



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for  
**CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT**

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**Statement by Ms. Virginia Gamba,  
Special Representative of the Secretary-General  
for Children and Armed Conflict**

**United Nations Security Arria Formula Meeting on the  
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in  
situations of armed conflict**

**7 May 2021**

Mr. President,  
Your Excellencies  
Distinguished members of the Security Council,

I am honored to be here with you today and I would like to thank the Permanent Mission of Estonia for its leadership in the organization of this Arria formula and all the 14<sup>1</sup> member states that are supporting this meeting.

Excellencies,

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and is still having, a major negative impact on our lives. Vulnerable people living in dire situations, including because of armed conflicts, have been particularly affected and children, once again, find themselves at the center of despicable events and suffering. They have lost family members, friends, teachers, doctors, and other important reference points in their lives. More than one year after the outbreak of the pandemic, there are important lessons that can be learned, and among these I would like to share with you the three that are particularly relevant to my mandate.

First of all, no one is immune to the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, we must be able to invest more on preventive actions to better protect children affected by armed conflict globally. The study we are launching today clearly outlines the difficulties faced by the Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting on the ground to document and verify grave violations against children. Measures put in place by Member States to contain the spread of the virus resulted in remote working arrangements and the impossibility to physically access areas, as well as survivors of violations or witnesses, to be able to make a solid assessment on whether the pandemic led to a concrete increase or decrease in violations. The second and third quarter of 2020 were particularly impacted by these access restrictions. In particular, violations that can lead to further stigmatization of the victims, such as rape and other forms of sexual violence or recruitment and use of children in some contexts have been extremely hard to document and verify. We are collecting data that shows that abduction, recruitment and use, attacks on schools and hospitals and sexual violence have been impacted by the pandemic, either because children became more vulnerable to use and abuse or because the socio-economic crisis resulting from the measures to combat the pandemic left them and their families with few options other than falling prey to the dynamics of armed conflict. For these reasons, I believe we should invest in early warning mechanisms and develop new and creative preparedness measures to prevent violations from happening in similar situations in the future, including through the development of prevention plans and through capacity-building of local actors to identify and report grave violations to the relevant child protection focal points in a manner more conducive to their immediate protection.

Second, an enhanced engagement with parties to conflict must be prioritized. During 2020, this aspect of my mandate has been severely challenged, again due to the impossibility for the United Nations on the ground to physically meet parties to conflict to

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<sup>1</sup> France, Ireland, Kenya, Niger, Norway, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia, United Kingdom, the United States and Viet Nam, together with additional co-sponsors Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Sweden

develop new action plans or other types of commitments to end and prevent grave violations against children in armed conflict. The monitoring of ongoing actions plans has also been interrupted, as well as related activities such as screening exercises, trainings, meetings, and the dissemination of action plan measures. For some armed groups operating in remote areas with hardly any access to electricity, it was certainly impossible to hold online meetings. On a positive note, though, some Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting were able to find creative solutions to continue engaging with armed groups despite COVID-19 restrictions either by relying on local counterparts or, for those based in urban areas, on good internet connections. Technology is indeed an important element that needs to be further explored in the context of the MRM.

Third, it is imperative to focus on long-term actions for the protection of children affected by conflict, through flexible funding and the development of tailored child programs to meet the needs of children on the ground. The economic reintegration support for children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups was significantly delayed for large numbers of children recently separated, as agencies were unable to set up new reintegration projects due to the challenges I mentioned earlier. To this end, I believe it is of key importance to establish new partnerships among international, regional and local actors, including the donor community, with the aim to provide a holistic approach to child protection prevention and response initiatives. This would also facilitate progress in the achievement of the sustainable development goals and the agenda 2030.

Excellencies,

I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of focusing on preventive actions to improve the protection of children and in this regard, the need to prioritize the allocation of flexible funding and resources for child protection. Funds should not be diverted from essential child protection and MRM activities to support COVID-19 prevention and response interventions, but rather ensure that child protection is mainstreamed in preparedness and response plans and emergency funding proposals, including in the context of the COVID-19 response.

I believe we must invest more on analysis of MRM data to be able to assess what the overall impact of the pandemic has been on children affected by armed conflict so as to find new ways to address similar situations in the future. In this regard, it is important to note that any increase in CAAC violations resulting from this health crisis, once identified, should be considered within a broader context of increased vulnerabilities of children to many violations and abuses as a result of the pandemic such as exposure to exploitative and hazardous relationships, increased social isolation, and reduced access to services and humanitarian assistance. Many violations are interdependent, and responses should be coordinated at the interagency level.

Excellencies,

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic on children used and abused in, for and by armed conflict will have long-lasting effects on them and on the environment they live in. We must join forces and put in place measures to ensure children are protected, while enhancing the capacity of the United Nations on the ground to be able to sustainably monitor and report grave violations against children in armed conflict as well as engage in prevention of violations whenever possible and as demanded by joint action.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is a global problem that requires global solutions: for children used and abused in, for and by armed conflict, the Pandemic is an aggravating factor. In dealing with this complex scenario we must remember that children are the most vulnerable of populations and that the SDGs demand that we move forward globally leaving no one behind. Children used and abused by conflict deserve to be prioritized; we must make sure they are not left behind.

I Thank you, Mr. President.