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**Promotion and protection of the rights of children:
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Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Summary

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly pursuant to its resolution [74/133](#) on the rights of the child, in which it requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to the Assembly on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate and on the progress achieved in advancing the children and armed conflict agenda. In the report, which covers the period from August 2019 to July 2020, the Special Representative describes trends, issues of concern and progress made, including the mainstreaming of child protection issues within the United Nations system. She also provides information on the field visits of the Special Representative and her vision, including her engagement with regional and subregional organizations and international partners. She outlines a number of challenges and priorities in the children and armed conflict agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

* [A/75/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [74/133](#), the General Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to it and the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, on progress achieved and challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The request stemmed from the mandate given by the Assembly in its resolution [51/77](#), in which it recommended, inter alia, that the Special Representative raise awareness and promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by armed conflict and foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children's rights in these situations.

2. In line with that mandate, and as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [74/133](#), in the present report the Special Representative provides information on current trends regarding children affected by armed conflict and gives an overview of emerging issues and challenges. She also highlights the ongoing engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, as well as efforts undertaken with a broad range of actors to raise global awareness and catalyse action on the issue. She also makes reference to steps that she has taken in response to the request contained in Assembly resolution [72/245](#) to increase her engagement with States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional and subregional organizations and to increase public awareness activities, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned, in accordance with the existing mandate.

II. Overview of trends, emerging issues and challenges

A. Monitoring and reporting mechanism

3. The year 2020 marks the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict by the Security Council in its resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#). This unique tool has delivered tangible and life-saving results in ending and preventing grave violations against conflict-affected children. It has allowed the collection and provision of timely, objective, accurate and reliable information on grave violations against children in over 20 conflict situations around the world. It has also provided the United Nations with a framework to hold conflict parties to account, to engage with them to end and prevent violations, and to adopt concerted and appropriate protection responses. Since its inception, the mechanism has led to the signature of over 32 action plans and, most importantly, to the release of more than 155,000 children from conflict parties.

4. It is important to underline time and again that the numbers of violations reported under the monitoring and reporting mechanism are only the tip of the iceberg. Information collection and verification are hampered by many factors, including security considerations for child protection personnel, monitors and victims, access constraints to affected areas and a lack of financial and human resources. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic further exacerbated this situation, with staff unable to leave compounds to conduct monitoring and verification missions. In addition, the prevalence of impunity for perpetrators, the lack of assistance programmes for victims and stigma contribute to many violations not being reported in the first place.

5. The monitoring and reporting mechanism is only as strong as the financial and human resources available for its functioning. Well trained, specialized and dedicated child protection advisers in United Nations peace operations and special political missions, as well as in the country offices of the United Nations Children's Fund

(UNICEF) and with resident coordinators, are central to ensuring that the mechanism and hence the mandate are effective. Nevertheless, dedicated child protection resources have been increasingly strained in recent years due to shifting donor priorities and budget cuts.

6. To address this and other challenges, in 2018, the Special Representative launched, together with her partners, a series of regional workshops to be held over a two-year period, bringing together country task forces on monitoring and reporting from countries on the children and armed conflict agenda (see para. 48 below for further details). One of the aims of the workshops was to broaden the participation of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes in the monitoring and reporting mechanism. To that end, the Special Representative reached out to other United Nations partners, including the World Health Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

7. To maintain and strengthen the monitoring and reporting mechanism, the Security Council and the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly should ensure that, when a new peacekeeping or special political mission is set up or the budget of existing missions is negotiated, enough financial and human resources are dedicated to the issue of child protection. In addition, UNICEF donors should increase their financial support to provide for additional human and material resources for mandated functions in relation to children and armed conflict.

B. Trends in grave violations

8. In 2019, more than 25,000 grave violations against children were verified by the United Nations, including late verifications of violations that occurred before 2019. Cases of denial of humanitarian access increased drastically, sexual violence continued to be vastly underreported and the number of attacks against schools and hospitals remained high. During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic added another grim layer to this already dire situation. Lockdowns can lead to child abuse, in particular in detention. They make access to children more difficult for child protection actors, affect reintegration programmes, complicate the delivery of services and disrupt education. The socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 can lead to child recruitment and use, sexual abuse and child trafficking. Related movement restrictions and curfews intensified access challenges for the United Nations to verify violations.

Denial of humanitarian access

9. In 2019, some 4,400 incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children were verified, as compared with 795 incidents of this nature in 2018 – an exponential increase. A surge in violence against humanitarian workers and assets was widely reported, including killings and assaults, arbitrary detention, harassment, looting and destruction. In August 2019, Boko Haram threw two hand grenades into a humanitarian hub in Borno State, Nigeria, where staff of non-governmental organizations live and work. Bureaucratic impediments and movement restrictions also seriously disrupted humanitarian activities. In Yemen, for instance, payments for passage were demanded at checkpoints on multiple occasions.

