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**Statement by the Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations,
Ambassador Mathu Joyini, on the Security Council Arrria Formula meeting on the
“Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed
conflict”**

7 May 2021

Thank you Chair,

We thank Estonia and the co-hosts for convening this important meeting, which gives us an opportunity to address the increased violations against children in situations of armed conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also thank the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict for *the Study Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict*, which addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children affected by armed conflict and on monitoring and reporting capacities to further assess the long-term impact on children's rights and to ensure appropriate responses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on children's lives, limiting their access to healthcare, food, education and protection. This pandemic has exacerbated children's vulnerability to grave violations in situations of armed conflict and restricted the realisation of their rights. The pandemic and related control measures have further increased the vulnerability of children to recruitment and use because of school closures, and the withdrawal of state and humanitarian actors in some conflict areas.

Chairperson,

South Africa believes that children need special protection because they are amongst the most vulnerable members in society. Lack of protection for children in conflict situations exposes children to further threats. This vulnerability has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing children in conflict situations to further threats.

In this context, part of the protection of children in armed conflict includes the provision of equitable distribution, and access to COVID-19 vaccines. We therefore wish to reiterate the Secretary-General's statement that “it is in the interest of everybody to make sure that as soon as possible and in a fair way, everybody gets vaccinated everywhere and that vaccines are considered to be a truly global public good”. It is only through equitable collective action that we

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will be able to ensure that the most vulnerable in our societies, including children are protected from the virus.

It is in this context that we wish to propose the following for Member States to consider when protecting children in conflict situations during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Firstly, we urge all the parties to conflict to endorse the appeal of the Secretary-General for a global ceasefire. This creates a conducive environment to put mechanisms in place to manage and protect children in conflict situations;

Secondly, parties to conflict, whether Governmental forces or non-State armed groups should adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure that Schools and hospitals are kept safe and not used for military purposes. The protection and safety of schools is of particular importance as it forms the backbone of any peacebuilding effort, which enables future development, growth and sustainable peace;

Lastly, we urge the international community to continue funding appeals for child protection across all humanitarian and refugee response plans, in order to holistically address context-specific needs and to strengthen systems weakened by the pandemic.

Chairperson,

Despite the challenges, we also note the progress that has been made to end and prevent grave violations against children, notably in the Central African Republic, where the Child Protection Code promulgated in June 2020 criminalised most of the grave violations, including recruitment and use of children, and enshrined the concept that children associated with armed forces and groups are to be considered primarily as victims.

We wish to commend the strong and resilient role played by the United Nations Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, in ensuring the protection of conflict-affected children in the face of additional challenges posed by the pandemic.

I wish to conclude by underscoring that the protection of children is of outmost importance as the world addresses the COVID-19 pandemic. Children are positive agents of change and are fundamental to the future of peaceful and prosperous societies in all corners of the world. In view of the fact that the long term impact of the pandemic will be most keenly felt by children, it is imperative that we partner globally, regionally and nationally to accelerate efforts to strengthen institutions and services for children, including justice, education and health services.

I thank you.