeal.
- Reaffirm and promote the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action – and step up overall humanitarian funding across sectors, including to particularly underfunded countries.
- Ensure mental health and psychosocial support for children and their families is well resourced and provided across health, nutrition, child protection and education sectors across the continuum of care, and fully integrated as an essential component of all phases of humanitarian response, including post-conflict recovery and longer-term peace-building efforts.

- Increase investment in other crucial protective humanitarian programmes for children, including education, programmes to tackle sexual and gender-based violence, and mine risk reduction.
- Mobilise new child-focused recovery funding as a core element of post-conflict reconstruction, building human capital by investing in children's education, healthcare, protection, mental health and psychosocial support.
- Ensure that all children forced by conflict to leave their homes have access to good-quality, inclusive and protective education within a few months of displacement, and support the development of national costed plans that set out the financing needs for all displaced children to be educated and the measures for ensuring their access to good-quality education.
- Designate dedicated, senior child protection and child rights expertise in multilateral peacekeeping and political missions, by securing specific provisions in UN Security Council mandates including explicit resourcing for senior-level child protection advisers.
- Review approaches to counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism to ensure that children are treated first and foremost as children, irrespective of their alleged association with armed groups.
- Systematically support the inclusion of children in peace-making and peace-building efforts.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

This report uses the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definitions of conflict. The UCDP is the world's foremost provider of data on organised violence, and its Georeferenced Event Dataset and other datasets inform this research.

Conflict/armed conflict: when armed force is used by an organised actor against another organised actor or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (low-intensity conflict). Medium intensity is defined as 25–999 battle deaths, and high intensity defined as 1,000 or more battle-related deaths in a country-year.

The definition includes three types of conflict:
- State-based conflict takes place between two states (inter-state conflict), or between one state and one or more rebel groups (civil conflict).
- Non-state conflict is fought between two organised, armed actors, of which neither is the government of a state.
- One-sided violence is perpetrated by an organised armed group, either a state's military forces or an armed group, against civilians.

Conflict incidents/events: a conflict event is defined as a lethal incident, either a violent clash between two armed groups or an attack on civilians by a group or groups, at a given time and place. Conflicts usually consist of multiple conflict events.

Conflict zone/area (or an area affected by conflict): an area within the borders of a country and within 50km from where one or more conflict incidents takes place in a given year.

Battle-related deaths: the use of armed force between warring parties in a conflict, resulting in deaths. We use the term to include both combatant and civilian deaths, unless otherwise specified.

Children living in conflict-affected areas/ conflict-affected children: children who reside within conflict zones.

Children: we use the definition from the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines children as individuals under the age of 18 years.

Gender: the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for a person, often based on their sex.

The six grave violations against children: the UN Security Council has identified six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict:
- killing and maiming of children
- recruitment or use of children in armed forces and groups
- rape and other forms of sexual violence against children
- abduction of children
- attacks against schools and hospitals
- denial of humanitarian access to children.

These grave violations were defined on the basis of their egregious nature and their severe impact on children's well-being. In addition to the six violations, the Secretary-General's annual report has verified incidents of detention of children since 2012.

APPENDIX 2: METHODOLOGY

The report draws on analysis commissioned by Save the Children and conducted by the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) mapping the numbers of children living in areas affected by armed conflict around the world. Areas defined by PRIO as 'conflict zones' or 'conflict-affected areas' are those within 50km of where one or more conflict events took place in a given year, within the borders of a country.

This analysis uses data collated by the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), the world's foremost provider of metrics on organised violence. This dataset provides the geographical location, timing and intensity of recorded conflict events globally, covering the years 1990–2019. PRIO cross-referenced this data with recently updated population data from the Gridded Population of the World and from the UN in order to estimate the numbers of children living in proximity to incidents of armed violence worldwide.

The UCDP defines armed conflict as a situation when armed force is used by an organised actor against another organised actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. This could be conflict involving states and/ or non-state actors or it could be one-sided violence perpetrated by an organised armed group against civilians. The dataset defines a conflict event as a lethal incident in the context of an armed conflict.

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ENDNOTES

1   For more information on the ways children are at risk of harm in conflict, see Save the Children's Stop the War on Children report series, available at www.stopwaronchildren.org

2   Save the Children (2020) 'The UN Secretary General must explain why he lets powerful parties get away with killing children and attacking schools and hospitals' (webpage), www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/un-secretary-general-must-explain-violence-against-children-statement

3   For more information on the ceasefire see: Rustad et al (2020) *The Strategic Use of Ceasefires in the Coronavirus Crisis*, PRIO.

4   Explosive weapons are those which "affect an area around the point of detonation, usually through the effects of blast and fragmentation." A range of such weapons are routinely used against children, including missiles, grenades, mortars, landmines and improvised explosive devices. Also included in the definition are unexploded ordnance (UXO) or explosive remnants of war. These are explosive weapons that remain unexploded either through malfunction or design, and continue to affect children even after conflict has ended. For more information see: Save the Children (2019) *Blast Injuries: The impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict.*

5   The Safe Schools Declaration is an inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict. For more information see: GCPEA (2020) *The Safe Schools Declaration* (webpage), https://ssd.protectingeducation.org

6   The Paris Principles lay out guidelines on protecting children from recruitment into armed groups and assisting those already recruited and used. For more information see: *The Paris Commitments, Consolidated Version*. Available at: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/publications/ParisCommitments_EN.pdf

7   The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict – adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000 is a multilateral treaty that commits to preventing the recruitment of children into armed groups. For more information see Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (2019) *Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (webpage) https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/opac/

