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Joint written statement* submitted by the Defence for Children International, Terre Des Hommes Federation Internationale and the World Vision International, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 July 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Aid and children's organisations call for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip*

Thursday night, on July 17, the Israeli government approved the expansion of its military operation, dubbed "Protective Edge", and launched a ground incursion in the Gaza Strip. This follows 10 days of heavy airstrikes and shelling by Israeli forces that killed 479 Palestinians and injured over 3,500 (UN OCHA figures, as of July 21, 15:00), the majority civilians. This new development is likely to dramatically increase the already high level of violence and suffering of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip, particularly in the case of children. Between 20 July 11:00 and 21 July 11:00, at least 28 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces throughout Gaza (UNICEF figures).

In the past 13 days of violence, at least 121 Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli fire (making up 33% of the civilian casualties), and 1,100 have been injured (UN OCHA figures, as of July 21, 15:00). Of the 121 children killed, 80 of them are 12 years old or younger (UNICEF figures, as of July 21 11:00). So far, more children have been killed by Israeli fire than Palestinian militants. These numbers do not reflect the psychological trauma of Palestinian children in Gaza and their families, who live under constant fear in the midst of heavy bombings and without access to safe places or shelters. According to early assessment, an estimated 107,000 children in Gaza (UN OCHA figures, as of July 21, 15:00) urgently need direct and specialized psychosocial support. In addition, the constant accumulation of unexploded ordinances constitutes an increasing threat to the lives of children, especially boys who tend to be the main victims of accidents.

Israel's military offensive on the Gaza Strip has so far been characterised by attacks on directed at government and civilian infrastructure, residential neighbourhoods, and individual civilians. As of July 21, 15:00, 85 schools and 18 health facilities have been damaged by shellings by Israeli forces (UN OCHA figures). Civilian homes, schools, hospitals and places of worship are presumed to be civilian objects. Any attacks on these structures raise serious concerns about whether Israeli strikes and shelling have been in accordance with international humanitarian law. The violence has left the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza, particularly children, traumatized and in need of psychological support. This violence is exacerbated by the blockade on the Gaza Strip imposed by Israel since 2007, which has led to a humanitarian crisis for the 1.7 million Palestinians that live in the Gaza Strip.

Over the course of Israel's military offensive on the Gaza Strip, Israeli strikes have carried out direct attacks on civilian homes causing a large number of civilian casualties, including children. The military offensive has seen heavy artillery fire and constant airstrikes batter the Gaza Strip, severely impacting the civilian population of the Gaza Strip. Sunday July 20 became the bloodiest day of the military offensive, with at least 100 civilians killed, including at least 20 children as Israeli troops advanced into Shujai'ya, a crowded residential neighbourhood of Gaza City.

Civilians, including children, must never be targeted, and civilian structures and infrastructure are presumed not to be legitimate targets. A lawful or legitimate object of an attack can only be a military objective. To qualify as a military objective, (1) the object must be used for a military purpose, and (2) its total or partial destruction will result in a definite military advantage. Both of these elements must be satisfied before a civilian object, such as a school, hospital or shelter can be lawfully targeted. Even then, parties to a conflict are bound by the principle of proportionality and are required to protect civilians from violence.

In light of the above, Defence for Children International (DCI) and four other non-governmental organisations would like to make the following recommendations:

- 1/ Urge all the parties involved in the military offensive on the Gaza Strip to start a concrete process towards pacification;
- 2/ Call for an immediate ceasefire that also ends the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Until such an agreement is reached, the undersigned stress that it is imperative that there is full compliance by the rules of international law.
- 3/ Put in place safeguards in order to ensure that no child is killed or maimed, abducted, attacked in schools or hospitals, or denied humanitarian assistance. Civilians, including children, must never be targeted, and civilian structures and infrastructure are presumed not to be legitimate targets.

* War Child, Kinder USA, NGOS without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.