

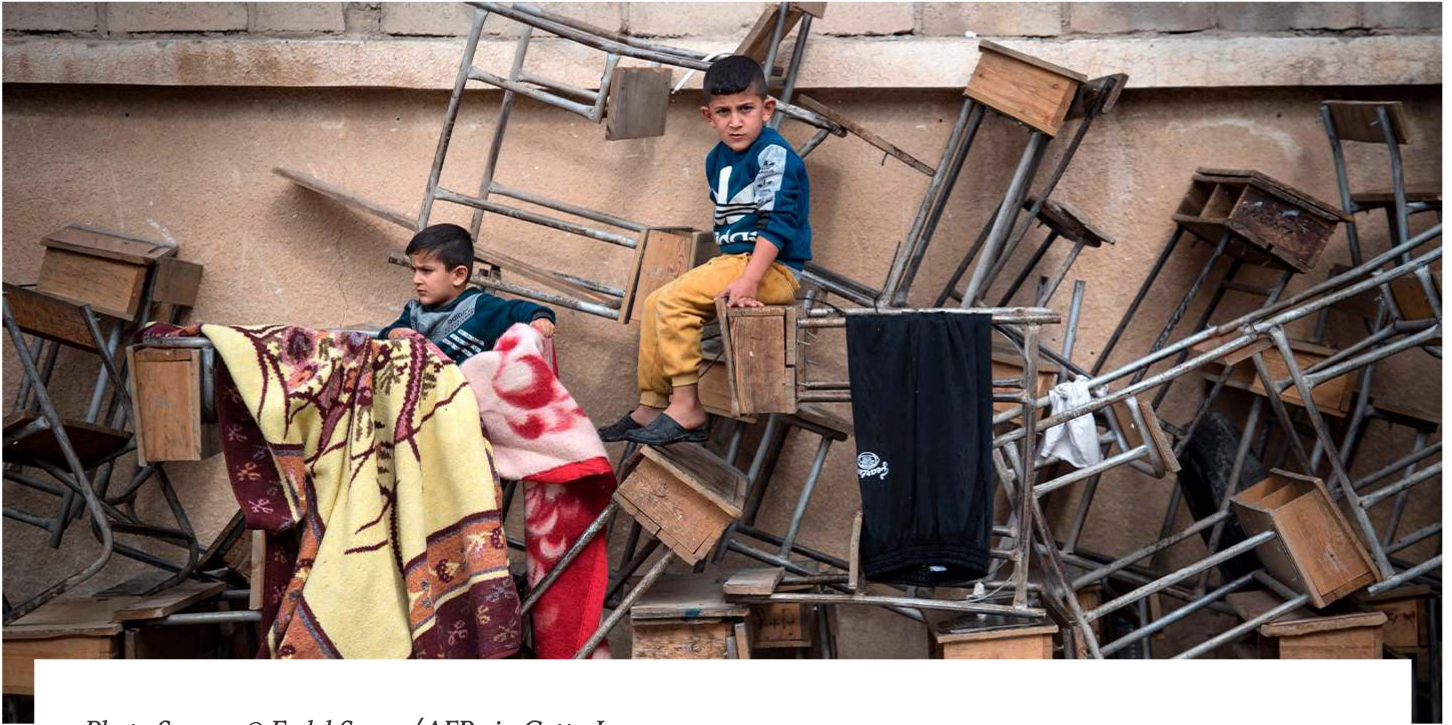


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Atrocity Alert Special Issue: Children and Armed Conflict

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GLOBAL CENTRE
FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY
TO PROTECT

ATROCITY ALERT IS A WEEKLY PUBLICATION BY THE GLOBAL CENTRE FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT HIGHLIGHTING SITUATIONS WHERE POPULATIONS ARE AT RISK OF, OR ARE ENDURING, MASS ATROCITY CRIMES.

UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF CHILDREN FACING GRAVE VIOLATIONS IN CONFLICT ZONES

On 26 June the UN Security Council held its open debate on children and armed conflict, during which the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, presented the Secretary-General's annual report on the topic. The number of situations of concern mentioned in the Secretary-General's annual report has increased, with the latest report providing information from 2023 on 26 conflict situations where children are facing grave violations, including 25 country situations and one regional monitoring arrangement covering the Lake Chad Basin. Countless children across the world are enduring unprecedented suffering due to the appalling immediate and long-term consequences of these

conflicts. Many of the “grave violations” against children outlined in the report – including killing and maiming, recruitment and use, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian access – can constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.

In the report, the UN Secretary-General described “extreme levels” of violence against children throughout 2023, with 32,990 verified violations perpetrated by state and non-state armed groups. This represents a staggering 21 percent increase compared with the previous reporting period and the highest number recorded since the UN’s Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) was established in 2005. The number of children killed – 5,301 – represents the equivalent of nearly 15 children killed every day. Rape and other forms of sexual violence increased by 25 percent and affected 1,470 children, especially girls. The targeting of schools and hospitals continued to deprive children access to education and health services, with 1,650 verified attacks last year. The denial of humanitarian access increased over 32 percent compared to the previous year, with 5,205 violations verified.