10. In 2020 to date, COVID-19 access restrictions and lockdowns have further undermined access for the monitoring, verification and response efforts of protection and humanitarian actors. In the Syrian Arab Republic, for instance, constraining measures to limit the spread of the virus were taken by the Government and the de facto authorities of territories within the areas under their respective control. While restrictions were often accompanied by mitigating measures for the movement of humanitarian staff and supplies, humanitarian activities were nevertheless severely affected.

11. With no protection, medical and psychological care, clean water or adequate food, children affected by armed conflict are being doubly victimized: they are victims of conflict and denied the actions that might assist in their recovery. The Special Representative thus continued to call upon parties to conflict to remove all impediments to humanitarian access to children and comply with their international commitments to facilitate the access of humanitarian workers in delivering life-saving assistance and supplies.

Attacks on schools and hospitals

12. Attacks on schools, hospitals and protected personnel continued as an unsettling trend in conflict-affected countries, leading to irreversible consequences for children's education, health and future. Schools and hospitals were looted, damaged and burned down; others were destroyed during military operations or aerial bombardments. In 2019, 927 attacks on schools (494) and hospitals (433), including on protected persons, were verified. In addition, schools and hospitals continued to be used for military purposes. In the Syrian Arab Republic, a record number of attacks on schools and hospitals was observed. In Libya, the escalation of violence continued to have a detrimental impact on children's access to education and health care, owing to indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes, which resulted in schools and hospitals being damaged and protected personnel being wounded or killed. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, health vulnerabilities were exploited as a tactic of war. Ebola health centres were attacked by armed groups and looted to discourage the medical response. The military use of schools has continued to result in schools being attacked by opposing groups in conflict-affected countries, such as Afghanistan, Burkina Faso and Mali.

13. In the light of the lockdowns and school closures imposed in 2020, there is an increased risk of the military use of empty buildings and of attacks on health facilities. The Special Representative continued to call upon all parties to respect the civilian nature of education and health infrastructure.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence

14. Rape and other forms of sexual violence remained significantly underreported, a continuous trend in all countries on the children and armed conflict agenda, particularly when perpetrated against boys. Children expressed reluctance to report such violations owing to the fear of reprisal or rejection by their families and communities, stigmatization, the weak rule of law and the lack of holistic services for survivors. Cases attributed to State actors nearly doubled, reinforcing fears related to retaliation and stigma for children and families willing to report sexual violence.

15. In 2019, 735 cases were verified, with a prevalence in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan. Sexual violence against children continued to be perpetrated frequently in the context of other grave violations. Girls were subjected to sexual violence, forcibly married to combatants and used as sex slaves when abducted by and during their association with parties to conflict. Girls leaving camps for internally displaced persons were particularly vulnerable, and detention facilities continued to be sites of heightened risk. Incidents of sexual violence against boys were verified in Yemen and Afghanistan, including cases of *bacha bazi*.¹

¹ *Bacha bazi* is a harmful practice whereby boys are used by men for entertainment. The boys are made to dance at parties, often dressed in female clothes, and subjected to sexual violence, as reported by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in their annual report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

16. In 2020, lockdowns in response to COVID-19 amplified the risk of children being subjected to sexual violence, owing to the increased presence of military and armed groups in cities and villages. A reduced presence of child protection actors and lack of access to health care and other basic services created special challenges for girls and boys who are survivors of sexual violence and in need of urgent and specialized medical and psychological support. The COVID-19 pandemic also amplified barriers to reporting sexual violence to child protection actors or health workers.

III. Importance and added value of mainstreaming the issue of children and armed conflict in peace and security processes

A. Security sector reform

17. In its resolution [2151 \(2014\)](#) on security sector reform, the Security Council reaffirmed that an effective, professional and accountable security sector without discrimination and with full respect for human rights and the rule of law was the cornerstone of peace and sustainable development and was important for conflict prevention.

18. Child protection considerations should be central to efforts to build rights-based, accountable security systems. The security sector has specific obligations to protect children as victims, but also has obligations to the children whom it encounters as victims, offenders or perpetrators of violence. It must also be recognized that the security forces themselves are too often responsible for committing violations against those whom they are supposed to protect. The safety and security of children is critical to the legitimacy and credibility of any military activity.

19. Security sector reform processes offer an opportunity to establish specific legal and practical safeguards not only to allow the security sector specifically to protect children and improve its interactions with them, but also to prevent violations from being committed by those same actors.

