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Children and armed conflict in South Sudan

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the third report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in South Sudan. It contains information on the six grave violations against children¹ and, more broadly, on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in South Sudan during the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020.

Highlighted herein are continued trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by all parties to the conflict. Children were recruited to boost the numbers of armed groups in anticipation of the reintegration process, and the emergence of new armed groups and the disintegration or splintering of existing groups increased children's vulnerability to grave violations. The report presents the evolution in the situation since the previous report ([S/2018/865](#)), the progress made in ending and preventing violations, and the follow-up of the conclusions adopted by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict ([S/AC.51/2018/3](#)). Lastly, the report contains a series of recommendations to end and prevent grave violations against children in South Sudan and to improve their protection.

¹ Recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abductions and denial of humanitarian access to children.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the third report of the Secretary-General on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in South Sudan. It covers the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020. The report provides an overview of political and security developments, describes the trends and patterns of grave violations perpetrated against children since the previous report (S/2018/865), and presents challenges and progress made with regard to improving the situation of children since the adoption of the conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in December 2018 (S/AC.51/2018/3). Perpetrators of grave violations are, where possible, identified in the present report. In that regard, in the annexes to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/74/845-S/2020/525), both the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, including the Taban Deng-allied South Sudan People's Defence Forces, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition – pro-Machar (SPLM/A-IO²) were listed for the recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and abduction of children. The South Sudan People's Defence Forces was also listed for rape and other forms of sexual violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals.

2. Violations against children continued throughout the reporting period. In particular, children were recruited to boost the numbers of armed groups in anticipation of the reintegration process. In addition, the emergence of new armed groups and the disintegration or splintering of existing ones increased children's vulnerability to grave violations.

II. Overview of political and security developments

A. 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019

3. Despite the pledges for a permanent ceasefire contained in the June 2018 Khartoum Declaration of Agreement between Parties of the Conflict of South Sudan signed by the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, the Chairman of SPLM/A-IO, Riek Machar, and representatives of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), SPLM Former Detainees and the Other Political Parties coalition, the conflict continued in parts of South Sudan as parties to the conflict pursued territorial control. Several reports were received of fighting between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and armed groups, and among armed groups. For instance, clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SPLA-IO were recorded in Mayendit county, Unity state; between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and the National Salvation Army (NAS) in Equatoria; and between the South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC) and SPLA-IO in Central Equatoria state. The fighting resulted in the recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and abduction of children.

4. Several rounds of the mediation process led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development were undertaken and, on 12 September 2018, in Addis Ababa, South Sudanese parties to the conflict signed the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. One of the key provisions of the Revitalized Agreement is the requirement for all parties to the Agreement to refrain from the recruitment and use of children in contravention of international conventions.

² Referred to in previous reports as “pro-Machar Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (pro-Machar SPLA-IO)”. The present report uses “SPLM/A-IO” when referring to both the political party (Movement) and its armed forces (Army). For the attribution of violations and the description of activities of the armed forces, the report uses “SPLA-IO”.

B. 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020

5. Between November 2019 and 15 February 2020, following calls from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the international community to resolve the pending issues regarding the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity, Mr. Kiir and Mr. Machar held several face-to-face meetings, including one in Uganda, convened by the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, and the Chair of the Sovereign Council of the Sudan, Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan, and one in Juba, facilitated by the Vice-Chair of the Sovereign Council of the Sudan, Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Mr. Kiir and Mr. Machar deliberated on outstanding pre-transitional tasks, including transitional security arrangements, and the issue of states and their boundaries.

