

Security Council Arria Formula Meeting:
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict

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Your excellencies, Special Representative Gamba, distinguished colleagues –

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important and timely issue. As the world's leading humanitarian agency for children – and a key actor in the roll-out of the COVAX initiative for equitable vaccine distribution – at every level of the organization, UNICEF has been responding to the pandemic. That includes in our work to support children affected by armed conflict – not just by monitoring and reporting on grave violations but also by staying and delivering lifesaving responses to children who are most in need.

Even outside conflict situations, the pandemic's impact on children is alarming. The world is witnessing a horrifying surge in gender-based violence, with girls particularly at risk. 920 million children globally remain affected by school closures, many without access to remote learning. Confinement, isolation, and loss of livelihoods has exacerbated violence against children and increased mental health and psychosocial needs, while economic insecurity has increased the risk of child labour and child marriage. Conflict-affected children face all of these vulnerabilities and more.

As the SRSG's report indicates, we don't yet fully understand the impact the pandemic has had – or will have – on trends in grave violations. But our child protection specialists are worried about the compounding impact COVID-19 may be having in situations of armed conflict.

In Colombia, for example, school closures in areas where armed groups are present appears to have exposed children to heightened risk of recruitment and use. And the socio-economic challenges faced by families due to the pandemic only serve to exacerbate this risk.

In West Africa, our specialists are concerned that heightened socio-economic insecurity may lead to increased use of abduction of children for ransom – an incredibly alarming trend if verified.

And I recently learned of two eleventh grade boys in another context whose teacher only discovered that they had been forcibly recruited by an armed group when they stopped showing up to school to pick up their remote schooling guides. The teacher believed that at least ten other boys faced the same risk of recruitment given circumstances fostered by the pandemic.

In addition to these heightened risks for children, the pandemic has created access challenges for monitoring and verification as others have highlighted. While verification standards remain as

robust as ever and the UN continues to be able to identify general trends, it will take some time for colleagues to verify the backlog of reported cases. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, I want to take this opportunity to highlight the resiliency of the UN teams on the ground who found ways to stay and deliver on the children and armed conflict mandate.

In Myanmar, pre-COVID conflict dynamics and existing access restrictions meant that the UN was already well-versed in adapting to shifting access dynamics and had built the community-based networks necessary to facilitate the remote work required during the pandemic. The CTFMR was even able to leverage COVID-19 impediments into opportunities with the signing of the first-ever Joint Action Plan with a non-state armed group, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army. The establishment of online communication with the group enabled regular and smooth negotiations, which may have been more cumbersome to achieve through physical meetings given the group's location.

In Yemen, the CTFMR was able to accelerate the release of almost 70 formerly associated children detained in a military facility due to the urgency created by the pandemic and an additional 95 children held in an interim care centre in the country were swiftly reunified with their families before lockdown took effect. Although case management has adapted to movement restrictions, as was the case in many countries, protection actors faced challenges in supporting certain aspects of release and reintegration programmes that required travel or are difficult to replicate through virtual platforms.

In the Philippines, colleagues managed to continue a number of important programmatic interventions, despite COVID, including sustained engagement with parties to conflict on prevention frameworks as well as technical assistance and capacity building to more than 200 government stakeholders on the Special Protection of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Law through virtual platforms.

And in Somalia, UNICEF ensured that reintegration centres remained open for recently released children by implementing strict social distancing and hand washing measures in addition to the provision of PPE to staff and children, reaching over 1,500 children in 2020 alone.

Through these experiences – many of which are ongoing – UNICEF has learned a few important lessons:

- Funding for monitoring and reporting capacity and response programming is more crucial than ever. The COVID experience has only underscored what we already knew – monitoring and reporting and required programmatic responses are inherently human resource intensive activities. Without sufficient resources, the work cannot continue.
- Access to internet and digital communication services must be scaled up in conflict affected settings. It's critical for monitoring and reporting to continue in the face of a crisis like COVID, but it's also fundamental to ensuring the most vulnerable children have access to education, which is why it is a core tenet of case management adaptation as well as UNICEF's Reimagine Education initiative.

- The value of building strong networks and partnerships cannot be overstated. These networks allowed monitoring work to continue safely and robustly in the countries that had them.
- Remote or virtual engagement can be leveraged to create opportunities to advance the protection of children, but in such sensitive work that relies so heavily on the building of trust, it can never fully replace face-to-face engagement with survivors, witnesses, and parties to conflict.

Your excellencies, we continue to count on your support. While the situation may be improving here in New York, conflict affected children will be dealing with the lingering impact of the pandemic for the foreseeable future. We must remain vigilant in our joint efforts to protect the children most impacted by the pandemic.

Thank you.