

STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN



Save the Children



LET CHILDREN LIVE IN PEACE

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their potential. In 120 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Names of children portrayed in case studies have been changed to protect their identities.

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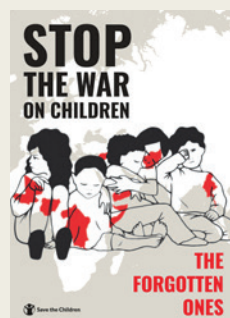
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FOREWORD

More than a century ago, the founder of Save the Children spoke these words:

“ALL WARS, WHETHER JUST OR UNJUST, DISASTROUS OR VICTORIOUS, ARE WAGED AGAINST THE CHILD.”

They resonate with even greater urgency today, as conflict¹ rages on with flagrant disregard for children’s rights and protection.

It is witnessed by the Syrian child whose home was destroyed by shelling, and whose friends were killed when an airstrike hit her school. It is witnessed by the Sudanese child who can no longer attend school because it has been turned into a military outpost. It is witnessed by Ukrainian children, who were forced to hide underground for an average of more than one month in the first year of full-scale war. And it is witnessed by the Malian child who was forcibly recruited into an armed group as a messenger.

While this report looks at conflict zones^{II} in 2022, it is written in the shadow of catastrophic events today in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory and Sudan. Thousands of children in Gaza have been killed and injured. The siege of Gaza has deprived Palestinian children of the basic means of survival, including food, clean water, and fuel. Children have been killed and maimed in the West Bank and Israel, and dozens of Israeli children were taken hostage inside Gaza.^{III} And in Sudan, the escalation of conflict in 2023 has now seen more than 7 months of unabated fighting, with more than 9,000 people killed.^{IV}

The suffering of children in armed conflicts challenges the progress we have made as a global community over the last decades. It is an unforgivable crisis that violates their rights and takes away their lives. We demand that the war on children stop, and accountability be enforced for crimes committed against children trapped in conflicts; crimes that are perpetrated even as world leaders talk or – worse – remain silent.

The challenge before us is immense. Today, 2 billion people – a quarter of humanity – live in conflict-affected areas. New research from the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) reveals that the number of children living in conflict zones has reached 468 million – a doubling since 1990. The number of grave violations against children since 2010 has almost tripled. War in cities blurs the space between frontlines and where children live, play and learn. Explosive violence is wreaking havoc, with children seven times more likely to die from blast injuries than adults. These statistics paint a grim picture of trends heading in the wrong direction.

Beyond risks to children’s protection, there is the far larger scale of indirect harm from conflict to children’s education, health, and welfare – crucial components of their rights to life, survival and development.

So, what needs to be done?

First, all duty-bearers, including states, must uphold international laws and standards protecting children in armed conflict. These laws were not made for times when upholding them would be easy, but for times when protection of children is challenged by parties to conflict. This is the time we need the international community to be principled and insist on their implementation.

I was pleased to see commitments made by 41 states and more than 50 organisations at the landmark Oslo conference in 2023 on the protection of children in conflict. Save the Children was proud to be a co-host alongside the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNICEF, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). We now need these commitments to translate into action.

Second, it is critical that accountability for crimes against children in armed conflict is prioritised on both international and national agendas. Fostering sustainable accountability is a key element to combat impunity and ensure that children survive and live free from violence.

While the UN’s children and armed conflict agenda is a vital tool, to be effective, it must consistently prioritise

children's rights over political or geopolitical considerations. All parties to conflict that are responsible for committing grave violations against children should be listed as perpetrators in accordance with the objective criteria. We must insist on children's rights everywhere, at all times.

Third, we need to urgently increase flexible funding and resources to strengthen age, gender and disability responsive child protection, prevent grave violations and support children, families and communities that have experienced such violations. It is also necessary to tackle the political barriers to this investment. I've seen so much collaboration and innovation to protect children in conflict, but it needs to be resourced sustainably.

For example, visiting Ukraine earlier this year, I saw child-friendly spaces and bunker kits with toys and games that supported children's learning amidst challenging circumstances. But more funding to support children's resilience and recovery is desperately needed - and we must ensure more of that funding goes directly to local and national organizations.

Underpinning all these efforts must be the full and meaningful participation of children themselves. Ahead of the Oslo conference, we consulted hundreds of children across 10 different conflict-affected countries,^v to share their experiences and give us advice on how to better protect children. Their inspiring words and call to action forms an important part of this report.

I want to end by sharing a message to the world from a group of children in Gaza in 2021, following the previous escalation of violence:

“WE WANT TO LIVE LIKE CHILDREN IN OTHER COUNTRIES WHO CAN PLAY IN PLAYGROUNDS INSTEAD OF HIDING FROM BOMBS. WE WANT GAZA TO BE A SAFE AND BEAUTIFUL PLACE WHERE WE CAN LIVE IN PEACE. WE STILL HAVE HOPE. BUT WE WANT THIS WAR TO BE THE LAST WAR.”

The world has failed them, and it is failing children in conflict zones around the world. We all share a collective responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure that children survive, their rights are protected, and we enable them to thrive.

Inger Ashing
CEO, *Save the Children International*

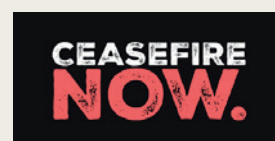
PROTECTING CHILDREN IN GAZA

Although the data analysed here covers the period up to 2022, the situation in Gaza at the time of writing requires our immediate close attention and action.

Save the Children, along with hundreds of organisations and over a million individuals, are calling for all heads of state, the UN Security Council and actors on the ground to prioritise the preservation of human life above all else. Through an online petition we are calling for a ceasefire and for all parties to unconditionally:

- facilitate the delivery of life-saving assistance, including food, medical supplies, fuel, and the resumption of electricity and internet to Gaza, in addition to safe passage of humanitarian and medical staff
- free all civilian hostages, especially children and older people
- allow humanitarian convoys to reach UN facilities, schools, hospitals and health facilities in northern Gaza and commit to protecting the civilians and staff inside them at all times
- rescind orders by the Government of Israel for civilians to depart northern Gaza
- allow patients in critical condition to be medically evacuated for urgent care.

The petition has so far generated more than 1 million signatories.¹



Street scene in Kabul,
PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is our seventh report in Save the Children's 'Stop the War on Children' series. Five years on since our first Stop the War on Children report, more and more children find themselves in contexts affected by conflict, with devastating consequences for their lives and their futures. The analysis in this report comes from updated data on the number of children living in conflict zones conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Save the Children's analysis of the 2022 United Nations annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, and our mapping of the number of grave violations in the reports on children and armed conflict from 2005–22.

KEY FINDINGS:

The top 3 worst conflict-affected countries to be a child in 2022:

1. Democratic Republic of Congo
2. Mali
3. Myanmar

- In 2022, about 468 million children – one in six – were living in a conflict zone. The number of children living in conflict zones has increased steadily over time, with 2022 seeing a 2.8% increase from 2021.
- Overall, 27,638 grave violations against children were verified in 2022, the highest-ever since reporting started in 2005. This works out as 76 violations on average per day, an increase of 13% from 2021. However, due to under-reporting we know this is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg.
- Based on Save the Children's analysis, the Democratic Republic of Congo was the worst conflict-affected country to be a child in 2022, followed by Mali in second place, then Myanmar. In alphabetical order, the other conflict-affected countries to make the top 10 include: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.
- While Africa was the continent with the highest number of conflict-affected children in 2022, the Middle East had the highest proportion of children living in conflict zones of all regions – with one-third of all children living in conflict zones.
- The number of verified cases of children recruited and used by armed forces and groups increased by 20% from 2021 to reach 7,610 in 2022.
- There has been a concerning rise in reported and verified incidents of the denial of humanitarian access in recent years. This is of particular concern as it could both reduce thousands of children's access to basic services and protection and hinder humanitarian agencies ability to report and verify grave violations against children. Three-quarters of all incidents of denial of humanitarian access verified since 2005 occurred in the last five years.
- Children continue to be most affected in the places they should be safe. The number of recorded attacks on schools and hospitals increased by 74% in one year, from 1,323 in 2021, to 2,308 in 2022, with many contexts of conflict experiencing a steep increase.
- Harmful gender norms and structural inequalities continue to affect children's risks and experiences of the six grave violations. While the number of girl victims slightly decreased, the trend of focusing on reporting of grave violations that happen in the public sphere, which are more often experienced by boys, means that violations experienced by girls are less likely to be visible and reported. Similarly, while one child in ten around the world has a disability, the impact of conflict on children with disabilities is often under-reported.



Khrystyna*, 8, photographed in her room in a town in Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine. Her mother Oksana* says the child's hair has started to turn grey, which she attributes to the trauma they have endured.

PHOTO: ANASTASIA VLASOVA/SAVE THE CHILDREN

ACT NOW

We urge the international community, states, armed groups, and all other relevant stakeholders to urgently prioritise and increase their efforts to protect children in armed conflict. The policy toolkit available to state actors to address the war on children has never been stronger, but those responsible need to implement it and to be held accountable. Children urgently need action!

As states have the greatest influence and hold the primary responsibility for upholding children's rights, we call on states to:

- **Uphold the standards of conduct in conflict:**

- Adhere – and demand that all parties adhere – to international humanitarian law (IHL), and all other applicable laws and standards.
- Endorse, ratify, and implement the existing declarations and tools that exist to protect children in armed conflict.
- Ensure that children associated with armed forces and armed groups are recognised as children. Help to build the capacity of relevant parties in international laws and standards and ensure child protection and rights expertise are adequately resourced.

- **Hold perpetrators to account:**

- Ensure international and national accountability mechanisms prioritise the investigation and prosecution of crimes against children.
- Support diplomatically and financially the mandate of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict.
- Promote and support existing accountability mechanisms.

- **Support children's resilience and recovery:**

- Recognise the life-saving importance of child protection interventions and commit to closing the gap in child protection funding by prioritising and investing in children and their protection.
- Increase and improve the quality of funding.
- Ensure child protection is mainstreamed and included across all programming.
- Invest in prevention.
- Tackle the political barriers that prevent investment in resilience and recovery.

- **Protect humanitarian access and action:**

- Engage with all parties to the conflict.
- Prioritise and advocate for principled humanitarian action.
- Ensure that sanctions and counter terrorism measures do not prevent aid reaching those in need.

- **Listen to children:**

- Meaningfully, safely and systematically consult and include children in relevant processes and initiatives, policies and programmes and ensure full and active participation of children in all forums where issues affecting their rights are being discussed.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

FROM ENDORSEMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION: THE 2023 OSLO CONFERENCE ON PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

**“IT IS NEITHER FAIR
NOR RIGHT THAT WE HAVE
MEMORIES FILLED WITH
EXPLOSIONS, SMOKE, FIRE,
AND THE LOSS OF
INNOCENT LIVES AND
LOVED ONES.”**

Ahmad, Gaza, taking part in the children’s consultations and calls for action presented at the 2023 Oslo Conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict

In 2018, Save the Children released *The War on Children*, a clarion call to end grave violations against children in conflict.² Five years on, 2023 saw a landmark global conference in Oslo bring together 450 attendees from 100 countries, including representatives from 80 states and from civil society and UN agencies to commit to substantive actions to see children in armed conflict better protected.

The conference was hosted by Norway together with Save the Children, UNICEF and the ICRC and in partnership the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict, the African Union and two states from different regions, Albania and Mozambique.

Why was the 2023 Oslo Conference convened?

As we will explore in this report, Save the Children’s annual estimates of children living in armed conflict found that in 2022, about 468 million children – one child in six – were living in a conflict zone. This number has almost doubled since the mid-1990s. Our analysis shows more than 329,000 grave violations against children in conflict have been committed since 2005.

Children have greater physical and psychological vulnerability and suffer disproportionately the consequences of modern warfare. For many children, their entire childhood is marred by violence, traumatic experiences, loss, separation and fear. With every attack on homes, schools, hospitals, food and water

systems, roads, and other civilian objects, children’s prospects diminish.

Despite this, funding for child protection interventions in conflict remains woefully inadequate, with predictions of a \$1 billion funding gap between children’s protection needs and funds received by 2026 if donors across the board don’t step up to meet their commitments.³ While some governments remain steadfast child protection champions, the impact of funding gaps has seen cuts to child protection case-management, reductions in services to identify and support unaccompanied and separated children, and challenges in providing children and families who have had to face unimaginable horrors with even the most basic psychological first aid support.

By failing to prioritise child protection in conflict, we are failing to prevent and respond to the very violations that children face. Strong, resilient communities and child protection systems are fundamental to ensuring we see children and their well-being safe from harm during the violence of conflict. This requires sustainable, flexible and multi-year funding from a broad range of donors if we are to ensure the humanitarian community can not only respond to but work to prevent grave and other serious violations against children.