6. On 21 February 2020, Mr. Kiir dissolved the Government and appointed Mr. Machar as First Vice-President, in addition to four other vice-presidents: Taban Deng Gai, James Wani Igga, Rebecca Nyandeng De Mabior and Hussein Abdelbagi Ayii Akol. Their swearing-in marked the launch of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity and the beginning of a transitional period of 36 months. Between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020, the United Nations engaged with the parties to the Revitalized Agreement and, on 7 February 2020, together they signed the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations. This was the result of sustained engagement by the country task force on monitoring and reporting, coupled with the support of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, particularly during her two visits to South Sudan in September 2018 and February 2020. However, implementation of the action plan was partially affected by delays in the reconstitution of the Government and the appointment of government office holders at different levels, which were mostly due to the emergence of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in South Sudan.

7. From August 2019, there was an escalation in intercommunal conflict and violence in the states of Lakes, Jonglei, Warrap and Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, which had a devastating impact on children. Children were displaced, abducted, maimed and killed during intercommunal fights. In some cases, armed forces and armed groups got involved in intercommunal conflicts, either in trying to restore calm or by taking sides with sections of the community. This had a ripple effect on the situation of children and the delivery of humanitarian assistance to children in the affected states.

III. Parties to the conflict

8. In line with the requirements of the Revitalized Agreement, cantonment of armed forces and armed groups commenced as part of the unification and integration process of SPLA-IO and SSOA, including the National Democratic Movement (NDM), into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, with a focus on training the unified forces. Other armed groups splintered, disintegrated and re-emerged, often taking part in sporadic localized fighting.

9. For instance, General Ochan Puot split from SPLA-IO and engaged in sporadic fighting with SPLA-IO in the greater Upper Nile region. In Central Equatoria state, Peter Khamis's SSNMC fought against SPLA-IO. General Thomas Cirillo's NAS often fought with the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, predominantly in the greater Equatoria region, while General Paul Malong's South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A) engaged the South Sudan People's Defence Forces in military battles in the greater Bahr el-Ghazal region.

10. In addition to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, other government security forces, including the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS), the

National Prison Service of South Sudan (NPSSS), Taban Deng-allied South Sudan People's Defence Forces and the National Security Service (NSS), also perpetrated violations against children. All these armed clashes and armed actors increased children's vulnerability to grave violations and had an adverse impact on the work of humanitarian actors providing assistance to children.

IV. Grave violations against children

11. Children continued to be victims of the six grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict. Children were affected in different ways, with 48 per cent of children associated with parties to the conflict recruited and used in combat roles.

12. The United Nations verified a total of 708 violations, affecting 618 children (431 boys, 178 girls and 9 of unknown sex), representing a decrease compared with the previous reporting period (see [S/2018/865](#)). A total of 286 children were affected in the second half of 2018, 251 in 2019 and 82 in the first half of 2020. SPLA-IO was the main perpetrator, affecting 222 children (172 boys and 50 girls), followed by government security forces (211 children: 117 boys, 89 girls and 5 of unknown sex), NAS (38 children: 25 boys and 13 girls), SSUF/A (36 boys), SSOA (10 boys), unknown armed elements (7 girls) and NDM (1 boy). Crossfire between various parties to the conflict affected 36 children (22 boys, 10 girls and 4 of unknown sex), while explosive remnants of war affected 58 children (48 boys and 10 girls).

13. Of the 618 children affected, 58 children (33 boys and 25 girls) were affected by multiple violations, with abduction being the most common accompanying violation. For example, four girls who were affected by sexual violence were also affected by abduction (three of the girls) and killing and maiming (one of the girls).

14. In addition, the United Nations verified 22 attacks on schools (13) and hospitals (9), and 10 denials of humanitarian access affecting children. The United Nations also verified 40 incidents of military use of schools (32) and hospitals (8). Furthermore, the United Nations is still verifying 360 incidents of grave violations estimated to have affected 770 children.

15. Most incidents took place in Central Equatoria (207), followed by Western Equatoria (101), Unity (79), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (58), Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (53), Jonglei (50), Eastern Equatoria (39), Upper Nile (19) and Warrap (13). Incidents of denial of humanitarian access and attacks on schools and hospitals were most prevalent in Jonglei (22), followed by Central Equatoria (4), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (4) and Eastern Equatoria (2).

