

**MONUSCO DSRSG for Protection & Operations**  
**Remarks to the UNSC Arria Formula Meeting on**  
**the Impact of COVID on Children and Armed Conflict**

7 May 2021

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, all protocols observed.

Let me begin by thanking Ambassador Jurgenson and his team at the mission of Estonia for organizing this Arria formula meeting and for inviting MONUSCO and myself to contribute to the discussion. I would also like to thank you my dear friend Special Representative Virginia Gamba, SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict for spearheading this initiative, with the support of the Government of the UK, to launch such an important study on the impact of COVID-19 on children and armed conflicts

Here in the DRC, as in many countries, children are the first victims of conflicts. As you are aware, the DRC has been on the agenda of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict since it was established. The DRC remains among the countries with the highest rates of documented grave violations against children, particularly child recruitment, sexual violence and abduction. Now, with

COVID-19, these children are hit by a double crisis: A pandemic that has severely limited their access to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, health, psychosocial and education services. Additionally, many children suffer the trickledown effect of the economic crisis on their families' livelihoods, leading to increased vulnerability to child recruitment by the numerous armed groups in eastern DRC.

MONUSCO's Child Protection Section, and its close partner UNICEF, sees the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on boys and girls in the Eastern DRC every day. Despite limited mobility under COVID-19 restrictions, our teams documented an increase in most child rights violations in 2020 compared to 2019: Documented cases of killing and maiming of children more than doubled, attacks against schools and hospitals tripled, and sexual violence and abduction of children both increased.

COVID-19 continues to hamper our ability to document these violations I just described. As a case in point: In 2019, our teams separated 3,100 children from armed groups, while in 2020 this dropped to 2,100 children. Girls appear to be

more seriously impacted by the COVID-19 crisis than boys, particularly when it comes to access to services.

It took creativity on the part of our Child Protection Section, UNICEF and our Government partners to mitigate the risk of the pandemic worsening an already extremely fragile environment for children in Eastern DRC. We maximized deployment of partners to the field and remote monitoring of more visible violations such as attacks on schools and hospitals, when our staff was under Mission lockdowns. When these were lifted, we immediately resumed COVID 19-compliant deployments of our staff to release children from armed groups. We also worked closely with the Congolese Armed Forces and Police to sensitize them to need to the risks COVID-19 poses to detained children and to speed up the time of handover of children formerly associated with armed groups from detention to child protection actors.

In 2020 and 2021, nine non-state armed groups factions signed our Children and Armed Conflict unilateral declaration and roadmap committing to end and prevent child recruitment and other grave child violations, bringing the total armed groups

that have formally signed unilateral declarations to 39. As a direct result of this dialogue, 838 children were voluntarily released by their commanders in 2020, and 50 more in the first quarter of 2021.

Excellencies,

It is clear that COVID-19 will be with us for many months to come, so what can we learn from this last year to keep children protected during times of both armed conflict and pandemic?

First, we need to underscore the importance of increased collaboration between Governments and the different members of the UN family devoted to protecting children and the right to health. We saw here in the DRC that the pandemic catalyzed improved coordination across the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism referral system within the Country Task Force.

Second, even in the midst of pandemic, peace processes and negotiated surrenders continue. Here in DRC, we expect the Government to soon issue its long-awaited

national ordonnance on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. MONUSCO is in the process of finalizing its support to the Government on this very important framework and will prioritize COVID-compliant demobilization of children.

Third, with the successful release of more than 2,100 children after our direct engagement with armed groups, we know engagement can work even during COVID-19.

Fourth, successful monitoring and reporting also requires adapting our working methods to maximize the use of social media, traditional media tools, and savvy messaging to counter misinformation.

Finally, I would like to echo SRSG Gamba's call for adequate and sustainable funding of child protection activities with a particular focus on education and sustainable livelihood activities.

Thank you for your attention.