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Children and armed conflict in Iraq

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fourth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in Iraq and covers the period from 1 August 2019 to 30 June 2021.

The report addresses the effects of conflict on children in the country, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations committed against children, and contains information, where available, on perpetrators. It also outlines information on the progress made in addressing grave violations against children, including through dialogue with parties.

Lastly, the report provides a series of recommendations addressed to all parties to the conflict aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in Iraq.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, covers the period from 1 August 2019 to 30 June 2021. It is the fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Iraq to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The report serves to highlight trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in Iraq, and provides details of the progress made towards ending and preventing such violations since the previous report ([S/2019/984](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on the situation of children and armed conflict in Iraq ([S/AC.51/2020/4](#)). It also contains an outline of the progress and challenges in establishing dialogue with parties to the conflict. Where possible, perpetrators of grave violations are identified. In annex I to the most recent report on children and armed conflict ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#)), Da'esh¹ was identified under section A, on parties that had not put in place measures during the reporting period to improve the protection of children, as being a party that recruited and used children, that killed and maimed children, that committed rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, that abducted children and that engaged in attacks on schools and hospitals. The Popular Mobilization Forces were listed under section B, on parties that had put in place measures aimed at improving the protection of children, as being a party that recruited and used children.

2. The information contained in the present report was verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting in Iraq, co-chaired by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and related response measures, including restrictions on movement, exacerbated existing challenges in documenting and verifying grave violations against children. Therefore, the information presented in the present report does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed against children in Iraq during the reporting period, and the actual number of grave violations is likely to be higher. Where incidents were committed earlier but verified only during the reporting period, that information is qualified as relating to an incident that was verified at a later date.

II. Overview of political and security developments

3. Since the previous report ([S/2019/984](#)), the security situation has stabilized across the country; however, Da'esh has continued to conduct frequent asymmetric attacks against civilians and the Iraqi security forces, albeit on a significantly smaller scale.

4. In October 2019, Iraq witnessed large-scale public protests demanding substantial political, economic and social reforms that rapidly spread and escalated, turning violent as protesters attempted to cross into the former International Zone and were met with a forceful response from the Iraqi security forces. Between 1 October 2019 and 26 January 2020, protest-related violence resulted in hundreds of dead and thousands of injured protesters. Although the scale of the demonstrations started to diminish in late 2019, public protests continued throughout the reporting period, albeit on a smaller scale and with reduced levels of violence.

¹ Following the adoption of resolution [75/291](#) by the General Assembly, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is now referred to as Da'esh in documents originating from the United Nations Secretariat.

5. On 1 December 2019, the Council of Representatives accepted the resignation of the then Prime Minister, Adil Abd Al-Mahdi. On 7 May 2020, the Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, who had been designated to form a Government on 9 April, received a vote of confidence from the Council of Representatives. The government programme was also approved during that legislative session.

6. The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 exacerbated an already vulnerable protection environment for children, especially for children living in camps and children in detention. The Government took a number of steps to address the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the creation of a crisis cell, on 26 January 2020, tasked with overseeing the implementation of precautionary measures and responses to contain community transmission. Initial measures included a nationwide curfew and a stay-at-home order, the suspension of commercial flights and the closure of land borders, with only essential trade allowed. By June 2021, some measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic remained in place, while efforts continued with a view to encouraging the Iraqi public to enrol for vaccination, after Iraq received its first COVID-19 vaccines in March 2021.

7. In parallel, a strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States of America was launched on 11 June 2020. The next day, the United States Department of State and the Government of Iraq issued a joint statement in which it was noted that the “discussions covered security and counterterrorism, economics and energy, political issues, and cultural relations”. In the statement, the United States noted that “in light of significant progress towards eliminating the [Da’esh] threat, over the coming months the [United States] would continue reducing forces from Iraq”.

8. During the reporting period, military operations to counter Da’esh were carried out in Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninawa and Salah al-Din Governorates and to reinforce the border with the Syrian Arab Republic against possible Da’esh incursions.