20. In its resolution [2151 \(2014\)](#), the Security Council encouraged States, when undertaking security sector reforms, to mainstream child protection, such as the inclusion of child protection in military training and standard operating procedures, as well as in military guidance. It also encouraged the establishment of child protection units in national security forces, of effective age assessment mechanisms to prevent underage recruitment, of vetting mechanisms to ensure that those responsible for violations and abuses against children are not included in the ranks of national security forces and of measures to protect schools and hospitals from attack and to prevent the military use of schools. A practical tool for child protection is the so-called handover protocol to swiftly transfer children apprehended in the course of operations from security sector actors to civilian child protection actors for reintegration. Such protocols have, for instance, been adopted in Chad, Mali, the Niger and Somalia. The regional and cross-border dimension of violations against children should also be taken into account in the adoption of those measures, particularly in the case of multinational forces operating across borders.

21. In countries such as Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan, the establishment of specialized child protection units in the armed forces or within the ministries of defence contributes to ensuring timely responses to cases of violations against children and to raising awareness of child rights and welfare among the security forces more widely. Such initiatives should be replicated.

22. Awareness-raising and dedicated training on child protection is critical to strengthening accountability and respect for child rights within the security forces.

Such training must be administered to all security sector actors and should cover the international and national normative framework and its application, as well as the care and treatment of children in conflict with the law. The United Nations, through its Department of Peace Operations, has developed specialized training materials on child protection for its military and police, including a specific module on children for the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards. Member States as well as regional organizations should use them as a basis to develop their own training materials.

23. Ensuring that child protection issues are mainstreamed throughout the security sector requires efforts not only of national actors in their own countries but also of those Member States and regional and international actors that are providing support to security sector reform processes. All actors that are supporting security sector reforms in conflict-affected countries should ensure that the measures mentioned in Security Council resolution 2151 (2014) are taken into account in those processes. Those measures are important both for ending grave violations against children and for preventing them from occurring in the first place.

B. United Nations peace operations and special political missions

24. In its resolution 1379 (2001) and subsequent resolutions, the Security Council expressed its readiness explicitly to include provisions for the protection of children when considering the mandates of peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, in its resolution 1539 (2004), the Council stressed the primary responsibility, at the country level, of peacekeeping missions and country teams to ensure effective follow-up on its resolutions concerning children and armed conflict. All peace operations personnel thus have the obligation to promote and safeguard the rights of children throughout their work and in interactions with national and local interlocutors as well to adhere to and abide by the highest international norms and standards reflected in the body of law and guidance on children's rights.

25. The work of United Nations field missions² on child protection is guided by their respective mandates, Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict, and the Policy on Child Protection in United Nations Peace Operations adopted in 2017 by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs and the Department of Field Support.³ The Policy applies equally to peace operations and special political missions and to civilian and uniformed personnel. In addition, Force Commander directives have been issued in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). The directive for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is being finalized.

26. The effective implementation of these policy and operational documents and consistent follow-up of key operational elements of Security Council resolutions depend on the deployment of sufficient and dedicated child protection expertise. In recognition of this, the Council has called systematically since 2001 for the deployment of child protection advisers to all relevant peace operations and special political missions. The General Assembly has also welcomed the deployment and role of child protection advisers, including in its resolution 74/133, the most recent one

² The term "United Nations field missions" is used to refer to both peace operations and special political missions.

³ Names of the departments as at the time of the adoption of the Policy, prior to the restructuring of the peace and security pillar, which came into effect from 1 January 2019.

on the rights of the child, and through its Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. Currently child protection advisers are deployed in five peace operations and in three special political missions.

27. Today, dedicated, specialized child protection capacities in United Nations field missions remain essential to ensuring the implementation of the monitoring and reporting mechanism, and of child protection as a whole. The engagement of child protection advisers with parties to conflict is crucial for obtaining the release of children and securing genuine commitments to ending and preventing grave violations. They are central to mainstreaming child protection issues within United Nations field missions, providing strategic advice to the mission leadership and coordinating the child protection response with external actors. They are also responsible for providing training on child protection to civilian and uniformed components (military and police) in field missions.

28. The unique role played by child protection advisers in engaging with parties to conflict for the development and implementation of action plans to end and prevent violations cannot be overestimated. Child protection advisers often have privileged access to parties by virtue of this engagement. Each action plan is designed to address a specific party's situation and outlines concrete, time-bound steps to achieve compliance with international law and, ultimately, build a protective environment and a better future for children. Such strategic engagement is only possible through the work of dedicated and adequately resourced child protection professionals who have a direct reporting line to the mission leadership.