16. Recruitment and use remained the most prevalent violation, affecting the largest number of children (321), followed by killing and maiming (142), abduction (115) and rape and other forms of sexual violence (98). Children were recruited from their villages and communities and from camps for internally displaced persons and refugees along the borders with the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Children were forced to move with parties to the conflict from one state to another, as well as across national borders, and were engaged in various roles, including in combat and domestic roles, in communication operations and as spies, guards and porters. Some of the girls recruited were also forced into marriage.

17. Grave violations against children began to decline in September 2018, as a result of the peace talks and the signing of the Revitalized Agreement. The reintegration of various armed groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, including the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) and the pro-Taban Deng

SPLA-IO,³ was a big factor in the reduction of the number of affected children. However, grave violations continued to be committed against children throughout the country during the reporting period.

A. Recruitment and use

18. The recruitment and use of children by all parties to the conflict persisted throughout the reporting period. The United Nations verified a total of 321 children as victims of recruitment and use (302 boys and 19 girls), with 116 affected during the second half of 2018, 166 in 2019 and 39 in the first half of 2020. In addition, verification of the recruitment and use of a reported 510 children (481 boys and 29 girls) is ongoing.

19. Government security forces recruited and used 79 children (77 boys and 2 girls), including the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (62 boys), SSNPS (8 boys), NSS (2 boys and 2 girls), Taban Deng-allied South Sudan People's Defence Forces (4 boys) and NPSSS (1 boy). With regard to armed groups, children were recruited and used by SPLA-IO (147 boys and 10 girls), SSUF/A (39 boys), NAS (28 boys and 7 girls), SSOA (10 boys) and NDM (1 boy). Children were recruited and used in Central Equatoria (101), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (50), Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (41), Western Equatoria (37), Unity (37), Jonglei (27), Eastern Equatoria (16), Warrap (10) and Upper Nile (2).

20. Some 52 per cent of the children recruited by and associated with armed forces and groups were used in support roles, including as cooks, porters, spies or bodyguards to senior commanders. In August 2018, the United Nations verified a 13-year-old armed boy in military uniform on duty as part of the SPLA-IO county commissioner's bodyguards in Jonglei. The country task force on monitoring and reporting continues to advocate the release of the boy.

21. Some 48 per cent of recruited children were armed, trained and used in active combat. Many children were assigned or deployed to operate military checkpoints, particularly in areas controlled by SPLA-IO. For instance, in June 2020, the United Nations witnessed a 14-year-old armed boy, dressed in civilian attire, operating a SPLA-IO checkpoint in Western Equatoria. The country task force on monitoring and reporting continues to advocate the release of those children.

22. Children were recruited into the armed forces and armed groups using various methods, including abductions and house-to-house forceful conscription, with some armed groups targeting schools for recruitment. In May 2019, the United Nations interviewed 14 children (12 boys and 2 girls, aged 13–17) who had escaped from a NAS base in Mukaya, Central Equatoria. All 14 children were verified as having been recruited by NAS between February and September 2018. Eleven of the children reported that they had been recruited from various primary schools, one boy reported that he had been abducted from his family residence and one boy from the road, while one boy had joined NAS voluntarily. The children received military training in Mukaya and were assigned different roles, with seven children used as bodyguards to commanders and three boys as combatants, while the other four performed domestic tasks. The children reported having been regularly beaten by NAS commanders.

23. Children were often recruited and used to boost numbers whenever there was an intensification of conflict or the emergence of new armed groups and during the training of unified armed forces. During the unification process, children were found in training centres to boost the numbers of forces, especially where the numbers were required for ranking purposes. In the last five months of 2019, 80 children (76 boys and 4 girls)

³ Referred to as Taban Deng-allied South Sudan People's Defence Forces in the latest report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/74/845-S/2020/525](#)).

were recruited and used in greater Bahr el-Ghazal alone. SSUF/A recruited, trained and deployed 36 boys in combat activities in a bid to control territory, while SPLA-IO recruited and used 41 children in the context of numerous military clashes with the South Sudan People's Defence Forces in Bahr el-Ghazal at the time.