9. Between October 2020 and March 2021, the closure by the Government of 16 camps for internally displaced people in Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Karbala’, Kirkuk, Ninawa and Salah-al-Din Governorates, as well as the reclassification of two formal camps as informal sites, resulted in the departure of 9,443 households (46,940 persons) from those camps to non-camp settings in Iraq. In early 2021, the Government paused the closure of camps in Iraq, with two formal camps, Nahiyat al-Amiriyah camp in Anbar Governorate and Jad’ah 5 in Ninawa Governorate, remaining open and hosting approximately 26,000 persons, including 5,453 children, many of them families with alleged Da’esh affiliations. In addition, 25 camps for internally displaced persons hosting 184,470 persons, including 86,641 children, remained open under the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government. On 16 March 2021, the Government’s national plan for the return of displaced people and reconstruction was endorsed by the Council of Ministers.

10. The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD), established pursuant to Security Council resolution [2379 \(2017\)](#), continued to support domestic efforts to hold Da’esh accountable by collecting, preserving and storing evidence in Iraq of acts that could amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by Da’esh in Iraq. On 7 May 2021, UNITAD reported that it had finalized an initial case brief addressing the legal characterization of the crimes committed against the Yazidi community (see [S/2021/419](#)). In a briefing on 10 May, the Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD denounced executions, slavery, sexual slavery and crimes against children as horrific and as proof that children were directly and deliberately being targeted by Da’esh. He stressed that Yazidi children were profoundly impacted and announced that the Team had established that there was

“clear and convincing evidence that the crimes against the Yazidi people clearly constituted genocide”.²

III. Update on the main actors involved in the armed conflict in Iraq

Iraqi security forces

11. The Iraqi security forces include the Iraqi police, under the Ministry of the Interior, and the Iraqi armed forces, including the Iraqi Army, under the Ministry of Defence. Since the Government declared the military defeat of Da’esh in December 2017, the Iraqi security forces have continued to implement a counter-terrorism campaign, including by conducting large-scale clearance operations in areas formerly controlled by Da’esh, defusing improvised explosive devices and exposing Da’esh hideouts, tunnels and weapons caches. Military operations were concentrated in areas where Da’esh remained active, including Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din Governorates.

12. The Popular Mobilization Forces are an integral part of the Iraqi security forces as an independent military formation under the direct command of the Prime Minister. Throughout the reporting period, the Popular Mobilization Forces continued to carry out security operations, sometimes jointly with the Iraqi armed forces, in areas where Da’esh was active.

International coalition to counter Da’esh

13. The international counter-Da’esh coalition, comprising 84 members, committed to, among other things, tackling the financing and economic infrastructure of Da’esh, preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters across borders and supporting the restoration of essential public services in areas retaken from Da’esh.³

14. In June 2021, at a ministerial meeting, the coalition members affirmed the continued need to sustain pressure on Da’esh in Iraq and to counter Da’esh global networks through the coalition’s five lines of action: stabilizing liberated areas, preventing the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, tackling Da’esh financing, providing political-military consultation, and countering Da’esh messaging efforts. In addition, it addressed the root causes of support for Da’esh “through targeted justice and accountability assistance to local communities and survivors” of atrocities committed by Da’esh.⁴

15. Since March 2020, the international counter-Da’esh coalition has transferred responsibility for several of its bases to the Iraqi security forces in Anbar, Baghdad, Kirkuk and Ninawa Governorates.

Other actors engaged in the fight against Da’esh

16. The Kurdistan Regional Government’s security institutions also engaged in the fight against Da’esh, including the Kurdish Peshmerga (the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government), the Peshmerga Zeravani (the military police) and the Peshmerga Asayish (the internal security forces). Progress continued to be made

² Text of the briefing available at [un.org/sites/www.un.org/files/general/sa_khan_6th_briefing_sc_as_delivered_en_0.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org/files/general/sa_khan_6th_briefing_sc_as_delivered_en_0.pdf).

³ See <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en>.

⁴ United States Department of State, “The Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS”, 28 June 2021. Available at www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis/.

on cooperation between the Iraqi armed forces and the Peshmerga forces in that regard.

17. As noted in the previous report, the Sinjar Resistance Units remained active in the Sinjar district (Ninawa Governorate) and the People's Defence Forces of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (HPG/PKK) continued to conduct operations in Iraq.