29. Child protection priorities need to be translated into budgeting processes and mission staffing. The implications of mission downsizing, withdrawal and transition on child protection activities and resources that are critical to the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda have to be considered. The role of the General Assembly is crucial in this regard, particularly in the context of the work of the Fifth Committee, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations.

IV. Dialogue, action plans and commitments with parties to conflict

A. Addressing grave violations against children by government forces

30. The Special Representative continued her engagement with countries on the children and armed conflict agenda, in support of country task forces on monitoring and reporting, for the adoption of measures and commitments to end and prevent grave violations against children, including in support of action plans, and to strengthen existing child protection frameworks.

31. In the Central African Republic, in June 2020, the President promulgated the Child Protection Code, criminalizing child recruitment and use, among other crimes.

32. In Colombia, a new policy to prevent child recruitment and use and sexual violence against children was approved by the Government in November 2019 and is currently being rolled out.

33. In July 2019, the Government of Myanmar adopted the Child Rights Act, criminalizing the six grave violations against children, and, in September 2019, it ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The authorities continued to implement their action plan to end and prevent child recruitment and use, through which 59 boys and young men were released in 2019, and disciplinary action was taken against

18 military personnel for failure to follow the proper recruitment procedures. The Tatmadaw was delisted for the violation of recruitment and use under the annexes to the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)).

34. In November 2019, the Government of the Philippines issued the National Policy Framework on Learners and Schools as Zones of Peace, in which it defines the elements and guiding principles outlined in the Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Act adopted in January 2019. In the Policy, the Government institutionalized the integration of a peacebuilding perspective and community engagement into education interventions in order to prevent, mitigate, respond to and recover from armed conflict.

35. In Somalia, the Federal Government, the Ministry of Defence and the Special Representative signed a road map in October 2019 to accelerate the implementation of the 2012 action plans to end and prevent the recruitment, use, killing and maiming of children, and to implement preventive measures on sexual violence.

36. In South Sudan, the Government signed a comprehensive action plan covering all six grave violations in February 2020, which was also endorsed by other signatory parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, notably the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance.

37. In Yemen, the President issued a directive in February 2020 instructing all forces to comply with the 2014 action plan and 2018 road map to end and prevent child recruitment and use, requesting, inter alia, the creation of child protection units in the forces overseen by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior. In relation to Yemen, the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen endorsed a programme of time-bound activities, through an exchange of letters with the Special Representative, in order to support the implementation of the memorandum of understanding to strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict in Yemen, signed in March 2019. The Coalition was delisted under the annexes to the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)).

B. Addressing grave violations against children by armed groups

38. During the reporting period, the Special Representative and country task forces on monitoring and reporting engaged with a wide range of armed groups to protect children affected by armed conflict. Action plans continued to provide a concrete framework to engage or initiate a dialogue to change behaviours and create positive change for children. Other types of measures and commitments also promoted the protection of children.

39. In the Central African Republic, in August 2019, as a result of United Nations advocacy, Unité patriotique pour la paix en Centrafrique signed an action plan to end and prevent child recruitment and use, sexual violence against children, their killing and maiming, and attacks against schools and hospitals, and to undertake preventive measures regarding abductions and the denial of humanitarian access. In August and December 2019, respectively, Mouvement patriotique centrafricain pour la restauration de la République centrafricaine and Unité patriotique pour la paix en Centrafrique issued command orders to prohibit grave violations against children. Dialogue with armed groups led to the release of 208 children.

40. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations engaged with 10 armed group factions, leading to the signature of unilateral road maps to end child recruitment and use and other violations. At least 180 children were subsequently released.

41. In Myanmar, the signature of action plans with the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army was delayed because of COVID-19 restrictions.
42. In Nigeria, 262 children were identified and separated from the Civilian Joint Task Force within the framework of the 2017 action plan signed with the United Nations.
43. In the Darfur region of the Sudan, the Salih Borsa faction of the Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid expressed its interest in engaging in a child protection-focused dialogue with the country task force. In March 2020, a workshop between the country task force and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North Abdelaziz Al-Hilu faction to assess the status of implementation of its 2017 action plan led to the development of a road map. A similar workshop is planned with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North Malik Agar faction.
44. In the Syrian Arab Republic, following the signing of an action plan in June 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces issued a military order prohibiting child recruitment, notifying its members of the signing of the action plan and creating an implementation committee. The Syrian Democratic Forces provided dedicated training to over 100 commanders and is developing a complaints mechanism to allow formal complaints through a civilian-led mechanism. Troop screenings of the Syrian Democratic Forces resulted in the release of 51 girls in early 2020 and the separation of 18 boys awaiting formal release. Following authorization from the Syrian Democratic Forces, the United Nations accessed one facility at which children actually or allegedly associated with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) were being detained. In May 2020, a command order prohibiting child recruitment was issued by some of the Syrian armed opposition groups.⁴
45. In Yemen, the Houthis issued a directive in April 2020 for the handover of children captured or detained during military operations while dialogue on the signing of an action plan continued. This engagement led to the release by the Houthis of 68 children detained for their actual or alleged association with opposition parties in January 2020.