24. Insecurity, poverty and lack of opportunities were also drivers of child recruitment and use. Several children interviewed at the Ngo Alima cantonment site in Wau stated that they had joined SPLA-IO to defend their communities, others because their parents had been killed during the conflict, while some said they had joined due to economic hardship, with the hope of getting assistance. On 28 June 2019, in Pibor, Jonglei, by order of the State Governor, the South Sudan People's Defence Forces rescued more than 100 children who were on their way to the SPLA-IO and SSOA cantonment sites in Teneth, Pibor. The children had been recruited from five primary schools in Pibor, Lukurnyang and Teneth by opposition forces under the pretext of providing the children with scholastic materials. The South Sudan People's Defence Forces returned them to their families. The United Nations had previously engaged with the State Governor, a former commander, on multiple occasions on issues pertaining to child protection.

25. The recruitment and use of children was often connected to other grave violations. In May 2019, the United Nations verified the killing of two children (a boy aged 17 and a girl aged 16) recruited and associated with NAS, due to crossfire during military clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and NAS in Otogo county in Yei, Central Equatoria. The boy was a combatant and the girl was doing domestic work while undergoing military training at a NAS military camp. In another incident, in August 2019, three boys (aged 14, 15 and 16) associated with SSUF/A were injured due to crossfire during fighting between SSUF/A and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces in Raja, Western Bahr el-Ghazal.

26. From 2018 to 2020, the United Nations documented incidents of cross-border recruitment of children by NAS along the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and by SSUF/A along the border with the Sudan, mainly from South Sudanese refugee camps in the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In May 2019, the United Nations received reports of the presence of eight armed boys (aged 13–17) in Lasu, Central Equatoria, on the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The boys said that they were South Sudanese and had been recruited from a refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by NAS. The verification process for these violations is ongoing.

B. Killing and maiming

27. The United Nations verified a total of 142 children (100 boys, 33 girls and 9 of unknown sex) killed (71) and maimed (71). Of those children, 54 were killed or maimed in the second half of 2018, 51 in 2019 and 37 in the first half of 2020. In addition, 26 incidents of killing and maiming, affecting 105 children (23 boys, 9 girls and 73 of unknown sex), were documented, and the country task force on monitoring and reporting is continuing with the verification process.

28. Government security forces were responsible for the killing and maiming of 35 children: the South Sudan People's Defence Forces killed or maimed 24 children (11 boys, 8 girls and 5 of unknown sex), SSNPS killed or maimed 10 children (9 boys and 1 girl) and NSS killed or maimed 1 boy. With regard to armed groups, NAS was responsible for the killing and maiming of 10 children (7 boys and 3 girls) and SPLA-IO of 3 children (2 boys and 1 girl). In addition, 36 children (22 boys, 10 girls and 4 of unknown sex) were killed or maimed by crossfire between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and armed groups, and among armed groups, including: the South Sudan

People's Defence Forces and SPLA-IO (9 boys and 6 girls), SSNMC and SPLA-IO (1 boy, 2 girls and 4 of unknown sex), the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and Misseriya armed cattle keepers (5 boys), SSUF/A and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (3 boys), splinter groups within SPLA-IO (2 boys), SPLA-IO and NAS (1 girl) and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and NAS (2 boys and 1 girl). The killing and maiming of a total of 58 children (48 boys and 10 girls) was due to explosive remnants of war. Children were most affected in Central Equatoria (43), Jonglei (23), Western Equatoria (20), Unity (16), Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (12), Upper Nile (9), Eastern Equatoria (11), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (7) and Warrap (1).