18. Da'esh continued to conduct predominantly small-scale, asymmetric attacks against civilians and the Iraqi security forces. The attacks involved the targeting of infrastructure and livelihoods, including burning crop fields and destroying electricity transmitters, with the aim of limiting stabilization in areas formerly occupied by the group, in particular in Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninawa and Salah al-Din Governorates.

Other actors

19. Throughout the reporting period, the Ministry of Defence of Turkey continued to report military activity, carried out under the name Operation Claw, against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions in northern Iraq.

20. In a new development, self-proclaimed, previously unknown armed groups were verified as the perpetrators of grave violations against children during the reporting period. For example, an armed group calling itself the "Companion of the Cave" first came to light when it claimed responsibility for an attack in Baghdad, on 17 November 2020, in which one girl was killed. Similarly, an armed group calling itself the "Guardians of Blood" first appeared when claiming responsibility for an incident of denial of humanitarian access that had occurred in Ninawa, on 26 August 2020. No further claims are known to have been made by those groups.

IV. Grave violations against children

21. During the reporting period, the country task force verified 317 grave violations against 254 children (195 boys, 51 girls, 8 sex unknown), representing a significant decrease compared with the previous report (2,114 grave violations), although the latter covered a four-year period and included the peak period of military operations against Da'esh. The country task force verified violations against 84 children in the second half of 2019, 82 in 2020 and 88 in the first half of 2021. Killing and maiming remained the most verified violation, affecting the largest number of children (249), with explosive remnants of war (121) and improvised explosive devices (46) being the leading causes of child casualties and amounting to 67 per cent of the total number of casualties. Denial of humanitarian access was the second most verified violation, with 62 verified incidents.

22. When perpetrators of grave violations could be identified, most violations were attributed to Da'esh (65). Additional violations were attributed to the Iraqi security forces (58), the Popular Mobilization Forces (10), Operation Claw (8), the Companions of the Cave (1) and the Guardians of Blood (1). The majority of grave violations (238) were verified in areas previously under Da'esh control, including Kirkuk (96), Salah al-Din (52), Ninawa (52), Diyala (42), Anbar (19) Governorates, followed by Muthanna (12), Basrah (11) and Baghdad (10) Governorates, among others.

23. While still being the main violation verified during the reporting period, the killing and maiming of children was at the lowest verified level since the start of the monitoring and reporting mechanism in Iraq in 2009. This could be linked to progress made in countering Da'esh. The majority of child casualties (174) could not be attributed to a specific perpetrator, as the contamination of areas with explosive

remnants of war left behind from decades of conflict, which resulted in 167 child casualties, remained of serious concern.

24. In addition, 39 grave violations against children that had occurred in previous reporting periods were late-verified during the period under review by the country task force. Those violations included abductions (21), rape and other forms of sexual violence (12), recruitment and use (1) and killing and maiming (5), and were attributed to Da'esh (36) and the international counter-Da'esh coalition (3). The violations affected 26 children (9 boys, 17 girls), of whom 13 children (1 boy, 12 girls) were affected by multiple violations, with abduction and sexual violence being the most prevalent double violations. Twelve of those incidents involved girls who had been abducted in separate incidents in August 2014, when Da'esh launched deadly attacks against communities living in Sinjar district (Ninawa Governorate). All those girls had been abducted and taken to locations outside Iraq and had been victims of multiple forms of sexual violence.

A. Recruitment and use

25. The recruitment and use of children (1) has decreased considerably since the previous report (296). The country task force verified the recruitment and use of one boy by the Popular Mobilization Forces. The 15-year-old boy was the victim of two violations: he was recruited, in 2018, and later killed, in May 2020, while being used by the Popular Mobilization Forces in a military operation. The country task force also late-verified the recruitment and use by Da'esh of one Yazidi boy, who was 3 years old at the time of the incident in 2015. Despite his young age, the boy was taken to the Syrian Arab Republic and trained in the use of weapons in a manner consistent with the recruitment methods of Da'esh. In 2017, the child managed to escape and was later reunited with his family in Iraq.