In the shadow of such a seemingly insurmountable challenge, the Oslo conference marked a beacon of hope that a combination of bold policy change, funding pledges and political commitments can make the world a better place for almost half a billion children. As one child from Colombia highlighted:

**“IT IS IMPORTANT TO TALK IN
ORDER TO REACH PEACE. AND
NOT TO NORMALISE VIOLENCE.”⁴**

A global commitment to children

41 states and more than 50 organisations joined the global commitment:

“We recognize that the suffering of children affected by armed conflict is one of the most pressing political and humanitarian concerns today. We commit to making every effort to ensure the protection of children in armed conflict and safeguard our common future.”

It is our hope that this global commitment will deliver a collective push to make real changes for children, to realise the commitments made in Oslo, and to promote further commitments.

Existing provisions of IHL, including the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, international human rights law (IHRL), and international refugee law, grant children special protection in armed conflict. The policy toolkit available to state actors to address the war on children has never been stronger: to cite just a few, there is the Safe Schools Declaration, the Paris and Vancouver Principles, and the Political Declaration on strengthening the protection of civilians from the humanitarian consequences arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Yet, as that list reminds us, there is no simple solution for stopping the war on children. Instead, states must prioritise child protection, adopting good practice in protecting children from harm from states' own actions, the actions of their partners and allies, and hardest of all, the actions of their enemies and of non-state armed groups, which were responsible for 50% of grave violations against children in 2022.⁵

As the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba warned in her keynote address to the conference:

“Over the 26 years of my mandate's implementation, the number of conflict situations covered has steadily increased, many of them becoming more protracted, more intense, and taking place in populated areas resulting in high civilian casualties, including children.”

Save the Children will continue to call for political support for the children and armed conflict agenda. That entails practical actions and advocacy to: address grave violations with increased support for child protection systems and services; improve humanitarian access to protect children affected by armed conflict; and support the effectiveness of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) and Country Task Forces with all relevant stakeholders. We will continue to support the work of the Global Coalition for the Protection of Education from Attack (GCPEA) and the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, as well as to support and strengthen the Watchlist network.

“Children benefit from an elevated level of protection during armed conflict, including age-appropriate treatment in detention, access to education, food and healthcare, reunification of unaccompanied children with their families, and protection from recruitment. Yet, the laws and standards are being applied selectively to some children and not to others.”

The Geneva Conventions are universally ratified, but in addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most ratified human rights convention in the world. There is a state obligation attached to this.”

Mirjana Spoljaric, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross⁶

Next steps

While we applaud the 80 states who attended the Oslo conference, it is concerning that 115 did not. Speeches from state representatives often seemed to address the toolkit of protection policies as less a holistic basket to be uniformly endorsed and put into practice, and more an à la carte menu that can be chosen from at the least cost of political capital possible. Likewise, the conference did not include the involvement of non-state armed groups, despite millions of children living in areas affected by conflict under their control. What is more, as Watchlist has highlighted,

“THE RAPID EXPANSION OF THE GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM AGENDA THREATENS TO UNRAVEL ESTABLISHED LAWS AND NORMS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS.”⁷

Sustained, high-level political commitment to this agenda is crucial, as is financial support for the humanitarian funds within which it lives. Protecting children in conflict may be a strategic, legal and moral prerogative, but it is not easy and state actors must not varnish over their own inconsistencies in application. It is partly for these reasons that in 2024 Save the Children will launch the first index of good practice that will aim to rank states' commitment to this agenda. We hope that engagement with this index will help keep the hope and momentum born of the 2023 Oslo conference alive and lead to further meaningful steps in stopping the war on children.

“We believe that peace is about allowing life to exist. Peace is about protecting life. And that we have a commitment as humanity and as a country to make an ethical commitment to protect children who are for sure the future of this species, of the human species. War is a contradiction in terms, but it is even more contradictory that war kills our children.”

Alberto Lara, Vice Minister of Defence and Security Policies, Colombia⁸



Maha,* age 10, with a drawing that she did during a workshop for injured children organised by Save the Children.
PHOTO: AHMED ALBASHA/SAVE THE CHILDREN

“WE DON’T HAVE MAGIC POWERS, BUT YOU DO!”

As a part of the 2023 Oslo conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict, children who have lived all or most of their lives in areas affected by armed conflict participated in consultations and workshops to share their experiences and concerns regarding how conflict is affecting children.⁹ The children were in ten countries – Burkina Faso, Colombia, Iraq, Mozambique, Nigeria, Niger, the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, Ukraine and Yemen.

“We live in fear on a daily basis and the slightest noise scares us, even the explosion of a balloon; this is because of the crackling of weapons and explosions that have become recurrent and almost daily. On top of that, many of our friends who had to move are struggling to find sufficient food.”

Girl, age 14, from Burkina Faso

More than 300 children participated in consultative sessions, interviews and creative workshops. In the process, they also reviewed recommendations that children living in conflict around the world have shared in earlier reports such as *The Children’s Manifesto* (2021) and the children’s communiqué for the Conference on Children Affected by Conflict in Nairobi (2022). Based on all of this, children developed clear asks and calls to action for world leaders,

governments and organisations, on behalf of themselves and the millions of children affected by conflict around the world.

The children of Burkina Faso, Colombia, Iraq, Mozambique, Nigeria, Niger, Palestine, Somalia, Ukraine and Yemen call on world leaders, governments and organisations to listen to them and TAKE ACTION NOW!

Their calls to action are:

- Listen to us, to know our concerns.
- Stop the war, remove the landmines, and come together and make peace.
- Never recruit children to armed groups and make sure all children have a safe place to sleep.
- Make peace, so internally displaced persons return to their villages and all children are happy, play outside and have the same opportunities as all other children in the world.
- Ensure the participation and safety of children and young people, so they can express their opinions without feeling ashamed or in danger.
- Ensure we can go to school without fear! Make sure that children with disabilities can go to school.
- Secure food and water for everyone, and a world without child labour, without bullying and with lots of love.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.



The words on this drawing by 15-year-old in Mozambique say: "The world where I would like to grow up has no discrimination."
 PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

“I WANT TO REALISE MY DREAM, BUT I NEED PROTECTION”

Boy, Iraq

A clear call from children we consulted is that decision makers must ensure the protection of all children who spend their childhood in areas where there is conflict. Children are calling for protection from bombs, missiles and landmines, and from violence and abuse. They want to feel safe, especially in their own homes and neighbourhoods, with their families and with their friends.

“There is not enough food for everyone because of the destruction of agricultural fields and with the non-state armed groups, people abandoned everything and burned things. I would like them to build many houses so that all the children have a safe place to sleep.”

Child in a resettlement centre in Mozambique

“When a rocket falls from the sky, it does not differentiate between a stone and a tree, and between a child and a young person.”

Palestinian children’s council, Gaza

“MY CALL TO ACTION FOR THE WORLD LEADERS IS THAT YOU SHOULD DO WHATEVER YOU CAN TO ENSURE THAT ALL CHILDREN ARE PROTECTED.”

Boy, age 16, Nigeria

“We want the international community to provide us with a protective framework and a system that enables us to live in peace. We want to draw our future with our own hands and write with our hands words that carry the anthem of hope, love and harmony. To live our childhood as we like and desire. Accountability for those who commit crimes and violations against children. Let our motto be freedom and a decent life for the children of the world.”

Palestinian children’s council, Gaza

1 CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES

ONE CHILD IN SIX IS GROWING UP IN A CONFLICT ZONE

In 2022, approximately 468 million children – one child in six – were living in a conflict zone, meaning within 50km of a conflict incident¹⁰ in any given year (see definitions and methodology page 48).¹¹

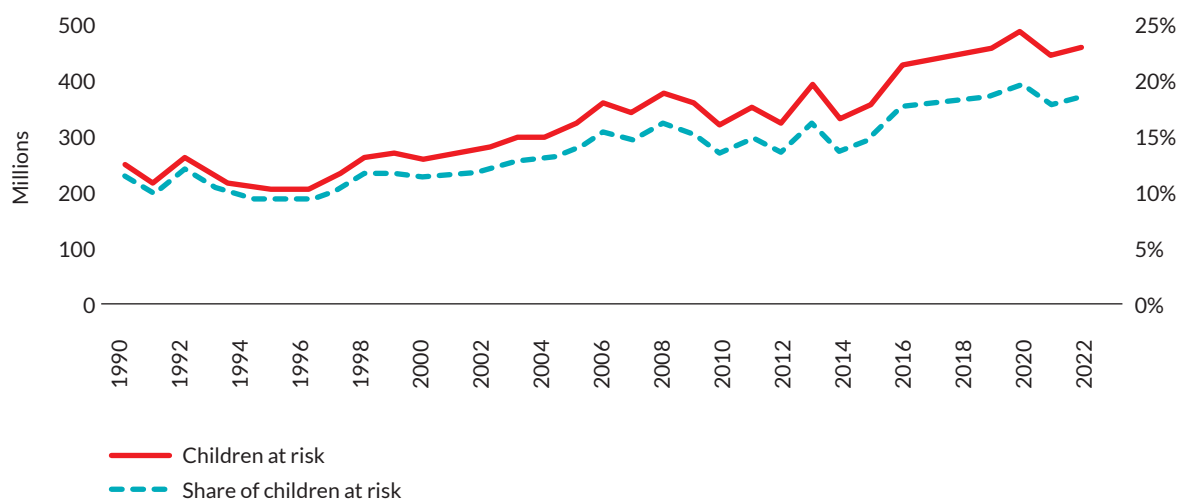
MANY MORE CHILDREN ARE GROWING UP IN CONFLICT TODAY THAN 30 YEARS AGO

As Figure 1 shows, the estimated 468 million children living in a conflict zone in 2022 constitutes a 2.8% increase from 2021. The number is slightly lower than the record year of 2020, which had 496 million children living in conflict areas.¹² Over time, despite some fluctuations, generally there has been a steady increase in the number of children living in conflict zones. The number has more than doubled since the lowest estimates in the mid-1990s. The main reason for this sharp increase is not due to population increase. Rather, the share of children living in conflict has almost doubled, from 10% in the mid-1990s to almost 19% in 2022.

Although the full-scale conflict in Ukraine dominated news headlines, it was the conflict in northern Ethiopia that was the most lethal in 2022. With more than 101,000 fatalities, it accounted for nearly half of all battle-related¹³ deaths during 2022. The Russia–Ukraine conflict was the second most deadly conflict, with approximately 82,609 battle deaths.¹⁴

As shown in Figure 2, in 2022, approximately 59% of the children exposed to conflict were living in an area that experienced between 1 and 24 battle deaths (low intensity). 20% were living in an area with between 25 and 99 battle deaths (medium intensity). 17% were living in an area with between 100 and 999 battle deaths (high intensity). Finally, some 14.7 million children, or 3% of all conflict-exposed children, were living in an area of extreme conflict intensity (1,000 battle deaths or more). Over time, there has been an increase across all levels, with the group of children exposed to low-intensity conflict (1–24 battle deaths) increasing the most.

FIGURE 1. NUMBER AND SHARE OF CHILDREN AT RISK, 1990–2022



SOURCE: UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM GEOREFERENCED EVENT DATASET (UCDP GED). DATASET V.22.1 AND UN (2020) WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS

FIGURE 2. CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED ZONES, BY CONFLICT ZONE INTENSITY, 1990–2022

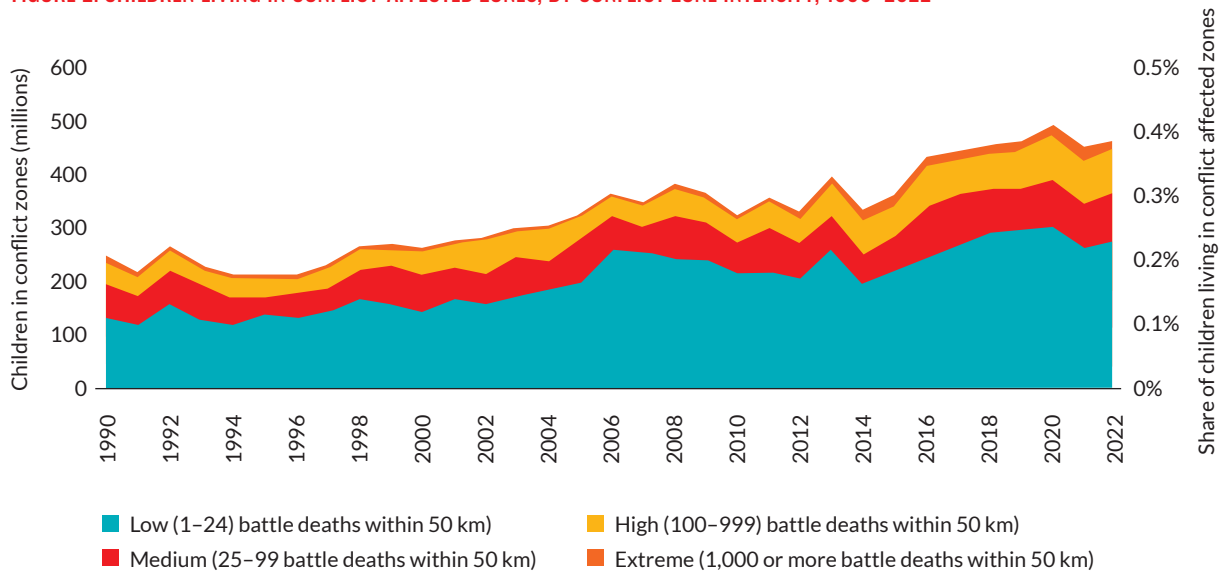


FIGURE CREATED BY PRIO. DATA SOURCES: UCDP GED DATASET V.23.1 AND UN (2020) WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS

REGIONAL TRENDS FOR CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

As shown in Figure 3A, **Africa was the continent with the highest number of conflict-affected-children in 2022**, with approximately 183 million children living in conflict zones. Asia followed, with approximately 145 million children living in conflict zones. In the Americas the number was 69 million, in the Middle East it was 63 million, while in Europe 9 million children were exposed to conflict.

