

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

- Thank you very much to the Permanent Mission of Estonia and the Office of the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict for hosting this meeting today to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on violations against children in armed conflict. I am grateful for the opportunity to share experiences from Save the Children's work in the Sahel to contribute to this important and timely discussion.
- Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the Sahel region has been facing an unprecedented crisis as escalating violence, rising levels of food insecurity and ongoing displacement, are creating one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world. With 50% of the Sahelian population under 15, this is very much a children's crisis.
- Grave violations of children's rights unfortunately, are widespread in the Sahel. In 2020 2.3m children were in need of protection assistance across the Sahel. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the challenges facing children in the Sahel.
- Nowhere has this been more prominent than on children's access to education.
- The number of schools forced to shut in the region as a direct result of insecurity and attacks on school infrastructure, has increased sixfold since 2017, forcing around 4,000 schools to close by early 2020.
- The COVID-19 pandemic tipped an existing education crisis to breaking point.
- At the height of the pandemic, school closures across Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to limit the spread of the virus affected the education of approximately 13 million children. Even with schools now re-opening, nearly 4,000 schools continue to be closed due to insecurity, which is affecting 700,000 children across the 3 countries.
- In conflict and humanitarian settings, schools provide a safe environment for children, protecting them from physical dangers as well as ensuring they have access to lifesaving food, water, health care and hygiene supplies.
- When children are not in school, we know they are at greater risk of violations and rights abuses including recruitment by armed groups, sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage, child labour and other forms of exploitation and abuse.
- In the Sahel we have been concerned that school closures due to COVID-19, alongside the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and ongoing conflict, have created conditions in which children are more vulnerable to recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups.
- While data on these potential trends is still to come, we have seen the recruitment of children and their association with armed groups become a growing concern in the Sahel. The conditions which drive children and parents to consider children joining armed groups, including insecurity, lack of prospects whether in education or employment, and poverty, have all been direct consequences of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- "In front of us, they killed my grandparents and two of my brothers. This is what made me go where I shouldn't have gone." Abdoulaye, Gao
- I also want to bring attention to an often-overlooked issue, which is the specific consequences of attacks on schools, school closures and economic insecurity driven by COVID-19, for girls.
- The gendered nature of attacks on schools, including targeting of girls' schools for abductions and attack, as we have seen in recent incidents in NE Nigeria, as well as sexual violence in and around schools or along school routes, is driving girls out of school.

- Attacks on schools that result in girls leaving or being taken out of school even for relatively short periods, greatly increases the risk of child marriage and permanent loss of education. Niger currently has the highest rate for child marriage in the world, with 76% of girls married before their 18th birthday,
- In humanitarian crises, and as we have seen, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as families face even greater hardship, child marriage can also be seen as a coping mechanism.
- It is crucial therefore to both tackle the underlying challenges facing children and their families, including long-term underdevelopment, lack of access to education and opportunities, alongside taking concrete steps to end conflict, and ensure parties to conflict uphold their obligations to the protection of children in conflict while it still rages.
- The governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger alongside others in the Sahel region, have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration – committing to the protection and continuation of education in armed conflict. There is good evidence that states are implementing the commitments and that this is having a positive effect. This is an important step and we hope that momentum on this issue will continue as we look to the Fourth International Conference on Safe Schools which will be hosted in Nigeria later this year.
- The risks I have laid out above require specialized support and resourcing to address. But reports consistently show that humanitarian child protection interventions are chronically underfunded, unpredictable, and do not match actual need. In 2019 for example, Mali received only 0.1% share of total estimated child protection funding.
- Alongside the impact of chronic underfunding of child protection, the ability of humanitarian organizations to address the protection needs of children has been compromised by worsening conflict and insecurity and measures which, while necessary to stop the spread of the virus, further impeded timely access to humanitarian assistance for children.
- While it is hard to say whether COVID-19 restrictions have been systematically used as a cover for deliberate restriction of access, what we do know is that humanitarian workers are increasingly targeted by non-state armed groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, meaning vulnerable communities cannot access humanitarian assistance and the monitoring of harm against civilians, including children, is being compromised.
- Despite this, child protection actors, including those engaged in the MRM and tasked with implementing the UN Security Council's CAAC agenda, are playing a critical role.
- Throughout the pandemic we have seen child protection actors adapt to new challenges and continue to support children and families who have experienced serious rights violations, for example through remote case management services, and efforts to strengthen community-based protection.
- Continued efforts to monitor and verifying grave violations, analyze root causes, and engage in dialogue with parties to conflict in order to end and prevent grave violations is also critical for improved accountability to children and communities, and to support more timely and appropriate programmatic interventions and services.
- I want to close today with five key recommendations:
- The first is that the UN Security Council must call on parties to conflict to immediately cease violations against children, including unlawful attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers and schools and urge and support all parties to implement the Safe Schools Declaration and its Guidelines for Military Use, as well as the Paris Principles and Commitments.

Perpetrators of violations must be fully held to account, including through ensuring a credible list in the Annual Report of the Secretary General on CAAC.

- Second, a greater emphasis and resource must be placed on facilitating dialogue between states, the UN, NGOs and non-state armed groups to better protect children from grave violations.
- Third, the UN Security Council must also ensure multilateral peacekeeping and political missions have adequate dedicated senior child protection expertise to ensure strengthened monitoring and reporting of violations against children and effective engagement with parties to conflict. The G5 Sahel defense and security committee must ensure the integration of the Safe Schools Declaration and its guidelines for military use into its security strategy and facilitate access to troops for training on respect for the Safe Schools Declaration and its guidelines.
- Fourth, the international community must also prioritize and support well-resourced and inclusive, gender-sensitive child protection services across the Sahel, and work to promote humanitarian access and the safety of humanitarian workers to reach all children in need of protection support to deliver such services. This includes ensuring counter-terrorism efforts do not restrict impartial humanitarian organizations from delivering aid.
- Finally, all States should support government efforts to keep education alive in times of crisis including through commitment to providing multi-year and flexible funds to support education in emergencies.