26. In addition, the country task force received allegations of the recruitment and use of 29 children between 2018 and 2020 in Sinjar (Ninawa Governorate); however, the allegations could not be verified.

Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups

27. A total of 1,091 children (1,048 boys, 43 girls) were held in detention by Iraqi security forces on national-security-related charges, including for their alleged association with armed groups, primarily Da'esh, compared with 778 children at the end of June 2019. As at June 2021, 35 of those children were of foreign origin. Most of the detained children were boys aged between 15 and 18 years; some children were as young as 9 years old. Children detained on such charges continued to face challenges in gaining access to legal, social and other services, with instances of prolonged pretrial detention and of mistreatment being reported. In some cases, children were held with adult detainees.

28. The country task force continued to engage with countries of origin for the repatriation of foreign children in Iraq. A total of 627 children (313 boys, 314 girls) were repatriated from Iraq to their countries of origin. Separately, in May 2021, the Government of Iraq conducted an initial repatriation to Iraq of Iraqi families from the Hawl camp in the Syrian Arab Republic, representing 382 individuals, including 245 children (121 boys, 124 girls).

B. Killing and maiming

29. The country task force verified the killing (98) and maiming (151) of 249 children (193 boys, 48 girls, 8 sex unknown), 82 of whom were killed or maimed in the second half of 2019, 79 in 2020 and 88 in the first half of 2021. There was a significant decrease in the numbers of children killed or maimed (249) in comparison with the previous report (1,722), owing to a conflict of lower intensity and an improved security situation.

30. Incidents of the killing and maiming of children were attributed to Da'esh (61), followed by Operation Claw (7), the Iraqi security forces (6), the Companions of the Cave (1) and unidentified perpetrators (174). Some 78 per cent of all child casualties were verified in areas previously under Da'esh control and where Da'esh remained active, with most instances being verified in Kirkuk (63), followed by Salah al-Din (49), Ninawa (38), Diyala (34) and Anbar (11) Governorates, as well as Muthanna (12), Baghdad (10), Basrah (11) and Karbala' (4).

31. Of the total number of child casualties, 67 per cent (167) were caused by explosive remnants of war (121) and improvised explosive devices (46) left over from previous conflicts. The predominantly affected areas were locations that had previously been under Da'esh control. In most cases, children were harmed while herding livestock in the surrounding areas of villages or while playing, by accidentally triggering the devices when they picked them up or stepped on them. For example, in December 2019, five boys aged between 6 and 7 years were killed while playing outside a primary school, in Salah al-Din Governorate, when they touched a device, causing it to explode.

32. Ground engagements (74) and airstrikes (8) were the second and third main causes of child casualties, with most incidents being verified in northern Iraqi governorates and attributed to Da'esh (61), Operation Claw (7), the Iraqi security forces (6), the Companion of the Cave (1) and unidentified perpetrators (7). For instance, in October 2020, five children (four boys, one girl) were maimed by shrapnel after missiles were launched by Da'esh in Jalawla' district (Diyala Governorate). In addition, five child casualties were late-verified and attributed to the international counter-Da'esh coalition (3) and to Da'esh (2).

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

33. Incidents of sexual violence against children continued to be underreported, with none verified by the country task force as having occurred during the reporting period.

34. The United Nations late-verified 12 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against Yazidi girls that had been committed by Da'esh in August 2014 in Sinjar district (Ninawa Governorate). With the support of Iraqi civil society and the Iraqi security forces, the survivors, who had been taken out of Iraq, returned to the country during the reporting period, with nine girls returning in 2020 and three girls in the first half of 2021. Where possible, survivors were reunited with family members, receiving case management and psychosocial support, referrals to health services and access to livelihood services to support the reintegration process.