However, to capture the regional risk to children, these numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size. As Figure 3B highlights, although Africa had the largest number of children living in conflict zones in 2022, it also had a high number of children living in peaceful areas.

The relative share of children living in conflict zones was slightly higher in the Middle East. Here, more than one-third of children were living in conflict zones in 2022, a higher proportion than in any other region.

- Number of conflict-affected children:**
The number of children living in conflict zones.
- Share of children who are conflict-affected:**
Share of children within a country or a region living in conflict zones, relative to overall child population within the country or region.

FIGURE 3. NUMBER (A) AND SHARE (B) OF CHILDREN LIVING IN A CONFLICT ZONE IN 2022, BY WORLD REGION

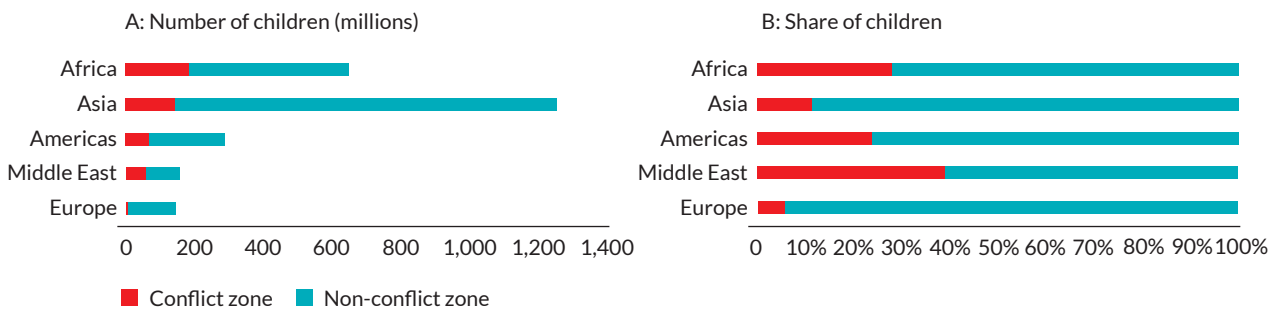


FIGURE CREATED BY PRIO. DATA SOURCES: UCDP GED DATASET V.23.1 AND UN (2020) WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS



A child standing among a pile of rubble on a street in Gaza. PHOTO: BISSAN OWDA/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

ACTION NOW TO END CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

At the 2023 Oslo Conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict, Aurélie Lamazière of Save the Children gave the following statement:¹⁵

International, regional and national non-judicial accountability mechanisms such as commissions of inquiries or fact-finding missions or judicial mechanisms, such as international courts, too often remain adult-centric in their documentation, investigation or prosecution work. While there are promising efforts being undertaken, their methodologies and approaches are still not developed enough to capture children's diverse experiences of war and the full breadth of violations that they suffer from. Children don't engage enough with accountability mechanisms, and accountability mechanisms don't engage enough with children, as it is often perceived as too difficult.¹⁶

Here are a few concrete steps to advance accountability for children:

- We need political and financial support from member states for a child-centred approach in the methodologies of documentation, investigation, and prosecution.
- We need state support to ensure that child rights experts can be deployed to such accountability mechanisms more systematically and more sustainably.
- We need to ensure the full spectrum of crimes and violations are captured. The collection of evidence is often reduced to one child specific crime, for instance, recruitment and use of children.
- The collection of evidence is often reduced to one child-specific crime, for instance, recruitment and use of children. We need to ensure the full spectrum of crimes and violations are captured. We need to continue galvanised support and give children the justice that they deserve.

2 GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

Children continued to suffer heavily in 2022 from the six grave violations of children's rights in conflict (see box). Overall, 27,638 grave violations against children were reported and verified in 2022, as presented in the annual UN report on children and armed conflict. That is an average of 76 violations per day and a 13% increase from 2021. This is the highest number of violations since the UN started reporting and verifying grave violations in 2005. Over the years since 2005, 329,806 violations have been reported in 32 conflict-affected countries.

According to the UN's annual report, in 2022, children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Yemen experienced the highest number of verified violations.¹⁸ Of the six grave violations (see box), killing and maiming of children had the highest

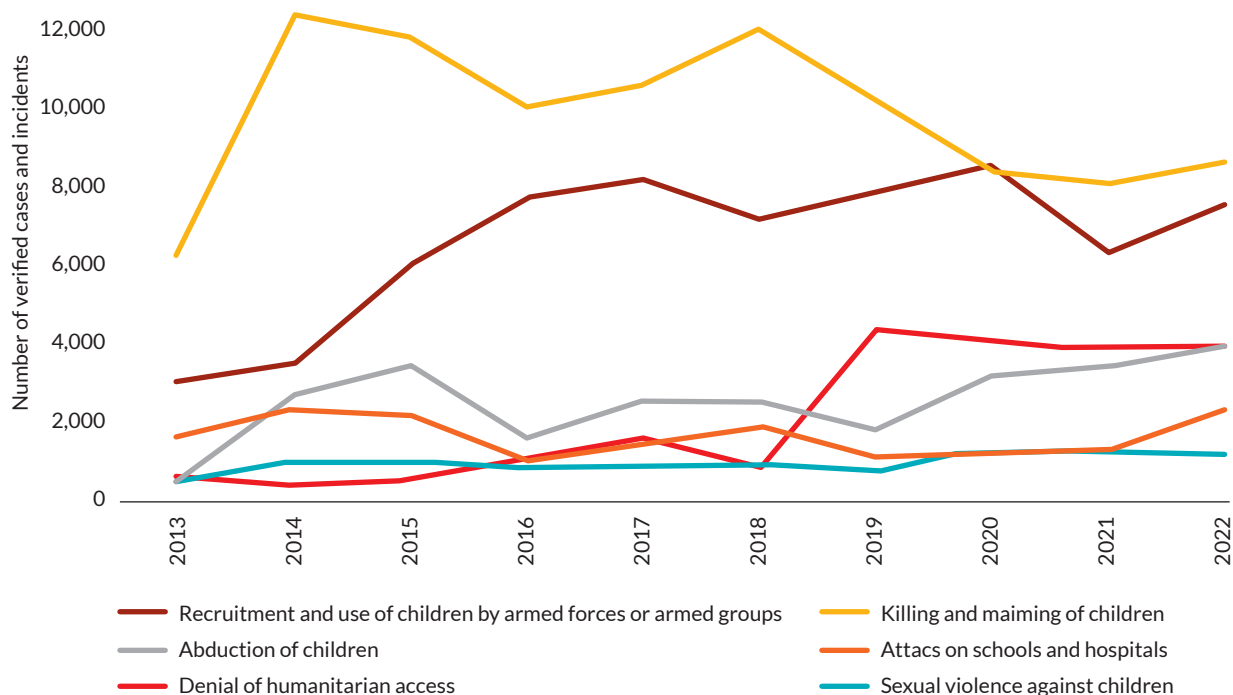
number of reported and verified cases, with 8,647 cases. Recruitment and use of children had the second highest; between 2010 and 2022, it has consistently been one of the two most reported grave violations.

Six grave violations against children in conflict

In 1999, the UN Security Council set out the following six grave violations against children in conflict:

1. killing and maiming of children
2. recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups
3. abduction of children
4. attacks on schools or hospitals
5. rape or other sexual violence against children
6. denial of humanitarian access.

FIGURE 4. TEN YEARS OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN



SOURCE: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S ANALYSIS OF THE UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT COVERING 2013-2022

It is important to remember that, given the significant under-reporting of actual violations, these verified grave violations are only the tip of the iceberg. Data for the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict is gathered through the MRM (see box below). While ideally it would expose the full scale of violations against children, the primary purpose of this mechanism is to identify perpetrators and violations and to use such data politically to halt violations and hold perpetrators to account. The six grave violations only record violations perpetrated by armed parties to the conflict, leaving out rights violations committed by other actors.

The numbers referred to in this chapter are as reported and *verified* in the 2023 UN annual report on children and armed conflict, covering events taking place in 2022. We refer to cases and incidents *verified* in 2022, knowing that around 10% of the violations were committed in previous years, and only verified in 2022. This chapter also draws on Save the Children's analysis of grave violations against children, as presented in our *'Stop the War on Children'* reports over time (see methodology page 48).

HOW GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ARE MONITORED

In 2005, with the adoption of resolution 1612, the Security Council established a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations committed against children in times of armed conflict. The MRM, which informs the UN Secretary-General's reports on children and armed conflict, is designed to gather accurate, timely, objective and reliable information on six grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict. The aim is that the information gathered be used to enable and improve accountability and compliance to international child protection standards and norms.¹⁹ The MRM is established in country-situations where parties to conflict have been listed in the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. It is recognised that the six grave violations covered by the MRM do not reflect all

violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict, but they have been determined by the UN to constitute especially egregious violations and as such should receive priority attention.

A picture of the severity of grave violations against children is presented in the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict. It indicates the situation in several countries, including whether progress has been made or, in deteriorating situations, what the challenges and concerns are. The MRM is formally established or mandated in a particular country once a clear pattern of violations that meets the UN's threshold for evidence has been demonstrated. Parties to conflicts reported to have committed violations are included in the annexes of the annual report.

FIGURE 5. GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN 2005–22



SOURCE: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S ANALYSIS OF THE UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT COVERING 2005–22

GENDERED NATURE OF VIOLATIONS

Harmful gender norms and structural gender inequalities affect children’s risks and experiences of the six grave violations. Overall, the number of boy victims increased from 2021 to 2022, while the number of girl victims slightly decreased; however, we see an increase in the number of girls who were killed or maimed. In some cases, the gender of the child is not specified.

It is important to acknowledge that gender dynamics affect reporting on children and armed conflict.²⁰ While girls are at higher risk from sexual violence committed by armed groups, stigma associated with reporting results in significant under-reporting, including the under-reporting of sexual violence committed against boys. In addition, there tends to be a focus on reporting grave violations that happen in the public sphere, such as killing and maiming, recruitment, and abductions, which are more often experienced by boys, and can be easier to identify and verify.