C. Prevention of grave violations against children

46. In support of the Secretary-General's vision on prevention, the Sustainable Development Goals and the sustaining peace resolutions, the Special Representative and the Government of the Central African Republic continued to discuss, at the country's request, the development of a national plan to prevent grave violations against children. To support the Government towards that end, representatives of the Office of the Special Representative conducted an evaluation mission to the country in November 2019.
47. The development and expansion of regional and subregional prevention initiatives, which was encouraged in Security Council resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#), would both sustain the gains made through national action plans beyond the duration of those plans and systematize preventive measures across regions to enhance the protection of children on a long-term basis. Within this framework the Special Representative continued her engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Economic Community of Central African States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

⁴ Formerly known as the Free Syrian Army.

V. Capitalizing on best practices and lessons learned

A. Fostering exchanges and generating lessons learned on the monitoring and reporting mechanism

48. As mentioned in her previous report (A/74/249), the Special Representative, in coordination with UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, organized a series of regional consultations with the Co-Chairs of country task forces on monitoring and reporting and country teams. The consultations aimed, inter alia, at fostering exchanges and generating lessons learned on the monitoring and reporting mechanism and on United Nations engagement with listed parties. After workshops in Amman and Nairobi, in 2018 and 2019, respectively, a third regional workshop covering East Asia and the Pacific region was held in Bangkok in August 2019. The Special Representative, UNICEF, the Co-Chairs of the country task forces in Afghanistan, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand as well as United Nations country team representatives from those countries attended. A fourth regional workshop, in Dakar in January 2020, brought together the Special Representative, UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations as well as country task forces and United Nations country team representatives from the Central African Republic, Colombia, Mali and Nigeria. The next steps will be to discuss the workshop recommendations at the Headquarters level and coordinate implementation with the field.

B. Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict

49. As mentioned by the Special Representative in her previous report (A/74/249), a consultative process with child protection and mediation actors was launched in 2018 to develop practical guidance on the integration of child protection issues into peace processes, in collaboration with the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UNICEF. Within this framework, the Special Representative, in conjunction with the Government of Belgium and the European Institute of Peace, organized a high-level consultation in Brussels in October 2019. The event brought together senior diplomats, experienced mediators and child protection actors to discuss challenges faced on the ground, highlight lessons learned and share recommendations on the integration of child protection issues into peace processes.

50. The practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict was launched in February 2020 by the Security Council. By identifying best practices for the integration of child protection issues into peace processes, this practical guidance will support prevention and mediation efforts by the United Nations and by regional, subregional, national and local actors, including parties to conflict and conflict-affected communities. The guidance is currently being translated into the Arabic, French and Spanish languages.

VI. Raising global awareness and building partnerships

A. Field visits

51. In October 2019, the Special Representative visited Somalia to discuss with its Federal Government the implementation of its 2012 action plans to end and prevent the recruitment, use, killing and maiming of children, including through the signing of a road map with the Minister of Defence to expedite implementation. The Special

Representative raised concerns about the increasing number of violations attributed to the regional security forces of the federal member states of Somalia. She visited Baidoa, South West State, to assess the harsh reality of children affected by conflict and engage with regional authorities. Together with the Minister of Defence, she launched a Peacebuilding Fund project supporting the prevention of child recruitment and the identification, separation and community-based reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups.

52. In January 2020, the Special Representative travelled to Myanmar to meet with key stakeholders, including the State Councillor, the Minister of Defence and the Tatmadaw, to give renewed impetus to the implementation of the action plan with the Tatmadaw on child recruitment and use, accelerate accountability measures put in place within the framework of the Child Rights Act and encourage the Government to sign an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence. She also met with three non-State armed groups, namely the Karen National Liberation Army, the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, and urged them to sign and implement action plans to end and prevent child recruitment and use. The signature of action plans with the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army was delayed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

53. The Special Representative visited South Sudan in February 2020 to witness the signature of the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations. In view of the unification of their forces with the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, pursuant to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance have bound themselves to this action plan. The Special Representative also inaugurated the child protection office at the headquarters of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, built with the support of the country task force on monitoring and reporting, and serving as the coordination centre for child protection activities in South Sudan.

54. Programmed missions to Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine had to be postponed owing to unforeseen political events and COVID-19-related travel restrictions. The Special Representative organized video-teleconferences with some of the scheduled interlocutors.