35. It should be noted that gender restrictive norms and practices significantly hamper access to services, including legal services, by survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. The situation is compounded by stigmatization and fear of retaliation, rendering survivors even more vulnerable should they decide to report such violations. For instance, concerns remained about displaced girls living in formal

and informal camp settings who were vulnerable to sexual violence owing to the confined living conditions, restrictions on movement and the lack of access to services, civil documentation and livelihoods. Since March 2020, COVID-19-related restrictions on movement have further exacerbated a dire protection situation for internally displaced persons, increasing their vulnerability to negative coping mechanisms, including the early and forced marriage of girls.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

36. The country task force verified no attacks on schools and one attack on a health centre. On 26 May 2020, a day-care health centre (primary health-care unit) was partially destroyed in Safr, Mawat district (Sulaymaniyah Governorate) during Operation Claw. The attack took place at night and no civilians were injured as a result of the operation. As at June 2021, the day-care centre remained non-functional.

Military use of schools

37. The country task force verified the military use of 45 schools – 4 during the second half of 2019, 27 in 2020 and 14 during the first half of 2021 – by the Iraqi police (35), the Iraqi Army (6), the Popular Mobilization Forces (3) and the Peshmerga (1). All the schools were located in areas previously under Da'esh control: 37 schools in Kirkuk, 4 in Ninawa and 4 in Salah al-Din Governorates. By June 2021, nine schools had been vacated by the Iraqi police (8) in Kirkuk and the Popular Mobilization Forces (1) in Ninawa, while 36 schools continued to be used by the Iraqi police (27), the Iraqi armed forces (7), the Popular Mobilization Forces (1) and the Peshmerga (1).

E. Abduction

38. The country task force verified the abduction of four children (one boy, three girls), one of whom had been abducted in 2019 in Kirkuk and three (one boy, two girls) had been abducted in 2020 in Salah al-Din (1) and Diyala (2) Governorates. All those abductions were attributed to Da'esh. In May 2020, Da'esh elements entered the house of the mukhtar (mayor) in Samarra' district (Salah al-Din Governorate) and abducted a 15-year-old boy after killing three men and injuring one woman. The boy was released shortly afterwards.

39. In addition, the country task force late-verified the abduction of 21 children (7 boys, 14 girls), with 18 of those abductions (6 boys, 12 girls) occurring between 2014 and 2016. All the abductions were attributed to Da'esh. Of those children, 12 were victims of at least one additional violation during the time of their abduction, with rape and other forms of sexual violence against 10 girls, while recruitment and use affected 2 boys. For example, four children (one boy, three girls) were abducted by Da'esh in August 2014 in Sinjar district (Ninawa Governorate), with the youngest victim just 3 years old at the time of his abduction.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

40. The country task force verified 62 incidents of denial of humanitarian access: 1 incident in 2020 and 61 in the first half of 2021. The incidents were attributed to the Iraqi security forces (52), the Popular Mobilization Forces (9) and the Guardians of Blood (1) and were verified in Kirkuk (32), Ninawa (14), Anbar (8), Diyala (6) and Salah al-Din (2).

41. The lack of a unified authorization mechanism for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) hampered the movements, activities and operations of humanitarian actors throughout the reporting period. From the end of 2019 to October 2020, the Government suspended the national mechanism responsible for authorizing access for NGOs, thereby increasing bureaucratic impediments and effectively limiting humanitarian operations. In November 2020, it launched a new online national access authorization mechanism for NGOs, which has contributed to overcoming the long-standing problems of obtaining access letters. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the restrictions on humanitarian access. As a result, until mid-2020, there were delays in delivering humanitarian assistance to more than 850,000 internally displaced persons living in or outside of camps, including approximately 385,000 Iraqi children in need of assistance.

42. Some 87 per cent of the denials of humanitarian access (54) in the first half of 2021 were concentrated in three Governorates: Kirkuk (32), Ninawa (14) and Anbar (8). All such incidents occurring during that period related to bureaucratic restrictions, attributed to the Iraqi security forces (52) and the Popular Mobilization Forces (9), which limited or slowed down the movement of humanitarian personnel and goods, thereby hampering humanitarian operations. There were also instances of denial of passage at checkpoints. For example, in Kirkuk Governorate, 32 incidents involved members of the Iraqi security forces at checkpoints in Hawijah district not recognizing Government-delivered access authorizations and demanding that NGOs obtain local permits.