The Secretary-General attributes the increase in the number of violations to several factors, including the changing complexity and escalation of armed conflicts and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA), as well as “blatant disregard” for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and “severe violations” of International Human Rights Law. The Secretary-General also raised particular concerns about armed actors increasingly launching attacks on schools and hospitals and blocking lifesaving humanitarian aid from reaching children in need. The report also noted the impact that the closing of UN missions in several countries and consequent loss of their child protection staff had for populations. For the second year in a row, state armed forces were responsible for the highest numbers of child casualties, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access for children.

During the open debate, Special Representative Gamba stressed, “The number of children enduring grave violations in 2023 as shown in the UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed conflict is a wakeup call. We are failing children. I call on the international community to recommit to the universal consensus to protect children from armed conflict and I call on States to fulfil their primary responsibility to protect their populations and respect all norms and standards applicable in the conduct of armed conflict situations.”

Grave violations against children in ongoing atrocity situations

The majority of these violations were perpetrated in countries where mass atrocity crimes are ongoing or have recently been perpetrated. The highest numbers of grave violations during 2023 occurred in **Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)**, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, **Myanmar (Burma)**, **Somalia**, **Nigeria** and **Sudan**.

In Israel and the OPT, the UN verified 8,009 grave violations by all parties and an additional 23,000 are pending verification. Israeli forces were responsible for 5,698 of those violations, including killing 206 children and maiming an additional 1,892, as well as 340 attacks on schools and hospitals. The UN verified the killing of an additional 2,051 children in the Gaza Strip between October 7 and December 31, noting that attribution continues. Most incidents were caused by EWIPA by Israeli forces in its **ongoing military operations** in the Gaza Strip. The UN also found Hamas' Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades responsible for 116 grave violations and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Al-Quds Brigades responsible for 21 grave violations, including the killing, maiming and abduction of children in the 7 October attacks.

Intensifying conflict in eastern DRC has been marked by **sexual violence** once again being used as a weapon of war, with displaced populations at heightened risk. The Secretary-General emphasized in the report that **gang-rape** continued unabated in DRC, with particularly high numbers of girls impacted. In Sudan, the outbreak of an **armed confrontation** between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023 has had devastating effects on children, with a "dramatic" 480 percent increase of grave violations over 2022. Children bore the brunt of escalating and **widespread violence** in Myanmar, with a 123 percent increase in grave violations against children, particularly recruitment and use, killing and maiming and attacks on schools and on hospitals by all parties. The Secretary-General expressed grave concern regarding the pattern of **indiscriminate and targeted attacks** by the Myanmar armed forces, including the use of explosive ordnance affecting children.

This year the Secretary-General's report also included information on violations committed against children in **Haiti** and **Niger**. In Haiti, children are facing widespread and unprecedented gang violence and abuses, including recruitment and use, killing and maiming, cases of sexual violence against girls, **attacks on schools** and hospitals, abduction and denial of humanitarian access. Approximately 30 to 50 percent of the gangs in Haiti have **children within their ranks**, with the majority forcibly recruited while others joined voluntarily as a survival tactic. With the initial deployment of personnel for the UN-authorized Multinational

Security Support mission to Haiti last week, children may face significant new risks of being caught in the crossfire.

“List of shame”

Since the MRM for children and armed conflict was established, the Secretary-General’s annual report and its annex have been useful tools for “naming and shaming” known perpetrators and pressuring them to end violations and protect children in times of war. The annex is intended to be a comprehensive list of perpetrators that accurately reflects the data collected and verified by the MRM. However, in previous years, the list has omitted several known perpetrators and thus failed to hold all perpetrators of grave violations against children to the same standard.

In a long overdue move, the Secretary-General added Israeli government forces and Palestinian armed groups to the “list of shame” in this year’s report. This is the first time Israeli government forces and Palestinian armed groups have been listed in the annual report, despite the UN finding them responsible for grave violations since 2005. Israeli forces are listed for killing and maiming children, as well as attacks against schools and hospitals, while Hamas’ Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and affiliated factions and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s Al-Quds Brigades are listed for killing and maiming and abduction.

The Secretary-General listed the SAF for killing and maiming and attacks against schools and hospitals and the RSF for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence and attacks against schools and hospitals. Armed groups were also listed for additional violations in **Burkina Faso**, DRC and **Mali**. The Secretary-General also kept Russian armed forces on the list given the gravity and number of violations perpetrated in **Ukraine** and lack of commitments last year. Overall, the report lists 75 parties as perpetrators of grave violations, including 10 state actors and 65 armed groups.

States must uphold commitments to protect children

In order to better protect children in armed conflict, all states should implement the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Children, the Paris Principles and the Vancouver Principles, abide by the Safe Schools Declaration and endorse and implement the EWIPA Political Declaration. Donors should increase the necessary resources to fund the protection of children in conflict at the scale and speed required, in line with the growing need. All states should uphold their obligations under IHL, as well as use their leverage to

ensure that all parties to a conflict, and those supporting them, respect international norms and standards. Member states, UN offices and agencies and civil society should work together towards the consistent, meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of children in decision-making processes. All perpetrators of grave violations against children must be held accountable.

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