



**Statement on behalf of the EU and its Member States**

**at the Security Council Arria Open Debate on**

**“Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against  
children in situations of armed conflict”**

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**United Nations  
New York  
Friday, 7 May 2021 at 14:00-17.00 EST**

Madame President,

I have the honor to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member States. The EU thanks Estonia and the co-sponsors for convening today's Arria-formula meeting.

Children do not only suffer from the devastating impacts of armed conflict but are also at the highest risk of suffering further devastating losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The concomitance of both scourges has indeed exacerbated their multifaceted impacts on children. We welcome the timely meeting today, as well as the study published by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) and thank the briefers for shedding light on the plight of the impacted children.

Children in conflict situations continue to face gross violations of their human rights with impunity, particularly girls. Conflict affected countries are not sufficiently equipped to protect children against the consequences of the pandemic. Public health systems do not have sufficient capacities to provide critical lifesaving services. Conflict has led to the destruction of civilian infrastructure, limiting children's access to basic services, such as education, health, access to clean water and sanitation and protection. Conflict also leads to family separations, harshly affecting children, especially girls. In some situations, parties to the conflict have exploited the pandemic, increasing grave violations, despite calls for a global ceasefire. In this context, the specific needs of girls, as well as those with disabilities, pose a particular challenge and require a special attention.

In addition, restrictions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 hamper efforts to prevent, monitor, report and respond to violations. Some of these measures impact the timely and effective delivery of humanitarian aid. School closures lead to the suspension of education, as many children do not have access to remote learning opportunities. This increases the risk of dropouts, recruitment, including forced labour and use by armed groups and forces as well as the exposure to other forms of violence such as gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage.

The EU will continue to put a strong focus on supporting child protection and education in situations of armed conflict as well as access to education for girls in humanitarian contexts.

We also note with great concern an increased risk of military occupation of education facilities, which makes it more difficult for children to resume their studies: and the longer children are out of education, the more likely they will not return, especially girls. Integrating education as a priority into the humanitarian-development-peace nexus can help to overcome the challenges. Access to education as a key way to break cycles of poverty and to build peaceful societies, must be preserved at all times.

The spread of COVID-19 has challenged the UN working methods to prevent and end the violations against children in armed conflict. At the same time, any response to COVID 19 has to put the protection of children at the center. The rights of the child is the primary consideration when addressing their needs, especially in reintegration efforts.

Peace operations must also be adequately resourced. The distinct role of child protection advisors must be preserved and strengthened – their inputs are unique and provide decisive added value. We also urge members of the Security Council to ensure mainstreaming of the CAAC agenda across the work of the Council, invite SRSG Gamba to brief on country situations, raising CAAC issues including on child protection during Security Council visits, and ensure that child protection is addressed in relevant mandate discussions of all UN missions and through SRSGs activities, reports and briefings at the Security Council.

The EU has reacted quickly to address the impact of COVID-19 by supporting the strengthening of local child protection systems, especially in countries affected by civil war or conflicts, and countries hosting children fleeing armed conflict such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, and Uganda. Child protection aspects are also taken into account in the EU's civilian and military missions and operations. For example, the EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine organised a human rights campaign focusing on the challenges created by the pandemic for children who are under the police surveillance in the Kyiv region.

The EU's political engagement further expresses itself in the implementation of projects focusing on the prevention of and the response to violence, with a particular

focus on gender-based violence, the prevention of the recruitment and use of children by armed forces, family tracing and reunification, demobilisation, release and comprehensive and successful reintegration through long-term interventions, education support, mental health and psychosocial support and alternatives forms of care for unaccompanied and separated children, and more.

In a context where millions of children are affected by armed conflicts, advocating and ensuring respect for international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law remains a necessity. It is crucial that governments facilitate access for all frontline medical and humanitarian workers to ensure continued provision of humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups, including children.

The protection of children through humanitarian assistance and development programmes requires sufficient financial resources. Children make up the majority of beneficiaries of EU-funded humanitarian operations. For example, the EU currently funds UNICEF's work in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Chad that offer support to children in armed conflict.

In such critical times, all stakeholders must continue the challenging and essential task of monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict, as well as other child protection concerns. In conflict-affected countries, where movement of essential personnel is allowed, this essential personnel should include those responsible for monitoring, reporting, and responding to these grave violations.

But foremost, the international community, governments and civil society should remain steadfast in its commitment to conflict prevention. In the recovery phase of the pandemic we must ensure that the rights of the child are of paramount consideration in the proactive and coordinated measures taken to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on children.

I thank you.