V. Progress and challenges in ending and preventing grave violations against children

43. The United Nations continued to engage with the Government of Iraq to strengthen the protection of children as well as for the purpose of finalizing and adopting an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces. It is also envisioned that the draft action plan will provide support for the reintegration of children who have been released from armed actors. Discussions are ongoing on the draft action plan, which will also strengthen the existing national child protection framework.

44. The interministerial committee on grave violations of the rights of the child, created in November 2017, remained active, albeit to a limited extent owing to the political, security and COVID-19-related situation. Its responsibilities included awareness-raising, building the capacities of parties to the conflict on child protection, supporting legal reform processes and documenting grave violations against children. The committee fully resumed its work in April 2021.

45. The country task force continued to support the Federal Government as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government to harmonize domestic legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international treaties to which Iraq is a party. In June 2021, after its endorsement by the Council of Ministers of Iraq, a bill on child protection, in which the involvement of children in armed conflict is criminalized, was submitted to the Council of Representatives of Iraq for its first reading. Similarly, during the same period, the draft child rights act for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, criminalizing the recruitment or conscription of children under the age of 18 into military or paramilitary services or armed groups in combat and support roles, was finalized and validated for submission to the Council of Ministers of the Kurdistan Regional Government for its endorsement and subsequent submission to the Parliament of the Kurdistan Region. A child protection policy for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in which the services and capacities for protection of children from

violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect are specified, is awaiting the endorsement of the Council of Ministers.

46. On 1 March 2021, the Council of Representatives of Iraq passed the Yazidi Female Survivors Law, thereby creating a reparation and rehabilitation framework for women and girl survivors of Da'esh crimes from Yazidi, Turkmen, Shabak and Christian minority groups. Under the Law, the crimes committed by Da'esh against these women and girls have been recognized as crimes against humanity and genocide, and future amnesties have been excluded. Some gaps remain, however, including the need to expand the definition of survivor to include men and boys, as well as other minority communities. In addition, the Law does not address the status of children born of rape by members of Da'esh.

47. The country task force supported the provision of juvenile justice services for children in conflict with the law, including children in detention for alleged association with parties to the conflict, including Da'esh. Services provided included specialized legal aid for children, advocacy on alternatives to detention, access to psychosocial support and aftercare reintegration.

48. The country task force supported the Government, the Supreme Judicial Council and countries of origin to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of foreign children detained in Iraq for their alleged affiliation with Da'esh. Support was provided to the Government of Iraq and to countries of origin to ensure that repatriation activities adhered to the principle of the best interests of the child and to develop specialized child protection programmes aimed at facilitating the children's full reintegration. Between August 2019 and June 2021, 625 children (312 boys, 313 girls) were repatriated to eight countries. The COVID-19 pandemic halted repatriation activities between March 2020 and February 2021, as Iraqi airspace had closed and restrictions on travel and movement had come into effect. This had a notable impact on children who had to spend another year in detention in Iraq. In March 2021, the repatriation of children to their countries of origin resumed, with 156 children (83 boys, 73 girls) being returned to two countries.

49. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country task force advocated the release of children from detention, including pretrial detention, to reduce overcrowding in detention facilities and to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Since March 2020, the Government has released 767 Iraqi children (701 boys, 66 girls) from detention, among them 48 boys convicted of security-related charges, including an alleged association with Da'esh.

50. The country task force provided training on child protection to international and national NGOs in order to strengthen the monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children. The task force held five training sessions for 144 participants (80 men, 64 women) of the Iraqi national child protection network, which included representatives of civil society and national and international NGOs. In addition, the task force collaborated with the international NGO Justice Rapid Response, which provided a four-month training programme for 24 members of the task force (11 of them women), thereby reinforcing its peer network on strengthening the child protection framework in Iraq.

51. The country task force continued to partner with local organizations to support the reintegration of children formerly associated with parties to the conflict and children at risk through a community-based reintegration and security programme. The programme reached 658 children and adolescents (630 boys, 28 girls) in Najaf, Karbala', Ninawa and Kirkuk Governorates. Reintegration and social cohesion activities included mental health and psychological services, legal advice and consultation, and facilitating access to education, vocational training, life skills and case management support.

52. More than 711,390 persons, including 504,068 children (264,095 boys, 239,973 girls) received explosive risk ordinance education through in-person and remote information sessions.