8   The Vancouver Principles are a set of political commitments focused on child protection in peacekeeping, including all stages of a conflict cycle. They comprise 17 principles that focus on preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers by armed forces and armed groups. For more information see Government of Canada (2020) *The Vancouver Principles* (webpage) https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng

9   Save the Children (2020) *Protect a Generation: the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives.*

10 UN News (2020) 'COVID-19 fast becoming protection crisis, Guterres warns Security Council'. 2 July 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067632

11 Child Rights Now (2020) *Ending Violence against Children and COVID-19.* Policy Brief.

12 Save the Children (2020) *The Hidden Impact of COVID-19: on child protection and wellbeing.* Global Research Series.

13 E Wagner and H Warren (2020) *Save Our Education: Protect every child's right to learn in the COVID-19 response and recovery*, Save the Children. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/save-our-education-protect-every-childs-right-learn-covid-19-response-and-recovery

14 Save the Children (2020) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Malnutrition: Poverty and acute malnutrition among the most serious side effects for children*. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/The%20impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20child%20malnutrition.pdf

15 Protection Clusters bring together protection partners who have the necessary expertise, resources, access and capacity. They are integral to the cluster approach adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee for non-refugee humanitarian crises – UNHCR *Emergency Handbook: Protection Cluster* (webpage), available at: https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/82064/protection-cluster

16 Global Protection Cluster (2020) *COVID-19 Protection Risks and Responses Situation Report No.7*. Available at: https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/2020/08/24/covid-19-protection-risks-responses-situation-report-no-7-as-of-24-august-2020/

17 See endnote 16

18 See endnote 16

19 United Nations (2020), *Secretary-General Calls for Global Ceasefire, Citing War-Ravaged Health Systems, Populations most Vulnerable to Novel Coronavirus*. SG/SM/20018.

20 See endnote 3

21 These diagrams are taken from the launch materials of *Still Unprotected* in October 2020. For more information the full report can be found at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18352/pdf/stc_still_unprotected_repport_high.pdf

22 The six grave violations against children defined by the UN are: the killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and the denial of humanitarian access for children.

23 All of the findings and analysis in this section of the report draw on the Secretary-General's annual report from this year and previous years. Save the Children conducted an extensive review of the findings of these reports to inform our analysis. The full source for this year's report is: United Nations, General Assembly, *Annual Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC)*. S/2020/525 (9 June 2020).

24 Save the Children (2019) *Blast Injuries: The impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict*.

25 Action on Armed Violence (2020) 'Explosive Weapon Harm' (webpage), https://aoav.org.uk

26 For more information see Save the Children (2020) *Stop the War on Children: Gender Matters!*

27 This number differs from the total cited in the introduction of the Secretary-General's report, however having counted each violation mentioned throughout the report, Save the Children found 1,804 to be the total.

28 It was noted in this year's Secretary-General's report that abduction could be underreported and combined with other violations.

29 In the last 20 years, an estimated 10,000 Palestinian children have been held in the Israeli military detention system. They are the only children in the world who are systematically prosecuted in military courts, which lack fair trial rights and fail to meet juvenile justice standards. For more information see: Save the Children (2020), *Defenceless: the impact of Israeli military detention on Palestinian children*. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/defenceless-impact-israeli-military-detention-palestinian-children

30 Save the Children (2020) *Defenceless: the impact of Israeli military detention on Palestinian children*. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/defenceless-impact-israeli-military-detention-palestinian-children

31 High-intensity conflicts are those in which 1,000 battle-related deaths were recorded in a calendar year.

32 Ostby et al (2020) *Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990-2019*, PRIO.

33 See endnote 32

34 The highest number recorded was 433 million in 2017.

35 See endnote 32

36 Save the Children (2019) *Stop the War on Children: Protecting children in 21st century conflict*.

37 The countries with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths in 2019 – Afghanistan, Brazil, Burkina Faso, DRC, Libya, Mali, Mexico, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Yemen – have had an average of 18.8 consecutive years in conflict.

38 This figure relates to continuous years of conflict.

39 These children are living in close proximity (50km) to conflict events involving 1,000 battle-related deaths as opposed to living in close proximity (50km) to conflict events within a country which has, nationally, involved 1,000 battle-related deaths.

40 For a methodology relating to both the population estimates and remaining indicators, please see Appendix 2.

41 This list is presented in alphabetical order in recognition that the quality of data available for each country is too variable to substantiate a definitive ranking.

42 Excerpt from children's foreword in Save the Children (2019) *Stop the War on Children: Protecting Children in 21st century conflict*.

43 See endnote 24

44 See endnote 24

45 See endnote 24

46 See endnote 24

47 See endnote 24

48 See endnote 24

49 See endnote 24

50 INEW (2020), *Ms Mahpekay Sidiqi delivers statement on behalf of the International Network on Explosive Weapons to UNGA's First Committee* (webpage), http://www.inew.org/ms-mahpekay-sidiqi-delivers-statement-on-behalf-of-the-international-network-on-explosive-weapons-inew-to-ungas-first-committee/

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STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN

Today millions of children are on the frontlines of conflict. While 2020 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that should not be allowed to mask the devastation conflict is having on the lives of a growing number of children.

Killed and Maimed takes a close look at how many children are affected by conflict today. It looks at what the world needs to do to protect children in conflict, particularly from the horrifying impact of explosive weapons. And we set out a series of concrete recommendations for governments to protect children in conflict.

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