In the data for 2022, 70% of the children who were killed or maimed were boys. Boys also accounted for 86% of those recruited or used by armed forces and groups. Girls were at far higher risk of being reported to have been subjected to sexual violence committed by armed groups, with girls accounting for 98% of reported cases. Although children recruited and used by armed groups are predominantly boys, we see an increase in the share of girls among the cases from 2021 to 2022.²¹

Children in conflict zones also often face increased risk from other gendered human rights violations and compounding harms that are not always captured by the MRM and the wider agenda around children and armed conflict. For example, girls living in crises contexts are 20% more likely to marry as children.²²

Additionally, violations in spaces that are less public and that girls are more likely to occupy are often unseen or ignored by others, rendering experiences of sexual violence and violations in these spaces – against girls, boys, and children of diverse gender identities – under-reported and invisible.²³

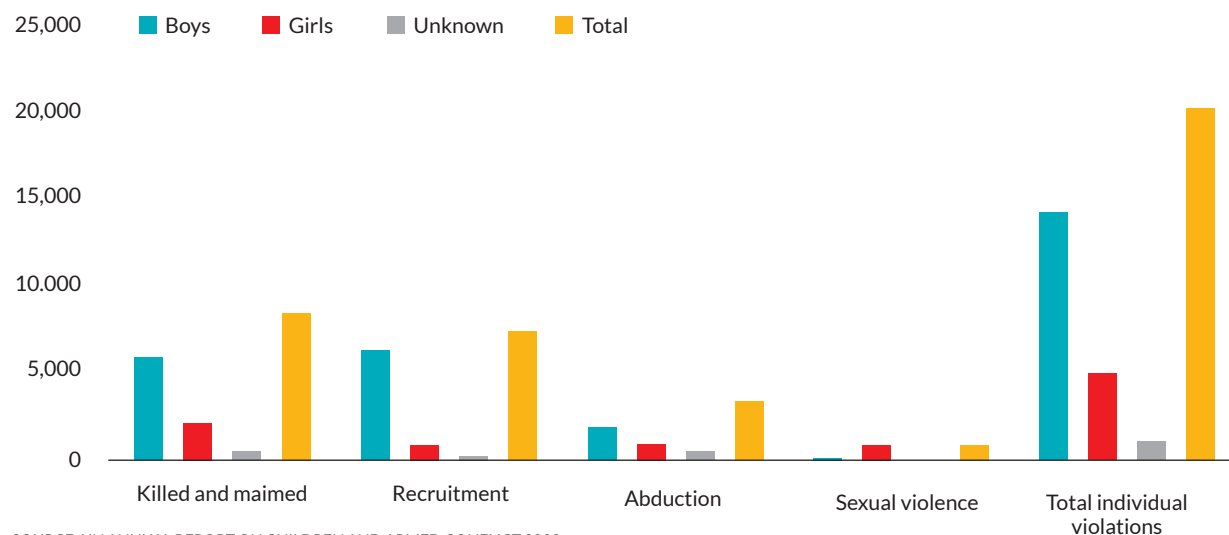
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND GRAVE VIOLATIONS

One child in ten around the world has a disability, and 16% of disabilities worldwide can be attributed to armed conflict.²⁴ Children with disabilities are at high risk of violence and exclusion while also less likely to be able to access services in humanitarian crises. Despite this, the impact of conflict on children with disabilities is under-reported. Results of a survey conducted by the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict among personnel of the UN-led country task forces on monitoring and reporting acknowledged that children with disabilities were not given sufficient space in the mandate of the children and armed conflict agenda.²⁵ Actors should increase attention, resources and their understanding of the specific needs of children with disabilities and adapt their response accordingly.²⁶

“Children who are most vulnerable to grave violations are those who lack education or livelihood opportunities, and are in situations of poverty and displacement, or are children with disabilities among other risk factors. These children are more exposed to recruitment, and re-recruitment, by armed forces and armed groups and to other risks of war, such as gender-based violence.”

Virginia Gamba, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict²⁷

FIGURE 6. THE GENDERED NATURE OF VIOLATIONS



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT 2023

1 KILLING AND MAIMING OF CHILDREN

Following a three-year decline in the number of children killed and maimed,²⁸ the numbers increased from 8,113 in 2021 to 8,647 in 2022. This grave violation had the highest numbers of cases in 2022. Since 2005, 131,311 children have been verified as killed or maimed across conflict situations.

While the killing and maiming of children is reported under the same violation, the total number of 8,647 cases in 2022 breaks down to 2,982 children killed

and 5,633 maimed, while it is not specified in 32 of the cases. The highest reported numbers of children killed in the UN's annual report are in Ukraine, Burkina Faso and the DRC, while the most cases of maiming of children were in the occupied Palestinian territory, Ukraine and Afghanistan.²⁹

Overall, the country with highest number of children killed or maimed in 2022 was Ukraine with 477 children killed and 909 children maimed. The second highest number of cases was in the occupied Palestinian territory, where 1,134 children were killed or maimed, most of them wounded in Gaza.



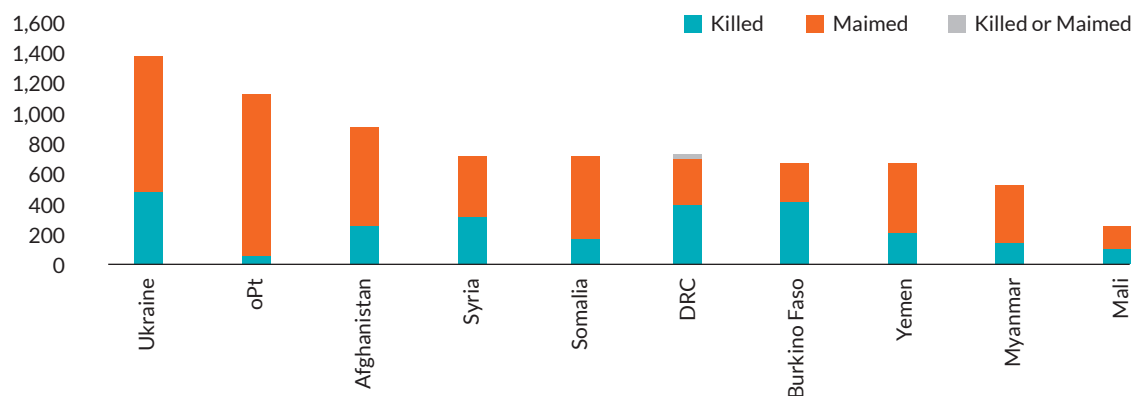
PHOTO: AL-BARAA MANSOOR / SAVE THE CHILDREN

Tamara* is 13 years old and lives in a rural village outside of Taiz, Yemen with her older sister and their mother. One day when she was feeding sheep next to her family's house, a landmine exploded. Tamara was taken to the hospital in Taiz, where the doctors immediately diagnosed that she would need multiple operations.

Medical staff amputated her leg, performed a skin transplant, and removed shrapnel from one of her hands. Tamara has not yet returned to school because she can't walk there on crutches and because she finds holding a pencil difficult due to the shrapnel in one of her hands.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

FIGURE 7. COUNTRIES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF CHILDREN KILLED OR MAIMED IN CONFLICT IN 2022



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT 2023

2022 saw the largest number of children killed and maimed in DRC since it began tracking grave violations there. Most of the 731 children reported as killed and maimed were killed, increasing by almost 50% from 2021. The data also paints a grim picture of developments in Myanmar where 526 children were killed or maimed, a more than double the previous year's total and the highest number recorded. Since 2021, cases also more than doubled in South Sudan, with 80 reported cases of children killed or maimed. In Burkina Faso, where violations have only been reported since 2020, the number of children killed and maimed increased in 2022 to 677 cases, with 424 of those children having been killed.

2022 SAW THE LARGEST NUMBER OF CHILDREN KILLED AND MAIMED IN DRC SINCE IT BEGAN TRACKING GRAVE VIOLATIONS THERE.

The UN reported that in Afghanistan, the number of children killed or maimed decreased considerably from 2,356 in 2021 to 909 in 2022, the lowest number since 2007.³⁰ However, the numbers remain unacceptably high and, following Ukraine and the occupied Palestinian territory, are the third highest across all countries covered by the MRM. There were also reductions in Yemen where 674 children were killed or maimed; although still high, this is the lowest reported number of cases since the conflict started in 2015. The same is observed in Syria with 718 cases, with the reported number of children killed and maimed decreasing year-on-year from 2018 until 2022. In Somalia, the numbers remain high, but there has been a slight decrease since 2019.

Of course, these numbers only capture a partial picture of how children in these countries are affected by conflict – both in terms of child casualties and the wider rights violations and protection risks they experience.



A child's school backpack and a doll among a rubble in Gaza. PHOTO: OLENA DUDCHENKO / SAVE THE CHILDREN

A DECLARATION TO PREVENT HARM: STRENGTHENING THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS FROM THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

In November 2022, *The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)*³¹ was endorsed by 83 states³² in Dublin, Ireland.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is the leading cause of harm to civilians in contemporary armed conflicts.³³ Yet despite this, the Declaration is the first formal international recognition that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a humanitarian issue that must be addressed directly.

The Declaration was developed to strengthen the protection of civilians and reduce harm, recognising that bombing and shelling in populated areas kills and injures civilians, and that yet more people suffer from the damage and destruction caused to housing, schools, hospitals and essential infrastructure, such as water and sanitation systems. It also recognises that children have unique vulnerabilities to the impacts of the use of explosive weapons, drawing on research that finds that children are more likely to suffer from burns, and to die from blast and fragmentation injuries than adults.

The Declaration is a practical tool that sets out an agenda for changes in military policy and practice, as well specific humanitarian measures. It lays out 14 commitments, which commit states to:

- Develop national military policy and practice to impose limits on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, by restricting or refraining when such use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects.
- Develop national policy and practice to protect civilians and civilian objects, including infrastructure critical to the survival of the civilian population, from the foreseeable direct and indirect or reverberating effects of military operations.

- Establish capacities to gather and share data to better understand the humanitarian consequences of military operations, including data on civilian harm and damage to civilian infrastructure, and on the use of explosive weapons.
- Assist victims, their families and affected communities, and facilitate humanitarian access to civilians in need.

The Declaration builds on states' existing obligations under IHL, which represent the absolute minimum standards that parties to conflict must abide by even under the most desperate circumstances. It also recognises that national policies and practices can go beyond these legal minimums – and commits states to develop these operational rules.

Changes in military practice to move away from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a long-term undertaking, but starting to develop changes to policy and practice must begin right away. Implementation will require dialogue and discussion between military and humanitarian actors to develop and shape both policy and practice on an ongoing basis, with a key role to be played by civil society, the ICRC and the UN. While endorser states will likely move through this process at different speeds and take different approaches, implementation must be driven by the shared commitment to strengthen the protection of civilians and reduce harm.

*By Laura Boillot, a Director at Article 36, and Coordinator for the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). **

*Save the Children is a founding member and on the steering committee of INEW.



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN / HUGH KINSELLA CUNNINGHAM

Junior,* 17, experienced a difficult childhood. At the age of 12, he was separated from his parents and three siblings as a result of violence committed by armed groups in his community. While his family sought refuge in a neighbouring country, Junior chose to remain with his uncle in Eastern DRC.

In 2018, Junior and some friends decided to join an armed group to defend their community from

attacks by other armed groups. After eight months, a project implemented by a Save the Children partner organisation secured Junior's release from the armed group. In subsequent years, Junior has had psychological support and lessons. He makes clothes for himself and to sell to earn an income. Junior hopes that all children trapped in armed groups will be freed. He believes that all children have the right to reclaim their childhood.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

2 RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN BY ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS

In 2022 there were 7,610 verified cases of the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, a 20% increase from 2021.³⁵ While fewer than the record high of 8,595 cases in 2020, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces was one of the top two reported grave violations in 2022, as has consistently been the case since 2018.

By far, most of the children recruited are boys, accounting for more than 87% of reported cases where gender is specified. However, there is an increase in the share of girls being recruited children in, for example, the Central African Republic and Somalia.

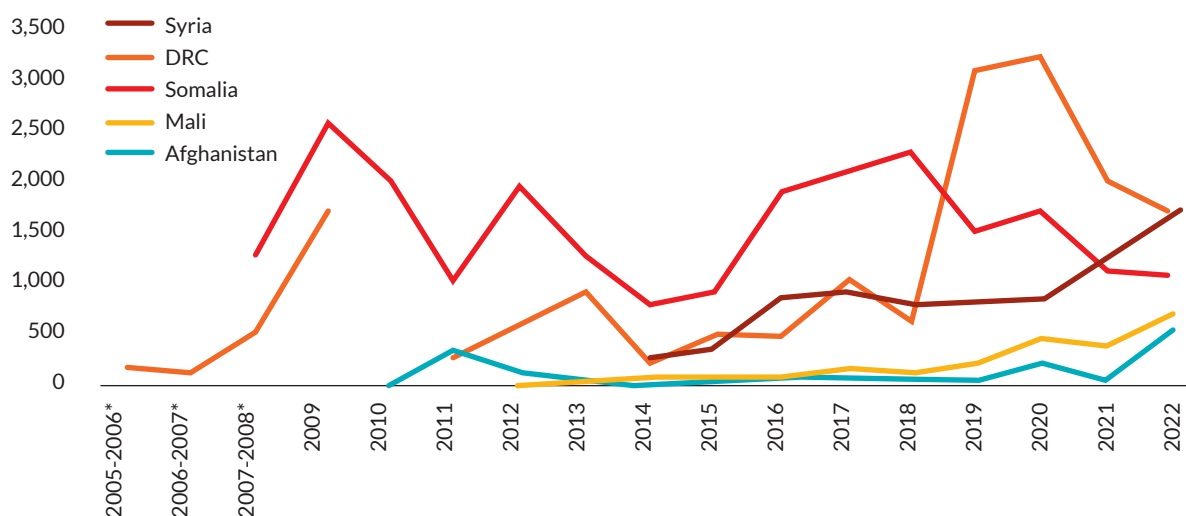
The increase in 2022 in the reported number of children recruited and used by armed forces and groups is to some extent a result of the rise in reported cases in Afghanistan, from 58 children in 2021 to 548 in 2022. There was also a 30% increase in Syria in 2022 and a 75% increase in Mali, as well as cases in conflicts covered by the MRM for the first time in 2022, such as Mozambique and Ukraine. While there was a reduction in reported cases of recruitment and use of children by armed groups in DRC and Somalia, the level in both countries remains unacceptably high and are among the highest of all countries covered by the MRM.

“WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT ISSUES ARREST WARRANTS FOR PEOPLE ACCUSED OF MANIPULATING, TAKING AND USING CHILDREN IN TIMES OF WAR, THESE ARE STRONG SIGNS. WE CAN NO LONGER ACCEPT IMPUNITY FOR WHAT HAPPENS AMONG CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT.”

Alain Deletroz, General Director, Geneva Call³⁶

In addition, 2,496 children were detained for actual or alleged association with armed groups. Detention entails physical, emotional and intellectual deprivation, and is likely to have a particularly severe and lasting effect on children.

FIGURE 8. DEVELOPMENT OVER THE LAST DECADE OF CHILDREN RECRUITED AND USED BY ARMED FORCES IN THE FIVE COUNTRIES WITH THE HIGHEST VERIFIED NUMBERS IN 2022



SOURCE: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S ANALYSIS OF THE UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED

3 ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN

The reported number of children who suffered abduction³⁷ in 2022 increased again from 3,460 cases in 2021 – a record year – to 3,983 cases in 2022. Boys account for 47% of reported cases, girls 26%, and in 27% of cases gender is not specified.

With an increase of 10% in 2022, DRC continued to have the highest reported number of children abducted, 1309. This is among the highest number reported under this violation in any conflict country since reporting started in 2005. The reported number of children abducted in Somalia also remains high, at 694, in spite of a significant decrease from 793 cases in 2021. From 2018 to 2022, DRC and Somalia have accounted for 66% of all verified cases of abductions.

The overall increase in the number of children abducted in 2022 is due to a sharp rise in cases in Myanmar and South Sudan, a doubling of cases in Burkina Faso, increases in cases in Nigeria, Mali, and verified cases in Mozambique.

4 RAPE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

1159 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children³⁸ were verified in 2022, a decrease of 12% from 2021. Girls comprise 98% of verified and recorded child survivors of sexual violence in 2022. This percentage has been consistent over the years.

“WHEN IT COMES TO ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE PERPETUATED AGAINST CHILDREN, WE ARE LAGGING BEHIND. THERE’RE SIMPLY NO EFFORTS TO SECURE JUSTICE FOR THESE CHILDREN, AND THAT’S WHERE WE HAVE TO STEP UP OUR EFFORTS.

“IT CAN NO LONGER BE COST-FREE TO RAPE A CHILD. TOGETHER, WE REALLY HAVE TO REVERSE THIS TREND OF IMPUNITY INTO A CULTURE OF JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY AS A DETERRENT BECAUSE CHILDREN ALSO NEED JUSTICE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND REPARATIONS.”

Pramila Patten, UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict³⁹

In 2022, the highest verified numbers of cases of sexual violence against children in conflict, by far, were reported in DRC, with 484 cases, and Somalia, with 221 cases. However, in both contexts the numbers decreased significantly from 2021 to 2022: by 13% in DRC and almost 30% in Somalia. The decline in reported cases of sexual violence in 2022 in DRC and Somalia is part of a trend in those two countries that started in 2020. Since the start of the UN Secretary-General’s annual reporting of grave violations in 2005, 15,336 children have been verified as survivors of sexual violence in DRC and Somalia, accounting for 64% of all cases verified under this violation.

While all six grave violations are under-reported, this is particularly the case with sexual violence. Girls may not report violations because of the potential backlash and stigma caused by harmful gender norms about girls’ purity, honour and value. Boys who are victims of sexual violence may fear potential stigma and taboo because of gender norms that define that experience as humiliating and emasculating.

5 DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

In 2022, a total of 3,931 incidents of denial of humanitarian access⁴⁰ were reported and verified, a slight decrease from 4,144 incidents in 2020 and 3,945 in 2021. However, as Figure 9 shows, since the first UN annual report on children and conflict in 2005, there has been a sharp increase in the number of reported and verified incidents of the denial of humanitarian access: three-quarters of incidents have occurred over the five years from 2018 to 2022. Though this steep rise could be partly due to under-reporting in previous years, it is nevertheless a deeply alarming trend.

Our analysis shows that since 2005, almost 23,000 such incidents have been verified in the UN annual report on children and armed conflict. These incidents include violence and threats against humanitarian aid workers, looting of humanitarian facilities and life-saving supplies, and physical and administrative barriers.

In a survey conducted by Watchlist in 2022, three out of four respondents observe that increased patterns of insecurity, attacks on humanitarian workers and assets, and restrictions on movement for humanitarians had limited children's access to humanitarian aid in recent years.⁴¹

Unlike the four other violations covered so far, an incident of denial of humanitarian access could impact thousands of children's access to basic services and protection. Access constraints also hamper humanita-

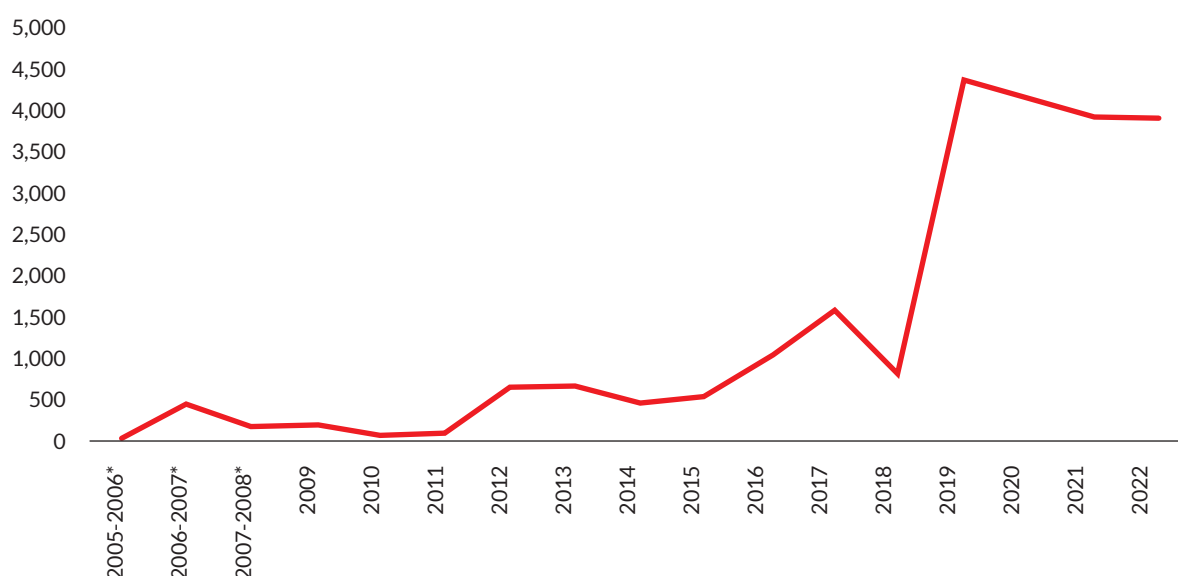
rian agencies' ability to report and to verify grave violations against children in support of the MRM.

The occupied Palestinian territory had the highest number of incidents of denial of humanitarian access, with 1,863 recorded denials in 2022.⁴² Almost all of these occurred in Gaza and were due to denials of permits to seek medical care outside of Gaza. A total of 1,861 permit applications to Israeli authorities for children to exit through the Erez crossing to gain access to specialised medical treatment were denied or not approved in time to reach the children's scheduled hospital appointments. Five children died while waiting for approval or after repeated delays.⁴³

Although decreasing, the number of verified incidents remains high in Yemen, with 901 incidents reported in 2022. While lower than the previous four years, it was the second highest figure across conflict settings in 2022. From 2018–22, almost half of all incidents of denial of humanitarian access covered in the annual UN reports on children and armed conflict occurred in Yemen.

The most alarming rise in incidents of the denial of humanitarian access in 2022 was in Afghanistan with 718, up from 31 cases in 2021, according to the UN.⁴⁴ This amounts to as many as the combined total of all cases reported in the country over all the previous 17 years, beginning in 2005. An alarming rise also occurred in Myanmar. In previous years, there were very few reported incidents of the denial of humanitarian access, but in 2022 there were 77 verified incidents. Sharp rises in incidents of the denial of humanitarian access were also reported in South Sudan and in Burkina Faso in 2022.

FIGURE 9. REPORTED INCIDENTS OF DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS, 2005–22



SOURCE: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S ANALYSIS OF THE UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT COVERING 2005–22

ACCESS DENIED

“We definitely see humanitarian space shrinking. With all these access restrictions and risks that we are facing, it is becoming increasingly difficult to operate at a time when humanitarian needs have dramatically increased. This situation is not sustainable.”

Interview respondent in a survey carried out by Watchlist and Fordham University’s Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs.⁴⁵

Humanitarian access under international law

Humanitarian access, rooted in IHL, and mandated by the UN General Assembly resolution 46/182 (1991), is defined as a two-pronged concept, comprising:

- humanitarian actors’ ability to reach populations in need
- affected populations’ access to assistance and services.⁴⁶

The IHL framework governing humanitarian access consists of four interdependent principles:⁴⁷

1. Each party to an armed conflict has to meet the basic needs of the population under its control.
2. Impartial humanitarian organisations have the right to offer their services to carry out humanitarian activities, especially when the basic needs of the population are not being met.
3. Impartial humanitarian activities carried out in armed conflicts are generally subject to the consent of the parties to the conflict concerned; however, consent cannot be denied arbitrarily.
4. Once impartial humanitarian relief schemes have been agreed to, the parties to the armed conflict, as well as all states that are not party to the conflict, are expected to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief. They may exercise a right of control to verify that the goods are in fact what they are claimed to be and that they are rapidly provided to the civilian population in need.

Full and unimpeded humanitarian access is a fundamental prerequisite to effective humanitarian action. Yet, multiple constraints impinge on access such as: the denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or of entitlements to assistance; restrictions of movement of personnel and humanitarian supplies; physical environment constraints; interference in humanitarian activities (for example, the diversion of aid); active fighting and military operations; and attacks on humanitarian personnel, goods and facilities.⁴⁸

Humanitarian access to populations in need in conflict zones has become more complex in recent years. Humanitarian access may also be denied in cases where the parties to armed conflicts have imposed blockades during the conduct of hostilities to prevent the passage of goods, weapons or people to or from a belligerent or a specific area in conflict.

At the outset, international law is clear. If the civilian population is inadequately provided for, the parties to the conflict must provide for free passage of humanitarian relief supplies.⁴⁹ In both international armed conflict, including occupation, and non-international armed conflict, customary international law now provides that the parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right control.⁵⁰

The passage of humanitarian aid can of course be hampered by the conduct of hostilities. But if a siege, blockade or embargo due to the hostilities has the effect of starving the population, the blockading party must provide for free passage of humanitarian relief supplies.⁵¹

IHRL continues to apply, alongside IHL, in times of armed conflict, whether of an international or of a non-international character. The two legal frameworks are complementary and not mutually exclusive.⁵² Human rights treaties offer a legal framework through certain key rights, such as the right to life, the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to food, the right to water, and the right to health. States must respect, protect, and fulfil these rights. The major human rights law instruments do not refer explicitly to humanitarian assistance and access. However, some references are found in, among others, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which has several provisions that necessitate the facilitation of humanitarian relief to children in need, including ensuring that children seeking refugee status “receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance.”⁵³

Denial of humanitarian access to children and attacks against humanitarian workers assisting children may constitute a war crime and a crime against humanity.⁵⁴

6 ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

The number of recorded attacks on schools and hospitals⁵⁵ increased by 74% in 2022, from 1,323 in 2021 to 2,308. This is the highest number of incidents verified since the record year of 2014. These incidents included attacks on school and hospital buildings, the military use of schools and hospitals, and attacks on health and education personnel. Despite this worrying increase, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, applying a different methodology to their reporting, documented an even higher number, with more than 3,000 attacks on education alone in 2022.⁵⁶

This increase can largely be attributed to the high number of incidents in Ukraine, 781, which constitutes one-third of the attacks on schools and hospitals verified across all conflicts in 2022. But the increase was also steep in many other contexts. The second largest number of reported attacks on schools and hospitals occurred in Myanmar, with 227 incidents, a significant increase from 80 in 2021. Attacks on schools and hospitals in 2022 also increased in Burkina Faso, Sudan and in South Sudan. In Somalia in 2022, following a fall in attacks on schools and hospitals over the previous four years, the number of reported cases also rose.