29. Children were killed and maimed during military operations carried out by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. In December 2019, a 16-year-old boy was shot and killed by South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers in Lobonok county, Central Equatoria, while the South Sudan People's Defence Forces were pursuing a NAS soldier who had come to visit his family. In another case, in September 2018, in Magwi, Eastern Equatoria, the United Nations verified the maiming of five children (four boys aged 10–17 and one girl aged 5) when heavily armed SPLA soldiers invaded homes in search of a South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldier who had defected to SPLA-IO. The children were severely beaten and sustained injuries and later fled to Uganda as refugees.

30. Many children were killed and maimed during raids by armed groups on villages, particularly in Central Equatoria, which continued to bear the brunt of military clashes throughout the reporting period. In January 2020, an 11-year-old boy was shot and killed by NAS forces when they raided and burned down houses in Maridi, Western Equatoria. The boy was shot and killed at close range as he tried to flee to safety with other civilians.

31. Children were also killed and maimed in crossfire between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and armed groups, and between various armed groups in the greater Equatoria and Bahr el-Ghazal regions. In October 2018, the United Nations verified the killing of seven children during clashes between SSNMC and SPLA-IO in Minyori, Central Equatoria. In January 2019, in Torit, Eastern Equatoria, the United Nations verified the killing of two children (an 8-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl) in crossfire during armed clashes between SPLA-IO and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. In September 2019, the United Nations verified the maiming of two boys (aged 16–17) associated with SSUF/A, during clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SSUF/A in Nyimboli, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal.

32. Explosive remnants of war continued to kill and maim children, with 58 child casualties. On 28 May 2020, two boys (aged 12 and 13) were killed while playing with an explosive remnant of war in the village of Jebel Dinka, Central Equatoria state. In another incident, on 12 December 2019, in Rokon, Central Equatoria, six boys (aged 9–14) brought home and played with a cluster bomb submunition they had found while digging out a termite mound. The bomb exploded and all six boys sustained injuries.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

33. The United Nations verified 98 children (97 girls and 1 boy) as survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence: 58 children in the second half of 2018, 37 children in 2019 and 3 children in the first half of 2020. The United Nations also received reports of 41 incidents affecting 58 girls, which the country task force on monitoring and reporting is working to verify. Twenty-nine of these girls were allegedly gang raped. The full scale of sexual violence affecting children is believed to be underreported, owing to fear of stigmatization, cultural norms, lack of awareness, fear

of reprisals and lack of adequate support services and avenues for accountability. The decrease in verified cases of children affected compared with the previous reporting period (658 children were affected between 1 October 2014 and 30 June 2018) is due to the reduction in the intensity of conflict, the signing of the Revitalized Agreement, the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity and the integration of some armed groups, including SSNLM and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces.

34. Most of the children (75) were subjected to sexual violence by government security forces, including the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (67 girls and 1 boy), SSNPS (5 girls), NSS (1 girl) and NPSSS (1 girl). Regarding armed groups, violations were attributed to SPLA-IO (14 girls), NAS (2 girls) and unknown armed elements (7 girls). The youngest victim of sexual assault was a three-year-old girl. The violation was attributed to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. Most incidents took place in Central Equatoria (64), followed by Western Equatoria (11), Unity (12), Upper Nile (4), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (3), Eastern Equatoria (2) and Warrap (2).

35. Children were often raped during military offensives. For instance, in August 2018, in Mayendit, Unity state, the United Nations verified the rape of two girls (aged 12 and 13) by soldiers from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces when they attacked a village during a military offensive against SPLA-IO.

36. Armed forces and groups raped children during military patrols. For example, in February 2019, in Kangapo county, Central Equatoria, the United Nations verified that a 16-year-old girl was gang raped by five soldiers from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces who were patrolling the border between South Sudan and Uganda. In June 2019, a 14-year-old girl was raped by a NAS soldier in Otego county, Yei River state. The girl and her uncle were on their way from Goli to the town of Yei when they were intercepted by several NAS soldiers patrolling the area. The girl was forcefully separated from her uncle, taken into the bush and raped by one of the soldiers.