B. Awareness-raising

55. The Special Representative continued to use her voice as the highest United Nations advocate for the protection of children affected by conflict to publicly call for their increased protection, including through issuing some 50 press releases and public statements, several of which were published jointly with other high-level United Nations officials as mentioned below. She also published a joint statement on the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium.

56. In April 2020, the Special Representative issued a donor report covering 2018 and 2019, in which she articulated her Office's achievements around four pillars that will inform her actions in the coming years: protecting children used and abused by, for and in armed conflict; preventing violations committed against children from occurring in the first place; raising awareness and strengthening partnerships for children; and promoting lessons learned and best practices.

57. By positioning children and armed conflict at the core of the peacebuilding, development and prevention agendas, the campaign "Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict" supported global advocacy efforts and was a strategic part of the global communications strategy of the Office during the reporting period. In August

2019, the second regional launch of the campaign took place in Bangkok. In February 2020, it was launched in South Sudan. The campaign will run until the end of 2022.

C. Building and supporting global alliances

58. The Special Representative actively supported initiatives promoting the endorsement and implementation of international instruments, including the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles), the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (Vancouver Principles). In August 2019, she participated in the launch of the publication *Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles*, hosted by Canada in New York. In May 2020, she was a speaker at a virtual event entitled “Protecting education from attack: scope, impact and response”, marking the fifth anniversary of the Safe Schools Declaration and co-organized by Argentina, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Uruguay and the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

59. Within the framework of the Global Coalition for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers, launched in 2018 by the Special Representative and UNICEF, consultations were held with global academia, local and international non-governmental organizations, Member States, financing experts, international organizations, and former child soldiers and children affected by armed conflict. On 26 November 2019, Belgium, Peru, Poland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland co-hosted an Arria-formula meeting on child reintegration, with an emphasis on bridging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Three briefing papers were researched and finalized: “Gaps and needs of children associated with armed forces or armed groups’ successful reintegration”; “Reframing child reintegration: from humanitarian action to development, peacebuilding, prevention and beyond”; and “Financing support for child reintegration”. Their main findings were compiled and published in June 2020 in a report entitled “Improving support to child reintegration: summary of findings from three reports”.

60. As a member of the United Nations inter-agency task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty, the Special Representative and her Office remained committed to supporting the development of this study, mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution [69/157](#). In October 2019, on the occasion of the presentation to the General Assembly of the report of the Independent Expert leading the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty ([A/74/136](#)), the Special Representative participated in a panel discussion on this topic and, together with members of the task force, issued a joint press release urging States to take action to end the deprivation of liberty of children.

61. In the study, it was estimated that 7 million children were deprived of their liberty worldwide, and the impact that deprivation of liberty can have on children was highlighted, including severe developmental delays, disability, irreversible psychological damage and increased rates of suicide and recidivism. Based on consultations with children, a set of materials was developed to promote the integration of a child rights approach into the penitentiary system. The inter-agency task force is coordinating its actions for follow-up to the study recommendations in order to leverage accelerated action to end the deprivation of liberty of children. In July 2020, the Office of the Special Representative participated in a webinar organized by the non-governmental organizations Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, Human Rights Watch and Defence for Children International, entitled “United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty: the implications of COVID-19, good practices and next steps”.

D. Working with regional and subregional organizations

African Union

62. The Special Representative continued her strong partnership with the African Union. In September 2019, her Office provided technical expertise for the training of the African Union Commission's Peace Support Operations Division in Harare. In October 2019, her Office participated in Addis Ababa in the Pan-African Conference on Children and Armed Conflict. In January 2020, her Office participated in a retreat of the African States that are members of the Security Council and of the African Union Peace and Security Council, focusing on children and armed conflict. In February 2020, the Special Representative was a speaker at the African Union Summit High-level Breakfast Dialogue on the theme "Stop the war on children: dividend of silencing the guns". On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Special Representative adopted a joint statement with the African Union and the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights.

63. The Office of the Special Representative also cooperated closely with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child on a commentary on article 22, on children and armed conflict, of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel

64. The Special Representative continued her advocacy to mainstream child protection provisions in the international humanitarian law and human rights compliance framework of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel. In a meeting with the President of Burkina Faso in September 2019, she advocated for the country to adopt a handover protocol for the transfer to civilian child protection actors of children associated with armed forces and groups who may be encountered during military operations. Her Office closely cooperated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the development of guidance and training modules on child protection for officers and troops from the Joint Force.