Illia,* 17, poses for a portrait at his damaged school outside of Kyiv. PHOTO: OLEKSANDR KHOMENKO/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Prior to the escalation of the war in Ukraine, about 400 children attended this school in a village outside Kyiv on a daily basis. Following the escalation in fighting in March 2022, the

school's premises have been severely damaged. Children could only attend online classes until a Digital Learning Centre was set up in the community with the help of Save the Children.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION

The Safe Schools Declaration is an inter-governmental political commitment dedicated to protecting education in armed conflict.⁵⁷ It outlines a set of commitments to strengthen the protection of education from attack and restrict the use of schools and universities for military purposes. By endorsing the Declaration, states also commit to implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.⁵⁸

According to the GCPEA, 6,700 students and educators were killed or harmed in the attacks on education in 2022. Attacks on education can destroy educational infrastructure, depriving learners of access to safe and quality education, and jeopardising their future and access to other essential services. The impact of these attacks is devastating for all children, it can cause psychological trauma, injury, or even death, all of which further diminishes their ability to return to school and undermine the prospects for sustainable peace and the long-term development of conflict-affected regions.

The Safe Schools Declaration aims to prevent these attacks from happening by encouraging states to adopt concrete measures to protect education and ensure continued safe access to good-quality education in conflict. Since it was opened for endorsement in May 2015, 118 states⁵⁹ have joined the Declaration, and many have started to take steps to implement it.⁶⁰

OVERALL TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

Although numbers of grave violations increased in 2022, we observe a sharp decrease in the overall numbers of verified violations in contexts such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen over the previous years. However, despite this overall decrease, the trend does not necessarily apply to all violations, with numbers of some violations increasing.

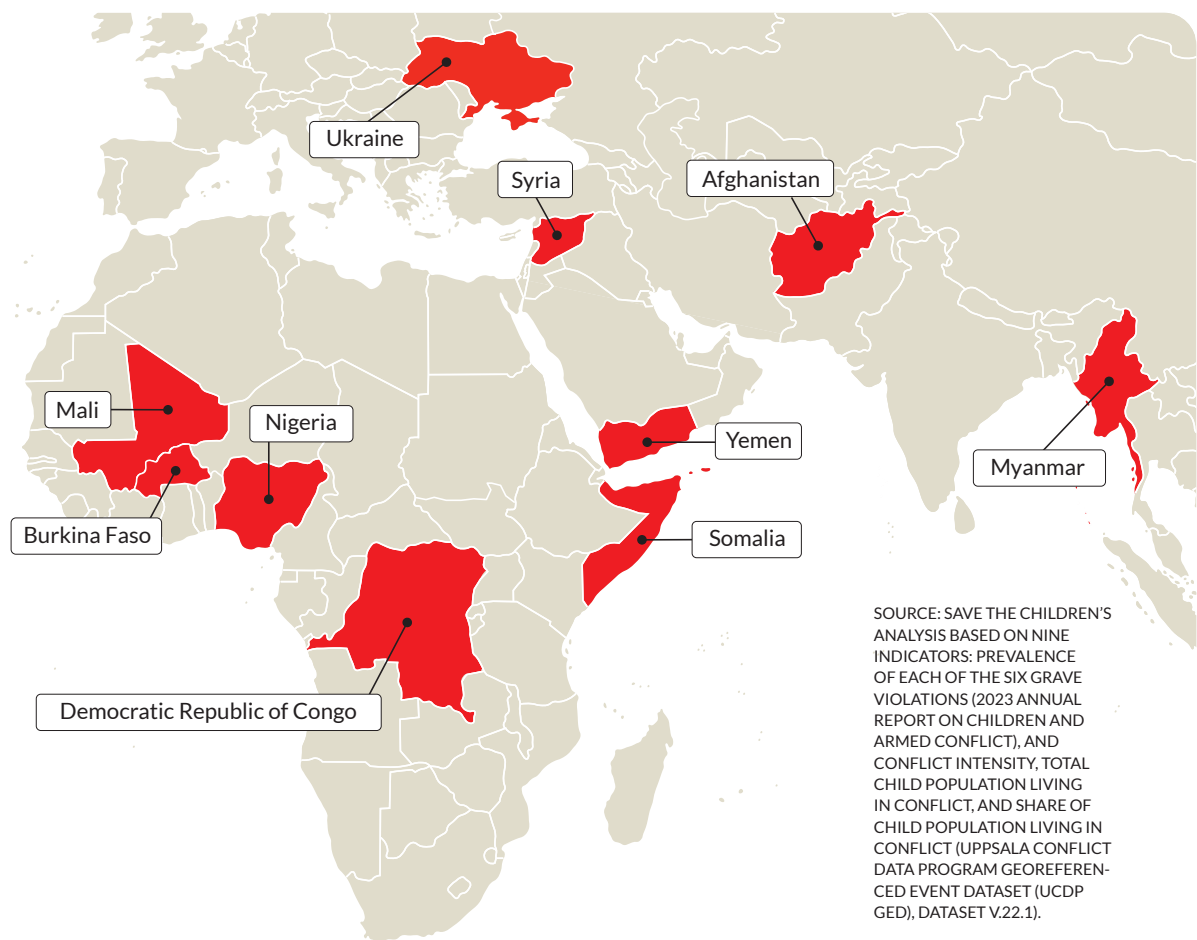
According to the UN, in Afghanistan, the number of children killed and maimed has declined significantly. However, cases of recruitment of children into armed forces and the denial of humanitarian access are on the rise.⁶¹ In DRC, recruitment is decreasing, but more cases of children killed and maimed are being recorded, as well as abductions, sexual violence, and incidents of attack on schools and hospitals. In Yemen, cases of five of the six violations are declining, but attacks on schools and hospitals are on the rise. In Somalia, we see a more consistent decrease across violations.

While numbers of cases of different violations may fluctuate, a simple and salient principle remains constant: for any child in any context, one grave violation of any kind is one too many.

ACCORDING TO THE UN, IN AFGHANISTAN, THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN KILLED AND MAIMED HAS DECLINED SIGNIFICANTLY. HOWEVER, CASES OF RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN INTO ARMED FORCES AND THE DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS ARE ON THE RISE.

3 THE 10 WORST CONFLICT COUNTRIES TO BE A CHILD IN 2022

FIGURE 10. THE TEN WORST CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES FOR CHILDREN 2022



Combining the Peace Research Institute Oslo's research on children living in conflict zones and analysis of the UN's data on grave violations for 2022 and analysis of the UN's data on grave violations for 2022, as reported in the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict, Save the Children identified the ten worst conflict-affected countries for children as: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

The top 3 worst conflict-affected countries to be a child in 2022:

1. Democratic Republic of Congo
2. Mali
3. Myanmar



Maha*, 10, pictured at school with her prosthetic hand after being severely injured by a landmine while collecting firewood with her 16-year-old sister, Maya*, in Taiz, Yemen, PHOTO: AL-BARAA MANSOOR / SAVE THE CHILDREN

In 2021, these countries were Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

Save the Children's analysis and determination is based on nine indicators. Six indicators show in turn the prevalence of verified cases or incidents of each of the six grave violations and three further indicators

draw on the Peace Research Institute Oslo's research to show conflict intensity measured in turn by battle deaths, total child population living in conflict-affected areas, and the share of children living in conflict zones relative to the child population of the country (see methodology page 48). Countries included are conflict situations covered by the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict.

WHY IS NOT THE MOST LETHAL CONFLICT IN THE WORLD NOT ON THIS LIST?

The rating and the countries presented here are based on 9 indicators, 6 out of which rely on the verification of grave violations against children as presented in the UN annual report on children and armed conflict. Despite the PRIO data (see page 14) showing that more people (adults and children) have been killed in the conflict in Ethiopia than in any other country in the world in 2022, the number of grave violations verified and presented in the 2023 UN annual report on children and armed conflict are still low compared to many other conflict settings. In Ethiopia, 270 violations are verified and presented in the report, violations that are serious and many, but does not reflect the scale of conflict intensity and violations. In the 2023 UN annual report on children and armed

conflict it is stated that *"the information does not represent the full scale of violations against children, as verification depends on many factors. A much larger number of allegations of recruitment and use was received and is under verification."*⁶² We are expecting the number of grave violations in Ethiopia to rise as ongoing violations are reported, verified, and presented in next year's UN annual report on children and armed conflict



Want to explore the data we make use of here in more detail? Check out: <https://data.stopwaronchildren.org/>

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Key facts about children and conflict in DRC in 2022:

1,697 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

731 children killed or maimed

1309 children abducted

138 attacks on schools and hospitals

12 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

484 verified cases of sexual violence against children

5,543 battle deaths (children and adults)

11,089,497 children living in conflict-affected areas

22% of children living in conflict-affected areas

DRC ranks as the worst conflict-affected country to be a child in 2022. Children in the country face waves of violent conflict, regular disease outbreaks, frequent natural disasters and prevailing poverty. The severity of the crisis prevents most children living in conflict-affected areas⁶³ from attending school. For those who can, their access to education is hampered by violence, with 121 incidents of attacks against schools and hospitals reported last year. In 2022, a total of 825 schools were closed, affecting nearly 325,000 children.⁶⁴ 71% of these closures were caused by attacks by armed groups.

The intensification of violence has led to soaring cases of murder, maiming and abduction of children. In 2022, DRC recorded the largest number of children killed or maimed in the country since reporting started, with 731 children affected, a 50% increase on the previous year. DRC continues to record the highest number of kidnapped children, most of whom are forcibly recruited into armed groups. 17-year-old former child soldier Junior* (see page 24) told Save the Children teams, *"I spent eight months in an armed group where I was in charge of looking for food for the fighters. Often, I was forced to go into the city to steal in*

order to fulfil these obligations. I'd only get rest after providing sustenance for our chief. It was hard for me."

Rape and other acts of sexual violence against children also followed an upward trajectory. In 2021 and 2022, DRC recorded the highest number of verified cases of sexual violence against children, with 284 cases. The Humanitarian response in DRC continues to be severely under-funded, with only 53% of humanitarian needs covered in 2022.⁶⁵

It is critical that donors and decision-makers:

- increase flexible funding for the response in DRC
- ensure that the Safe Schools Declaration is effectively implemented and that its guidelines are disseminated among actors
- ensure unfettered humanitarian access to enable the delivery of life-saving assistance for children
- support strengthening the existing mechanism to document and monitor grave violations and hold perpetrators to account.

“THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO IS COMMITTED TO WORKING FURTHER TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE THE STATE OF SOCIAL ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN INTEGRATED PROTECTION, EDUCATION, CARE AND HEALTH SERVICES FOR MORE THAN A MILLION CHILDREN DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT.”

Modeste Mutinga Mutushayi, Minister of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Actions and National Solidarity, Democratic Republic of Congo.⁶⁶

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

MALI

Key facts about children and conflict in Mali in 2022:

689 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

252 children killed or maimed

129 children abducted

100 attacks on schools and hospitals

85 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

43 reported cases of sexual violence against children

3,641 battle deaths (adults and children)

8,968,906 children living in conflict-affected areas

75% of children living in conflict-affected areas

In recent years, Mali has consistently ranked among the 10 worst conflict-affected countries for a child to live in, but reached a grim peak in 2022, being ranked as the second worst conflict-affected country for a child to live in. Most areas of the country experience regular attacks by non-state armed groups, with children particularly at risk of being abducted, recruited,

and used by armed forces and groups, being killed or maimed, and being subject to sexual violence. These attacks often lead to entire villages being displaced.

Children have told Save the Children staff how they were made to watch family members being killed, how they were forced to reveal their parents' whereabouts, and how they were kidnapped by groups to help herd stolen cattle or even join armed groups.

Assa,* age 10, told us how she had to flee after seeing armed men kill the men in her village. When crossing the river by boat to get to safety, she saw other children and families drowning and was terrified her boat would sink too. She is currently living with her family in another village, but her dream is to be able to return to her own village and to play with her friends. One 13-year-old boy told us his wish was for "schools to become the place where we can live in freedom."

Despite all of this, the humanitarian response continues to be severely underfunded, with the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022 only receiving 43% of the funds needed.⁶⁷

To provide Malian children with a better future, the international community must:

- increase support to document and monitor grave violations following the departure of the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
- increase flexible humanitarian funding and prioritise support for the protection crisis in Mali
- ensure commitment from all actors to implement the Safe Schools Declaration
- support unhindered access to ensure delivery of life-saving assistance for children.