VI. Observations and recommendations

53. I am encouraged by the overall decrease in grave violations against children in Iraq since my previous report, in particular the significant decrease in the recruitment and use as well as the abduction of children, and in attacks on schools and hospitals.

54. I remain concerned, however, that grave violations against children continue to be committed. I call upon all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law and to immediately end and prevent grave violations in Iraq.

55. I am particularly concerned about the continuing incidents of killing and maiming of children, notwithstanding a decrease in their number, and about the impact on children of the contamination of Iraqi territory by explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices, which are the leading cause of child casualties. I urge all parties to immediately take all preventive and mitigating actions necessary to avoid and minimize harm and better protect children, including in the conduct of military operations and from the risks and effects of explosive remnants of war and the use of explosive weapons, including in populated areas. I call upon the Government of Iraq to fully implement international legal instruments on anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war, particularly the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction and the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (Protocol V). I further call upon the Government to continue promoting mine clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance and stockpile destruction, including prior to any movement of internally displaced persons back to contaminated areas. The United Nations will continue to support the Iraqi authorities in this regard.

56. I am troubled by the significant increase in the number of children detained by Iraqi security forces on national-security-related charges, including for their alleged association with armed groups, primarily Da'esh. I call upon the Government of Iraq to release children held on such grounds. I reiterate that children formerly associated with armed forces and groups should be treated primarily as victims and that alternatives to detention should be pursued in accordance with international law and in line with international standards on juvenile justice. I call upon the Government to continue to engage with the United Nations in this regard and to provide child protection actors with access to the children concerned.

57. When children are suspected of having committed criminal acts, I reiterate that due process and fair trial standards must be adhered to, with appropriate consideration given to age and gender. Any prosecution of children should respect internationally recognized standards of juvenile justice. I further call upon the Government of Iraq to establish the minimum age of criminal responsibility, in line with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

58. I welcome the collaboration of the Government of Iraq with the United Nations to strengthen the protection of children and the ongoing dialogue on an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces. I encourage the Government of Iraq to expedite the adoption of the action plan.

59. I commend the Government's efforts to address the needs of the survivors of atrocities committed by Da'esh and welcome the passing of the Yazidi Female Survivors Law. I encourage the Government to continue engaging with the United Nations on the implementation of the Law, including by ensuring a survivor-centred approach and by paying particular attention to the needs of children. I further encourage the Government to consider similar provisions to address the needs of other minorities and of boy and men survivors of Da'esh atrocities.

60. I welcome the steps taken by the Government and the progress made concerning the bill on the protection of children in Iraq, under which the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict will be criminalized in line with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which has been ratified by Iraq, and I call for the bill's swift adoption. In addition, I note that a child rights act is being drafted for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, pursuant to which the recruitment or conscription of children under the age of 18 will be criminalized, and I encourage its quick enactment.

61. I commend the Government of Iraq for the initial repatriation of Iraqi families, including 245 children, from Hawl camp in the Syrian Arab Republic, and I am encouraged by the increasing number of children repatriated from Iraq to their countries of origin, as well as by the progress made in developing specialized child protection programmes to address children's specific needs and to ensure their full reintegration. I reiterate my call upon all concerned countries of origin that have not yet done so to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of their children, consistent with the principle of non-refoulement and with respect for family unity and the best interests of the child. I urge States Members of the United Nations to continue to search for solutions towards the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of children, including those with alleged links to Da'esh and other groups designated as terrorist by the United Nations, being held in camps or detained in Iraq, under the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq Third Country National Returnees, adopted in 2020.

62. I call upon all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access in order to provide assistance to children and to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and assets.

63. I call upon the Government to develop and implement a national reintegration programme for children affected by armed conflict, with the support of the United Nations and other actors.

64. I welcome the contributions of donors in support of the United Nations and the Government in implementing national programmes to enhance the protection of children in Iraq. I call upon the donor community to reinforce its efforts to provide additional financial support, in particular for explosive risk ordnance education and reintegration programmes for children, as well as to continue to support United Nations access to decontamination efforts and ammunition management efforts.