European Union

65. The partnership between the Office of the Special Representative and the European Union continued throughout the reporting period. In October 2019, the Office participated in the European Union-United Nations senior officials' workshop on humanitarian civil-military coordination, international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians in Mali and the Sahel region. The Special Representative held bilateral meetings with multiple European Union officials, including the European Union Special Representative for Human Rights, the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel, the Head of the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, the Deputy Secretary-General for Common Security and Defence Policy and Crisis Response at the European External Action Service and one of the Co-Chairs of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights. In Somalia, the Special Representative met with the Force Commander of the European Union military mission to contribute to the training of Somali security forces.

66. The Liaison Office in Brussels provided briefings on children and armed conflict to experts from European Union States and States Members of the United Nations. The Liaison Office also facilitated the engagement of the Special Representative with the Human Rights Council. It provided training on children and armed conflict to the members of the Geneva-based Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, to

military chaplains during the fifth international course for Catholic military chaplains in international humanitarian law, and to the German armed forces.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

67. The Office of the Special Representative continued its partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), including by cooperating closely with the Senior Focal Point on Children and Armed Conflict at NATO headquarters and providing dedicated technical assistance for further developing NATO activities in identifying and preventing grave violations against children. Her Office also assisted NATO in the finalization of an updated training package for NATO staff on children and armed conflict with a specific emphasis on the six grave violations.

68. In May 2020, the Special Representative held a videoconference with the NATO Resolute Support Mission and the United States forces in Afghanistan on measures taken by the International Forces in Afghanistan to mitigate child casualties during military operations.

League of Arab States

69. In September 2019, the Special Representative and the Assistant Secretary-General for Social Affairs of the League of Arab States met in New York to discuss the implementation of the cooperation framework that they had signed in 2014.

E. Building partnerships with civil society

70. Building and maintaining strong partnerships with civil society organizations and academia remained a priority for the Special Representative. In addition to regular engagements with New York-based non-governmental organizations, she engaged with civil society partners during her field missions and with non-governmental organizations based in Europe, facilitated through the Liaison Office in Brussels. The Special Representative participated in dozens of events organized by civil society.

71. In September 2019, the Special Representative was a speaker at the event entitled “How are we going to stop the war on children?”, organized by Save the Children, together with Belgium, Côte d’Ivoire, France, Germany, Indonesia, South Africa and the European Union, in New York in the margins of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly. On the same occasion, and as part of her efforts to support reintegration efforts, she took part in an event entitled “A goal within reach: ending the institutionalization of children to ensure no one is left behind”, organized by the Lumos Foundation and Save the Children, together with Bulgaria, Jordan and the European Union.

72. At the event entitled “Responding to sexual violence in the context of detention”, organized in October 2019 by the All Survivors Project, together with Germany, Norway, Peru and Switzerland, the Special Representative shed light on the issue of sexual violence against boys in conflict.

73. Discussions on children and armed conflict with universities, academics and think tanks continued. In November 2019, the Special Representative was invited as a keynote speaker at the first congress of the International Mukwege Chair on the theme “Violence against women and girls in conflict”, held at the University of Liège, Belgium, with the Queen of Belgium and Dr. Mukwege in attendance. In January 2020, the Special Representative took part in a workshop held at Princeton University in New Jersey, United States of America, and organized by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination and the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.

74. When unable to attend events herself, the Special Representative provided recorded statements. Representatives of her Office also participated in events, including the annual meeting of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, held in Geneva in October 2019. In the same month, her Office took part in a side event in Amsterdam with youth affected by armed conflict, organized by War Child Holland in the margins of the International Conference on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Crisis Situations.

F. Building support through partnerships with United Nations mechanisms and international organizations

75. As in previous years, the Special Representative worked closely with the Security Council and relevant subsidiary organs. She briefed the Council on the situation of children and armed conflict in Somalia (October 2019) and the Philippines (November 2019) and briefed the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She briefed the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on specific country situations and issued country reports on Afghanistan (S/2019/727), the Central African Republic (S/2019/852), Iraq (S/2019/984), Colombia (S/2019/1017) and Somalia (S/2020/174). She also issued three global horizontal notes and provided a briefing to the Working Group regarding the impact of COVID-19 on children affected by armed conflict. Her Office supported the organization of several video-teleconferences between the Working Group and the Co-Chairs of country task forces on monitoring and reporting, and during the Working Group's visit to Mali in December 2019.

76. The Special Representative continued her outreach with the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and with the Special Advisers to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect. In November 2019, in conjunction with the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, she issued a joint statement welcoming the sentencing of Bosco Ntaganda by the International Criminal Court. In the same month, together with other high-level United Nations officials, she issued a joint statement on human rights and humanitarian concerns related to women and children affected by armed conflict in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. In February 2020, she joined the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Representative on Violence against Children in issuing a statement deploring continued reports of human rights abuses against civilians, including women and children, in the south-west and north-west regions of Cameroon. Furthermore, in September 2019, technical teams from her Office and the Office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict travelled to Myanmar to undertake joint training for partners on child protection and conflict-related sexual violence. In June 2020, to commemorate the annual International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, the Special Representative hosted a virtual event held jointly with the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Argentina.