Children's drawings in a Save the Children school showing what they saw when their villages were attacked.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

MYANMAR

Key facts about children and conflict in Myanmar in 2022:

268 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

526 children killed or maimed

286 children abducted

227 attacks on schools and hospitals

77 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

3 reported cases of sexual violence against children

2,750 battle deaths (adults and children)

16,091,888 children living in conflict-affected areas

88% of children living in conflict-affected areas



One of Daw Sung Chin's* children in Myanmar. In 2021, Daw Sung Chin and her family were displaced from their home because of concerns about conflict and relocated to a remote village. She and her husband have started farming here, but they struggle to feed their children.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN MYANMAR

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

AFGHANISTAN

Key facts about children and conflict in Afghanistan in 2022:

548 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

909 children killed or maimed

8 children abducted

152 attacks on schools and hospitals

718 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

13 reported cases of sexual violence against children

1,545 battle deaths (adults and children)

15,500,068 children living in conflict-affected areas

81% of children living in conflict-affected areas



Gulalai's* daughter, Harija*, 6, Jawzjan, Afghanistan.
PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan saw the ending of active conflict throughout the country from late 2021 and in 2022. Before that, most conflict-related threats against children were the result of active hostilities between the then-incumbent government and NATO forces and the Taliban, with children and education, health and other civilian facilities attacked. After August 2021, the number of attacks on civilians, including children, significantly decreased.

The reduction in the number of children affected by armed conflict since August 2021, while notable, warrants careful scrutiny. Instances of grave violations have witnessed a marked decline, but underlying challenges persist, including the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance. The other major violations, including issues such as school attacks, military use of schools, abductions of children, and denial of humanitarian access have significantly decreased from 2021 to 2022.

The data on the recruitment and use of children by armed forces, a grave violation that marred the pre-August 2021 period, has also seen some improvement, suggesting a potential shift away from the exploitation of children in combat or supporting roles. However,

concerns for children's vulnerability and exposure to dangerous situations persist.

Despite a notable decrease in overall armed violence, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan documented 2,106 civilian casualties (700 fatalities, 1,406 injuries), including children, between mid-August 2021 and mid-June 2022. The predominant cause of these civilian casualties can be traced to targeted attacks carried out by the armed group self-identifying as 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province.' These attacks specifically targeted ethnic and religious minority communities in locations where they, for example, go to school, worship, and go about their daily routines.⁶⁸

In summary, the post-August 2021 period has seen nuanced developments in the situation of children and conflict in Afghanistan. While there are some signs of improvement, that cautious optimism is further tempered by persistent challenges and uncertainties. While recognising the complexities inherent in achieving meaningful change for children, there is hope that we will see continued attention and efforts towards creating a more secure and stable environment for Afghan children.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

BURKINA FASO

Key facts on children and conflict in Burkina Faso in 2022:

125 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

677 children killed or maimed

500 children abducted

172 attacks on schools and hospitals

79 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

20 reported cases of sexual violence against children

2,597 battle deaths (adults and children)

6,218,246 children living in conflict-affected areas

53% of children living in conflict-affected areas



A portrait of Souleymane, aged 14, inside his home in Yatenga province, Burkina Faso.

PHOTO: ADRIEN BITIBALY / SAVE THE CHILDREN

Burkina Faso was one of the worst conflict-affected countries in the world to be a child in 2022. One in four people was in need of urgent assistance (more than 4.9 million people).⁶⁹ It is also one of the world's most neglected crises, with less than 50% of funding secured to meet humanitarian needs in 2022.⁷⁰

Widespread insecurity between multiple armed groups is triggering a massive displacement crisis. As of the end of 2022, 1.9 million people were internally displaced,⁷¹ almost half of whom were children.⁷² More severe and frequent climate shocks, including drought and flooding, are also uprooting families from their homes, further restricting their access to essential services and livelihood opportunities. Food insecurity and insufficient livelihoods, coupled with a lack of good-quality nutrition services, are perpetuating children's vulnerability to malnutrition, disease and multi-dimensional poverty. Limited access to good-quality and safe education is denying children their right to learn, entrenching gender disparities and inequalities, and exposing them to protection risks. In 2022, a total of 6,253 primary and post primary schools were closed due to insecurity, almost of quarter of educational institutions⁷³ and over a million children were out of school.⁷⁴

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

Save the Children is calling for:

- the government of Burkina Faso to facilitate humanitarian access to affected populations in hard-to-reach areas
- all parties to the conflict to uphold IHL, prioritise the safety and security of humanitarian personnel, and enable them to carry out their duties with independence and impartiality
- the international community, including donors, to provide organisations with flexible funding to support the scale-up of urgent, life-saving services to the most at-risk communities
- children in all conflict-affected countries, such as those in the Central Sahel, to be given the attention, solidarity and protection they are entitled to and that they need to rebuild their lives.

“WE, THE CHILDREN OF BURKINA, HAVE ONLY ONE WISH: FOR PEACE TO RETURN.”

Bande,* from Burkina Faso, taking part in the child consultations ahead of the 2023 Oslo Conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict

NIGERIA

Key facts about children and conflict in Nigeria in 2022:

168 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

53 children killed or maimed

285 children abducted

10 attacks on schools and hospitals

6 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

81 reported cases of sexual violence against children

2,882 battle deaths (adults and children)

66,519,775 children living in conflict-affected areas

59% of children living in conflict-affected areas

Over the last few years, the situation for children in Nigeria has significantly deteriorated due to protracted armed conflict as well as the compounding effects of climate change. These twin threats are having a profound impact on the well-being and safety of children. In Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) states, which are the epicentre of the conflict, children face significant protection concerns.

In 2022, 3.6 million people were internally displaced in Nigeria, of whom 1.9 million were living in protracted displacement in the north-eastern state of Borno.⁷⁵ Displaced people are often forced to live in overcrowded camps, where they are denied access to education, and face hunger, malnutrition, and other health-related issues.

Children also face high levels of violence. Already one of the conflict-affected countries with the highest reported numbers of children raped and sexually abused in 2021,⁷⁶ the rate of reported cases of sexual abuse and violence against children increased further in 2022, with 81 registered cases. 2022 also saw an increase in cases of abducted children with 285 cases and 168 cases of children being recruited by armed actors, sometimes to carry out domestic work. In September 2022, a total of 934 schools were closed due to insecurity, affecting many thousands of children.⁷⁷

Save the Children is calling for the government to:

- enforce the implementation of the Child's Rights Act nationwide, emphasising the need for one state that is yet to pass the bill to undertake domestication
- institutionalise legal frameworks such as the Child Rights Law, including planning within the annual budget cycles in order to see impact on the ground
- establish and monitor clear indicators for budget allocation to healthcare, to ending child marriage, and to ensuring access to good-quality education for children
- provide support and resources to ensure the needs of children are met, particularly in the face of environmental and humanitarian crises
- support coordination in safeguarding the rights and future of Nigerian children.

I Feel
Protected
When
there is
no war
and I can
Play Outside



A drawing by a child in Nigeria. PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

SOMALIA

Key facts about children and conflict in Somalia in 2022

1,094 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

712 children killed or maimed

694 children abducted

45 attacks on schools and hospitals

18 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

221 reported cases of sexual violence against children

3,115 battle deaths (adults and children)

4,554,861 children living in conflict-affected areas

63% of children living in conflict-affected areas

“AS GLOBAL LEADERS, IT’S OUR DUTY TO PROTECT AND INVEST IN CHILDREN’S WELLBEING.”

Abshir Omar Jama,
Foreign Minister of Somalia⁷⁸



Abu,* age 7, at a camp in south-western Somalia. Abu was shining shoes with his friends when he was injured in a bomb blast. PHOTO: MUSTAFA SAEED / SAVE THE CHILDREN

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

SYRIA

Key facts about children and conflict in Syria in 2022:

1,699 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

718 children killed or maimed

4 children abducted

67 attacks on schools and hospitals

7 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

3 reported cases of sexual violence against children

1,637 battle deaths (adults and children)

8,181,564 children living in conflict-affected areas

99% of children living in conflict-affected areas



Sanaa*, 8, writing on the board during a class in Save the Children's school in a displacement camp in North East Syria. PHOTO: RONI AHMED / SAVE THE CHILDREN

In 2022, children in Syria continued to face severe crisis, driven by 12 years of conflict and a deepening economic crisis, with rising prices and currency devaluations making it increasingly difficult for families to afford food, water, rent, school fees and other essentials. By the end of the year, more than 15 million people required some form of humanitarian assistance, up from 14.6 million at the end of 2021. For the first time, this included people living in every sub-district of the country. Drought, water shortages and cholera outbreaks all exacerbated levels of need across the country.⁷⁹

Syria in 2022 had the highest number of any country in the world of reported cases of children recruited and used by armed forces and groups – a total of 1,699 children signifying a 30% increase from the previous year – with almost all of these children used in combat. Children across the country face protection risks due to the deteriorating humanitarian situation, including child labour, child marriage, as well as violence and exploitation. Across northern Syria, children face serious protection threats caused by conflict, including displacement, being separated from families or forced out of school. In Al Hol and Roj, thousands of children, including Syrians, Iraqis and third-country nationals are trapped with limited freedom of movement, facing security threats and limited access to basic services,

including education. At the end of 2022, almost 7,000 third-country national children required safe repatriation with their families, despite a 60% increase in repatriations from the previous year.⁸⁰

Save the Children is calling for all parties to the conflict to:

- respect their obligations under IHL to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure
- end grave violations against children, including killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the recruitment and use of children by all parties.
- end the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

An inclusive political solution to the conflict has remained out of reach but is desperately needed. Despite rising needs, the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022 was only 53% funded. Funding continues to be highly politicised, preventing early recovery efforts that would enable families to rebuild their lives.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

UKRAINE

Key facts about children and conflict in Ukraine in 2022:

92 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

1,386 children killed or maimed

92 children abducted

781 attacks on schools and hospitals

10 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

3 reported cases of sexual violence against children

82,609 battle deaths (adults and children)

6,945,528 children living in conflict-affected areas

81% of children living in conflict-affected areas



Maxim*, 5 sitting at the fence of his house hit by shelling, Kyiv region. PHOTO: OLENA DUDCHENKO / SAVE THE CHILDREN

In 2022, at least 17.7 million people in Ukraine were in need of humanitarian assistance —around 45% of the pre-conflict population.⁸¹ Around 7.5 million children in Ukraine face grave risks, including physical harm, emotional distress and displacement.⁸²

In 2022, a total of 1,386 children were reported to have been killed and maimed.⁸³ The majority of civilian casualties were caused by explosive weapons with wide-area effects, such as artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, missiles and air strikes. It is a grim reminder that explosive weapons should not be used anywhere near populated areas, such as towns and villages.

Despite the cessation of active fighting in some areas, the high contamination of explosive weapons, unexploded ordnance and mines poses a grave danger. More than 2 million children are at risk due to mines and unexploded ordnance, with contamination increasing significantly since February 2021.

501 educational facilities were reported as damaged or destroyed in 2022, with 383 damaged and 118 completely destroyed.⁸⁴ Many are still used as collective centres housing displaced people; others are used as distribution sites, and some for military purposes.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

Save the Children is calling for:

- all parties to the conflict to halt the use of indiscriminate and non-precision weapons, including cluster munitions, and for an immediate halt in attacks targeting civilians, civilian infrastructure, schools, hospitals and humanitarian facilities
- all parties to the conflict to respect IHL and recognise the life-saving, non-political, and non-commercial nature of humanitarian action
- the international community to have a comprehensive approach to accountability, including judicial accountability, but also victims' right to truth, reparation and non-repetition
- a comprehensive investigation that focuses on grave and other violations of children's rights.

YEMEN

Key facts about children and conflict in Yemen in 2022

198 children recruited and used by armed forces and groups

674 children killed or maimed

18 children abducted

117 attacks on schools and hospitals

901 incidents of denial of humanitarian access

6 reported cases of sexual violence against children

3,199 battle deaths (adults and children)

12,975,290 children living in conflict-affected areas

89% of children living in conflict-affected areas

Yemen continues to be one of the worst places in the world to be a child. Despite a reduction of conflict activities in the country following a six-month truce, 2022 saw one child killed or injured every day;⁸⁵ explosive ordnance, including landmines, accounted for more than half of child casualties.⁸⁶ By the end of 2022, more than 11,000 children had been killed and maimed since the beginning of the conflict in 2015.⁸⁷

The impact of the protracted conflict in Yemen and its induced economic crisis has left millions of families struggling to meet even the most basic requirements for their children, such as food and education. More than 17 million people, comprising over 50% of the population, have experienced high levels of acute food insecurity. Children are disproportionately affected; with 2.2 million suffering from acute malnutrition – among the highest number in any country in the world.⁸⁸

2.7 million children, including 600,000 internally displaced children, are deprived of their right to an education, subjecting them to further protection risks.⁸⁹ Other risks, including child labour, early and forced marriage, and recruitment into armed groups, continue to soar across the country as more and more families are forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms to manage the impact of the crisis. More than 9 million children require protection assistance.⁹⁰ However, child protection only received 9.4% of the requested funding in 2022.

To give children in Yemen the chance of a better future, it is critical that:

- parties to the conflict prioritise the protection of civilians, especially children, and comply with IHL
- parties to the conflict prioritise the clearance of explosive ordnance with long-lasting impacts and provide explosive ordnance risk education to safeguard children
- the international community must urge conflict parties to recommit to the truce and boost funding to the country's Humanitarian Response Plan, including child protection, to meet children's pressing needs and uphold their rights.

“IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY TO EXCHANGE AND UNDERTAKE ACTIONS AIMING TO INCREASE POLITICAL WILL AND ADVOCACY TO END VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS AND TO HOLD PERPETRATORS TO ACCOUNT AND INCREASE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR REINTEGRATION PROGRAMMES THAT ARE FLEXIBLE, MULTI-YEAR, MULTI-SECTOR AND ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND PLANS.”

Megi Fino, Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania⁹¹

CHILD PROTECTION AND PRIMARY PREVENTION

Within humanitarian response, the humanitarian sector often focuses on responding to harm when it occurs. At the 2023 Oslo Conference and beyond, we have seen a steady increase of calls across the humanitarian sector to prevent harm before it occurs and to do so more systematically. Particularly, as we know that harm caused to children during conflict can have a devastating effect, with impacts spanning their well-being and adversely affecting their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development.

Primary prevention is about identifying and addressing the risk factors and root causes of harm to children at population level – and not waiting for those risk factors to turn into actual harm. By nature, this requires a multi-sectoral approach.

If lack of access to education, social norms and household food insecurity are identified among the main drivers of the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, for example, then this requires targeted interventions by food security, education and child protection actors across the affected population.

Children, their families, communities and societies also have their own protective mechanisms, including children's agency, peer networks, family ties and support systems. Therefore, an important element of primary prevention includes our role as humanitarian actors in supporting and strengthening these protective factors during humanitarian crises.

Why is it so important to prioritise prevention?

If we wait to act until a protection crisis breaks out, it is already too late. Every child has the right to protection from all forms of violence, including in humanitarian settings. Preventing harm to children before it occurs, wherever possible, is an ethical responsibility of all humanitarian actors. Additionally, addressing the root causes of harm to children improves the sustainability and long-term impact of humanitarian responses. It also increases the cost-effectiveness of child protection interventions: by allocating more resources towards preventative strategies we save money by reducing the need for more costly response interventions.

What is being done on prevention for child protection?

As the child protection community, we have been prioritising prevention in child protection in humanitarian action. The Prevention Initiative⁹² of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action is a body of work that seeks to invest in building the foundations for a more prevention-focused child protection response, including through the development of practical tools and generation of evidence on primary prevention.

A Primary Prevention Framework⁹³ is currently being tested in South Sudan and Niger, which should provide an essential evidence base to move forward this agenda.

How can we scale up a prevention approach to humanitarian response?

The Alliance sees three key areas that would scale up a prevention approach and ensure the protection of children in conflict before harm occurs. This includes:

- 1. A lens-shift** for the protection sector to invest significantly in changing the culture of humanitarian action to be more prevention focused alongside response. This will require increasing awareness and understanding of primary prevention.
- 2. Invest more** in research to showcase the effectiveness of prevention approaches to minimise harm in a cost-efficient manner.
- 3. A whole-of-system shift** for donors, humanitarian leadership at all levels and frontline workers. This must include sectors outside of child protection, as primary prevention is only possible through a multi-sectoral approach.

Preventing harm to children is everybody's responsibility. In many cases, it is possible to address the root causes of harm rather than merely treating the symptoms. This approach fosters collaboration across humanitarian sectors, contributes to bridging the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus, creates sustainable change, and promotes holistic well-being and protective environments for children, families and their communities.

By Hani Mansourian, co-coordinator of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action⁹⁴



PHOTO: CICILIA ADE HILLARY/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

Simon,* age 13, with a red jacket in the photo, lived with his family in Khartoum before the fighting broke out in Sudan. He was worried by the sound of guns and the sight of many people fleeing the conflict. He went to stay with his uncle, who was also in Khartoum. But when he came back to his family and his neighbourhood, he found that armed men had destroyed most of the houses. Lots of people were fleeing. Simon decided to escape with them, even though he wasn't with his parents or other family members. After a week on the move, Simon and the group he was with reached a city in White Nile.

Fortunately, Simon was identified as an unaccompanied minor by staff from the International Organisation for Migration. They referred him to Save the Children to trace his family's whereabouts. Save the Children worked with partners to trace Simon's relatives in South Sudan and reunify him with them. Now, after spending more than three months travelling on his own, Simon is thankfully back home with his family in Juba.

* Name changed to protect anonymity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We welcome the commitments made at the 2023 Oslo conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict. We urge states to take immediate steps to ensure those commitments are effectively implemented. And we encourage more states and other actors to follow suit.

As the stark findings of this report make glaringly clear, children affected by armed conflict need action now.

The following recommendations are aimed specifically at states, since it is states 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 states to:

UPHOLD STANDARDS OF CONDUCT IN CONFLICT

- Take all possible measures to protect children in armed conflict, in line with IHL and other applicable international laws and standards.
- Consistently demand that all parties to conflict adhere to these standards, regardless of the context. When states hold their allies to a lower standard, this fundamentally undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the international order and of attempts to strengthen the protection of children.
- Endorse and fully implement the Safe Schools Declaration on protecting education during conflict, ensuring its comprehensive integration into national policies and practices – and encourage other states to do the same.
- Endorse and fully implement the Political Declaration on the use of EWIPA to strengthen the protection of civilians from the humanitarian harm explosive weapons cause. Encourage and support other states to do the same.
- Ratify and fully implement international instruments to protect children from recruitment, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Paris Principles, and the Paris Commitments. Encourage other states to do the same.
- Ensure that all children associated with armed forces and groups, including those with alleged or actual affiliation with proscribed groups, are recognised first and foremost as victims and that their protection and rights are prioritised. Ensure that children are only detained as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time, and that their rights and protection are prioritised in line with international juvenile justice standards as well as IHRL.
- Work with parties to armed conflict to ensure their full compliance with IHL, IHRL and International Refugee Law and their respect for norms and standards on civilian protection. This includes strengthening training and other capacity-building measures to foster a culture of respect for civilian protection and ensure that partners and allies:
 - understand and take into account the reverberating effects of military actions on civilians and civilian infrastructure
 - are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of civilian populations, including the indispensable role of mitigating civilian harm
 - record casualties according to internationally agreed standards.
- Sign and ratify the International Arms Trade Treaty, ensuring steps are taken to suspend and/or ban the supply, export or transfer of arms, weapons and other military assets, including dual-use goods, to parties to conflict where there is an overriding risk that such items may be used to commit or facilitate violations of IHL, IHRL or other serious crimes against civilians, including children.
- Develop a national strategy for the protection of children in conflict that brings together military policies and operational procedures, diplomacy, and humanitarian, development and peace approaches.
- Support and fund dedicated resources for embedding and adequately resourcing child protection and children's rights expertise in all peacekeeping missions – UN, African Union, EU, NATO, and those of other regional organisations.

HOLD PERPETRATORS TO ACCOUNT

- Ensure that international and national accountability mechanisms prioritise the effective investigation and prosecution of crimes and violations against children, including through:
 - ensuring that crimes against children are explicitly included in their mandates
 - resourcing dedicated child-specific and gender-sensitive expertise
 - strengthening collaboration between accountability mechanisms to avoid re-traumatisation of survivors, notably children.
- Support, diplomatically and financially, the mandate of the Special Representative on children and armed conflict and advocate for the complete, accurate and impartial listing of perpetrators in the UN Secretary-General's annual children and armed conflict report. Invest financial and diplomatic resources in strengthening the UN's systematic monitoring and reporting of violations of children's rights in conflict (via the MRM), including the tracking of age- and sex-disaggregated data.
- Provide diplomatic and financial support for the African Union's work on children and armed conflict.
- For members of the UN Security Council: Actively support – and refrain from impeding or vetoing – Council action to hold perpetrators of grave violations of children's rights in conflict to account. Security Council members have a particular responsibility to champion adherence to IHL, promote independent accountability mechanisms, identify and call out perpetrators, and make full use of the tools and resolutions currently available to the Security Council designed to protect children from grave rights violations.

SUPPORT CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY

- Recognise the life-saving importance of child protection interventions and commit to closing the gap in child protection funding by prioritising and investing in children and their protection. This includes:
 - scaling up sustainable, multi-year, flexible, stand-alone child protection support to all children impacted by conflict, including child protection case management; family strengthening and support to unaccompanied and separated children; mental health and psychosocial support services; and capacity strengthening of community-level child protection mechanisms
 - ensuring child protection is integrated, mainstreamed, and included in multi-sector, gender-, age-, and disability-responsive programming that recognises the centrality of protection as an obligation that cuts across interventions for

children, including ensuring safe education and continued learning, and age-responsive, gender-based violence prevention, mitigation, and response services

- increase investment in primary prevention, guided by the Primary Prevention Framework for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action,⁹⁵ to address the root causes of harm to children within a population or community.
- Tackle the political barriers that preclude investment in children's protection, resilience and early recovery, and ensure that support is provided in line with children's needs and dignity, and in line with the child protection minimum standards.⁹⁶
- Fulfil commitments made through the Grand Bargain by allocating at least 25% of humanitarian funding directly or as directly as possible to local and national actors, including child- and youth-led groups.

PROTECT HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND ACTION

- Engage, directly or indirectly, with all parties to conflict to ensure that children and other civilians can access life-saving assistance, protection and basic needs support.
- Prioritise and advocate for principled humanitarian action, avoiding undue interference or politicisation of aid by host authorities, non-state actors and donor governments.
- Ensure that sanctions and counter-terrorism measures do not prevent aid reaching those in need, including by fully implementing the standing humanitarian exemption across UN sanctions regimes established by UN Security Council Resolution 2664.

LISTEN TO CHILDREN

- Meaningfully, safely and systematically include children in peace processes, conflict prevention initiatives, and the development of policies and programmes aimed at strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict.
- Ensure the full and active participation of children in all global, regional and national forums where issues affecting their rights and futures are discussed, including conflict and climate change.

APPENDIX 1

DEFINITIONS

This report uses the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definitions of conflict.

Battle-related deaths: deaths resulting from the use of armed force between warring parties in a conflict, be it state based or non-state. We use the term to include both combatant and civilian deaths.

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 in one calendar year, and high intensity defined as 1,000 or more battle-related deaths in one calendar 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 impacted 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.

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

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

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; and 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 wellbeing. In addition to the six violations, the annual UN has verified cases of detention of children since 2012 and presented them in the report.

APPENDIX 2

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this report are based on the main sources set out below. We have included limitations associated with each of the sources.

1. Updated data on the number of children living in conflict zones conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). The core dataset used to map conflict patterns in this report is the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Georeferenced Event Data set (UCDP GED). The UCDP dataset provides the geographical location, timing and intensity of each conflict event⁹⁷ globally, covering the years 1989–2022. To estimate the number of children living in conflict areas, and populations more generally, PRIO cross-referenced the conflict data with population data from Gridded Population of the World (GPW) and from the UN (2020) World Population Prospects.⁹⁸ The data does not distinguish between civilians and military personnel, or between adults and children.
2. Analysis by Save the Children of the 2023 United Nations annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, based on data reported and verified in 2022. The analysis also draws on previous Save the Children mapping of the number of grave violations in the reports on children and armed conflict from 2005–22. Unlike the annual UN reports on children and conflict, we have included verified incidents of military use of hospitals and schools under the grave violation *attacks on schools and hospitals* when we add up the grave violations in each conflict setting.

The MRM data in the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict inevitably only paints a partial picture due to access restrictions, security threats and limited resources. This means that not all cases can be reported and verified and are therefore not included in the report. Although the numbers on verified violations are likely to only be the tip of the iceberg, the trends are measurable and reflect the reality that we see in conflict zones today. There is also a time-lag. As the process of reporting and verifying takes time, some violations that have taken place one given year might only be included in the report covering the following year.

3. Save the Children's analysis and determination is based on nine indicators. Six indicators show in turn the prevalence of verified cases or incidents of each of the six grave violations (as set out in the annual UN reports on children and armed conflict). Three further indicators draw on PRIO's research to show conflict intensity measured in turn by battle deaths, total child population living in conflict affected areas, and the share of children living in conflict zones relative to the child population of the country. The indicators are separately rated, then the rating is summarized. All indicators are weighted equally.

The indicators we have used to identify the ten worst countries to be a child are based on the annual UN reports on children and armed conflict and the UCDP GED dataset/PRIO as outlined above, shaped by the very same data limitations. The challenge to timely report and verify grave violations is one, illustrated by the example of Ethiopia on page 32.

ENDNOTES

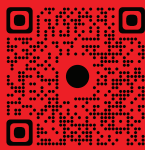
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**Eglantyne Jebb said “All wars,
whether just or unjust, disastrous
or victorious, are waged against
the child.”**

THE WAR ON CHILDREN MUST STOP



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