37. Armed forces and groups often attacked civilian homes, abducted girls and raped them. In October 2018, a 14-year-old girl was abducted from her home at gunpoint, forced into the bush and gang raped by five South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers in Yei, Central Equatoria. After the rape, the girl was released but the soldiers threatened to kill her if she reported the case to the authorities. In another case, in December 2018, the United Nations interviewed a 16-year-old girl who was raped by a South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldier in the town of Yei. The incident occurred when a group of about 30 South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers invaded the girl's home in search of her uncle (reportedly a NAS officer). The soldiers threatened her at gunpoint and asked where her uncle was, but she denied knowledge of his whereabouts. The girl was taken to the Nyombe area of Yei, where one of the soldiers raped her before she was released.

38. Children were also raped when venturing out of their homes and were sometimes ambushed on roads. In August 2018, in Korwach, Upper Nile state, three girls (aged 13–14) were raped by SPLA-IO soldiers while fleeing to Panam with their parents. In another incident, in January 2019, two girls (aged 13 and 16), as well as two women, were gang raped at gunpoint by seven armed soldiers from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, as the girls were moving from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) protection of civilians site in Unity state to the village of Chamach.

39. Armed perpetrators also targeted and raped children while they were performing domestic chores. In March 2019, the United Nations verified the rape of a 16-year-old girl by SPLA-IO soldiers in Ombaci, Central Equatoria state. The girl had gone to collect firewood when she was attacked and sexually assaulted. In Yambio, Western Equatoria, a 16-year-old girl was attacked and raped at gunpoint by a SPLA-IO soldier while she was working in the garden.

40. Gang rape continued to be perpetrated by armed forces against children. In June 2020, the United Nations verified the gang rape of a 14-year-old girl by three South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers in Central Equatoria. The girl was sexually assaulted when four soldiers from the mobile unit of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces arrested her brother on his way back from the market and escorted him home. Upon reaching home, the soldiers saw the girl and ordered her and her mother to go into two different houses. Three of the soldiers followed the girl into the house and gang raped her, while the fourth blindfolded her brother and kept him at gunpoint. After raping the girl, the soldiers looted household property and left. The girl was taken to hospital for medical treatment.

41. In some situations, rape and other forms of sexual violence occurred in the context of other grave violations, such as killing and maiming, recruitment and use, and abduction. In February 2019, in Mukaya county, Central Equatoria, a 17-year-old girl was raped and killed by South Sudan People's Defence Forces. As verified by the United Nations, when soldiers attacked and looted her village, one of the soldiers dragged the girl into the bush, raped her and shot her dead. Her body was later found by community members. In March 2019, in Morobo, Central Equatoria, the United Nations verified the rape of a 15-year-old girl by a soldier from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces at the Forces' Jimi Barracks. The child had been abducted in 2016 at the age of 12 by a group of South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers in Morobo, during armed clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and pro-Machar SPLA-IO, and taken to the Jimi Barracks, where she lived with a South Sudan People's Defence Forces commander and carried out domestic work. In March 2019, the commander asked to marry her, but she refused. She was offered protection by another soldier, who took her to his house under the pretext of rescuing her from the commander. Instead, he repeatedly raped the girl at his residence within the Jimi Barracks. The information came to the attention of a government official, who rescued the child on 18 March 2019. The child received medical treatment and was put under the care of the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare in Yei, Central Equatoria. The country task force on monitoring and reporting continues to follow up on the accountability measures taken in response to this violation.