77. The Special Representative continued her cooperation and engagement with other United Nations partners, including UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Her Office continued to contribute to the update of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards with respect to children associated with armed forces or groups. Furthermore, it contributed to the planning process for the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan, led by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Sudan.

78. In the framework of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Technical Reference Group, co-chaired by the Special Representative and UNICEF, a guidance note for monitors on child abductions is currently being finalized.

79. Cross-cutting issues relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate remained an important entry point for mainstreaming child protection concerns. The Special Representative continued to treat the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeepers as a matter of priority, including by engaging regularly with the High-level Steering Group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.

80. Regular communication with the Human Rights Council regarding violations of the rights of children in situations of conflict continued. On 2 July 2020, the Special Representative presented her annual report to the Council ([A/HRC/43/38](#)). Her Office continued to support the universal periodic review process by providing information on the six grave violations and progress made by the countries on the children and armed conflict agenda. The Special Representative continued her dialogue with the Council's special procedure mandate holders on common areas of concern. In October 2019, she had a meeting with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. In New York, also in October 2019, the Special Representative participated in a side event on protecting internally displaced children, organized by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. In the same month, representatives of her Office met with the Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. In November 2019, the Special Representative had a discussion with the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the Central African Republic. In February 2020, she met with the Commissioners of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and, in June 2020, she had a telephone call with the Head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. Her Office also provided inputs for multiple reports and field missions of special rapporteurs and independent experts and collaborated regularly with commissions of inquiry on situations of mutual interest.

81. In November 2019, the Special Representative spoke at a General Assembly high-level meeting to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the occasion of the anniversary of the optional protocols to the Convention in May 2020, she published, together with the Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material and the Special Representative on Violence against Children, a press release on protecting children from sale, sexual exploitation and recruitment and use in hostilities. As a result of continued advocacy by the Special Representative and the United Nations on the ground, in September 2019, Myanmar and the Gambia ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

VII. Recommendations

82. The Special Representative is deeply concerned by the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children. She calls upon all parties to conflict to fully comply with international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law and to immediately end and take all necessary measures to prevent grave violations, including through mitigation measures and enhanced training on preventing grave violations, as well as by ensuring strong accountability measures for perpetrators. With regard to the denial of humanitarian access, she calls upon all parties to allow 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.

83. The Special Representative calls upon all Member States to further strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including through the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the endorsement and implementation of the Paris Principles, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles.

84. The Special Representative is concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on children affected by armed conflict and calls upon Member States to ensure that services and child protection actors are protected and have enough resources despite shrinking economies. She urges parties to conflict to act on the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire and put an effective halt to hostilities.

85. The Special Representative calls upon Member States to continue to support the implementation of action plans and other commitments aimed at strengthening the protection of children in armed conflict, including by facilitating United Nations engagement with armed groups.

86. The Special Representative encourages all Member States and parties to conflict to ensure the inclusion of child protection provisions in peace negotiations and mediation efforts. She strongly encourages all actors involved in peace processes to make full use of the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict published by her Office.

87. The Special Representative encourages Member States, United Nations partners, regional organizations, child protection actors and parties to conflict to join the campaign "Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict".

88. The Special Representative encourages countries on the children and armed conflict agenda to ensure that child protection considerations are central to efforts to build rights-based, accountable security systems and to implement the recommendations contained in this regard in Security Council resolution [2151 \(2014\)](#). She also calls upon those Member States and regional and international actors that are providing security sector support to conflict-affected countries to take into account child protection considerations.

89. The Special Representative reiterates the importance of sufficient financial and human resources for the monitoring and reporting mechanism and the central role of dedicated child protection capacities. She encourages the Security Council, the Fifth Committee, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, as well as donors, to ensure that child protection priorities are translated into budgeting processes and staffing. She also encourages Member States and regional and subregional organizations to strengthen their child protection capacities and enhance the mainstreaming of, and training on, children and armed conflict.

90. The Special Representative calls upon the donor community to provide sufficient, sustainable and reliable funding for child reintegration and address existing gaps in order to allow child protection actors to react swiftly to the release of children and to put in place long-term viable alternatives to military life, notably through gender-sensitive reintegration programmes that provide, among other resources, psychosocial support, education programmes and vocational training. She encourages Member States to join the New York-based Friends of Reintegration Group.