

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children
Briefing by Fiona Frazer, UNAMA Human Rights Chief
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I would first like to acknowledge the efforts made by the Office of the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict in conducting this study one year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on the impact on violations against children in situations of armed conflict, and I thank SRSG Gamba and Estonia for bringing us together today for this important discussion.

As Head of the human rights component of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and country representative for OHCHR, I oversee the child protection work in UNAMA, and we work closely with our SRSG, Deborah Lyons, who serves as the co-chair, together with the UNICEF country representative, of the Afghanistan UN-led Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) on grave violations against children.

In Afghanistan, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was recorded in the Western Province of Herat in February of 2020. Since then, COVID-19 has added to the uncertainty, increased vulnerability, and extreme distress of children and their families. Quarantine measures such as school closures and restrictions on movement have disrupted children's access to education, healthcare and response mechanisms.

The economic and social conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated protection risks for vulnerable families, many of whom had already depleted their limited financial, mental, and social coping capacities due to prolonged conflict and recurrent natural disasters.

As was the case in many facets of life during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Afghanistan CTFMR having adapted its Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) methodology with the added priority of using COVID-safe measures, faced many challenges in its monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children amidst the pandemic.

It is difficult, *with certainty*, to establish direct causality between COVID-19 and the trends that the Afghanistan CTFMR has verified related to the six grave violations against children.

However, data recorded and the trends seen, corresponding with the timeline of the pandemic, together with observations and information that interlocutors and contacts on the ground have shared, paint a certain picture of the outbreak's effect on Afghan children's lives.

For example, during these times of isolation, acute stress in the home, increased poverty, and food insecurity, families and communities were more likely to resort to harmful coping mechanisms, making children more susceptible to child recruitment and use, child marriage and hazardous child labour, placing girls and boys at greater risk of neglect, violence, and exploitation. At the same time, school closures prevented children from access to learning and limited their interactions with peers.

In 2020, the CTFMR verified that 196 boys were recruited & used by parties to the conflict, mainly Taliban, more than triple the number verified during the previous year. In addition to the verified incidents of recruitment and use of children by the Taliban, the CTFMR has received an increase in reports of recruitment and use of children by the Afghan national security forces across various regions of Afghanistan. The CTFMR is working to verify these reports while following the child protection principles.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the President of Afghanistan issued a series of Presidential Decrees, the first in March 2020, which saw the release of prisoners, including children from the Juvenile Rehabilitation Centres, as a measure to reduce congestion of detention facilities to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, children facing allegations of being associated with armed groups or on national security related charges were excluded from these decrees, leading to their continued detention, and resulting in their greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

Turning to potential mid- and long-term effects of the pandemic, and new vulnerabilities that may have emerged from the pandemic, we see several issues. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as in so many other parts of the world, exacerbated poverty in Afghanistan. Many schools remain closed and children who were not in school may have been more prone to being recruited and used by parties to the conflict, especially as with increased poverty, many children face pressure to help provide for their families rather than stay in school.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the suffering that children already faced due to the armed conflict: with children resorting to hard labour in order to feed family members, girls facing early marriage, and many other challenges, all of which require long-term responses, including

psychosocial support, counselling support, reintegration, rehabilitation, livelihood opportunities to return back to their communities as active citizens.

The CTFMR also observed a number of attacks against hospitals and healthcare personnel – of particular concern considering the fragile state of Afghanistan’s healthcare system and the heavy burden it has carried during the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the continued armed conflict. UNAMA published a special report on this in June 2020, highlighting the egregiousness of the attacks, as well as the short- and long-term implications for medical care.

The impact of COVID-19 also led to the cancellation of polio vaccination campaigns in July 2020, depriving millions of children from being vaccinated.

With the current COVID-19 situation in neighbouring countries, there are real worries as to how the people of Afghanistan may be further affected by COVID-19, and we need ensure that child friendly and child-centred approaches are considered in all aspects of the continued response.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns, government measures, and UN policies required the Afghanistan CTFMR to change the way it worked, especially in relation to in-person meetings. For example, from April to August 2020, government ministries were largely closed or on remote-working arrangements, so the CTFMR could not conduct in-person meetings during this time. Along a similar timeline, in accordance with UN COVID-19 safety measures, the CTFMR had to convert most of its communications to either telephone or internet-based calls.

Many national staff were forced to work from home, without the benefit of reliable internet connection or mobile phone service - a problem across Afghanistan - not only for the CTFMR, but also for the contacts they are trying to reach. These factors made MRM work and advocacy particularly challenging. For example, the special committee established by the Attorney General’s Office to investigate alleged sexual violence against children in Logar province, was stalled for several months due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and related protection concerns.

With many staff facing movement restrictions, the CTFMR continued to be innovative, changing strategies and using different methods to monitor, follow up, and verify incidents. This included strong collaboration with communities, contacting interlocutors via telephone, conducting online

training and capacity building, and for sensitive and confidential cases, inviting individual interlocutors for meetings outdoors.

The CTFMR continued to engage with parties to the conflict on child protection issues, including virtual and in-person meetings with armed opposition groups. It remained actively engaged with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the secretariat for the Action Plan for the Prevention of Underage Recruitment and Use and the annexes on killing and maiming and sexual Violence against Children and the Road Map to Compliance.

Excellencies

Some of the key lessons learned by the Afghanistan CTFMR include how necessary it is to work hard to exhibit flexibility, patience, and creativity. It is also critically important to prepare contingency plans, remain ever aware of different cultural sensitivities, engage in trust building with communities (especially in times where physical meeting are not possible), and to find creative ways to continue collaboration among the members of the CTFMR, UN country team, and government when restrictions are in place. Moreover, it is quite clear that better mobile phone network access, coverage, and increased overall access to internet would greatly facilitate MRM work in Afghanistan, as it would allow interlocutors to communicate with the CTFMR in a safe manner, both in terms of the pandemic and in the situation of ongoing armed conflict.

Looking to what the Security Council, Member States, the UN, and civil society actors can do to factor in, and respond to, the impact of the pandemic on violations against children – in Afghanistan there is a very simple starting point: the CTFMR needs additional human resources in order to continue its now more difficult and complicated work. Last year, the UNAMA mandate was expanded, yet it still has not received any additional human resources to respond to this increase in expected work/output.

As I close, I would like to make some brief recommendations for your consideration:

We must ensure that decision making bodies on the COVID-19 response in Afghanistan, including task forces, crisis management teams, legislative, policy and budgetary working groups and other

relevant national and local government institutions, are child focused and putting children a priority in all aspects of their works.

As Afghanistan looks to many changes in the post-COVID world, we need to make sure that emphasis is placed on quality education, social protection services and better economic opportunities, so that children and their families will be better equipped for future challenges.

We must have active referral options ready, and efforts to raise awareness around child marriage and other negative economic coping mechanisms should be intensified. More support and funding for social workers is needed, with additional social workers recruited locally.

Finally, particularly during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, much more needs to be done to protect children from the irreversible physical and psychological harm of recruitment and use. We will continue to encourage the Government to use the Child Protection Units more proactively in monitoring for use of children at checkpoints, and to work with armed opposition groups to commit to ending child recruitment, including looking for opportunities to raise these issues as peace negotiations continue.

I thank you.