42. Lack of proper command and control of armed forces and armed groups increased children's vulnerability to sexual violence. Soldiers would move from military bases and sexually abuse children in their neighbourhoods. In June 2019, in Yei, Central Equatoria, a three-year-old girl was raped by an armed soldier from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. The perpetrator was part of a group of South Sudan People's Defence Forces soldiers going around the area in search of food for the soldiers in the barracks. The perpetrator was caught by the girl's neighbours while committing the crime and was handed over to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. The country task force on monitoring and reporting continues to follow up on prosecution or disciplinary measures taken in connection with this violation.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

43. The United Nations verified a total of 22 attacks on schools (13) and hospitals (9), of which 8 took place in the second half of 2018 and 14 in 2019. In addition, 17 attacks on schools and 6 on hospitals were documented and verification is ongoing. Attacks on schools affected access to education for an estimated 6,741 children (3,486 boys and 3,255 girls) during the reporting period. Most attacks on schools and hospitals took place in Jonglei (16), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (3), Central Equatoria (2) and Eastern Equatoria (1).

44. SPLA-IO was responsible for most of the attacks on schools (4) and hospitals (4), followed by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (2 schools and

3 hospitals). In addition, seven schools were affected by crossfire between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SPLA-IO, while crossfire between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and NAS affected one health facility.

45. Attacks on schools and hospitals, including looting, vandalism, destruction of facilities and threats against protected personnel, often occurred during military offensives. In September 2018, SPLA-IO forces attacked and looted Akobo hospital in Jonglei and threatened medical personnel. Hospital supplies and equipment, including nutritional supplies for children, were looted. The SPLA-IO forces entered the hospital compound, expelled health workers and occupied the facility. Five hospital staff were evacuated to Juba. In February 2019, in Jonglei, the United Nations verified the attack and destruction of 6 primary schools and a health centre during fighting between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SPLA-IO.

Military use of schools and hospitals

46. A total of 40 cases of military use of schools (32) and hospitals (8) were verified, 16 in the second half of 2018, 22 in 2019 and 2 in 2020. The military use of schools affected access to education for an estimated 8,000 children. Government security forces were responsible for 33 cases: the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (31) and NSS (2). Regarding armed groups, SPLA-IO was responsible for five cases, while SSUF/A and SSNMC were responsible for one each.

47. Armed forces and armed groups used schools and hospitals as military bases, sleeping quarters, offices and stores for their military equipment. In November 2018, during a visit to Upper Nile state, the United Nations observed a primary school being used as military barracks by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces. Heavy artilleries were deployed on the school premises and classrooms were used as accommodation, stores and offices for soldiers. In April 2019, in Torit West county, in Eastern Equatoria, the United Nations verified the use of Himoru primary school by SPLA-IO forces. The school was being used as a military base to round up young people over the age of 18 as well as children forcefully recruited and to store items looted from the community.

E. Abduction

48. The United Nations verified the abduction of 115 children (61 boys and 54 girls). Of those children, 94 were abducted in the second half of 2018, 18 in 2019 and 3 in the first half of 2020. In addition, the United Nations received reports of 25 abductions, affecting 97 children, for which the verification process is ongoing. Children were most affected in Western Equatoria (47), followed by Central Equatoria (29), Upper Nile (14), Unity (14), Eastern Equatoria (10) and Western Bahr el-Ghazal (1).

49. SPLA-IO was the main perpetrator, responsible for abducting 73 children (30 boys and 43 girls), representing 63 per cent of the total number of children abducted, followed by government security forces (28 boys and 7 girls), namely the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (17 boys and 7 girls) and SSNPS (11 boys). NAS abducted 4 boys and 3 girls.

50. Abduction was primarily used for the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups. For example, in August 2018, 10 children (7 boys and 3 girls) were abducted for recruitment from Soka, Mukaya county, in Central Equatoria, by SPLA-IO. The SPLA-IO forces invaded Soka payam and abducted the 10 children, along with 36 adults, and forced them to join SPLA-IO. On 12 September 2018, in Unity state, the South Sudan People's Defence Forces abducted 10 boys (aged 10–15) while the children were on their way from the UNMISS protection of civilians site in

Bentiu to MirMir. The children were held in open-air detention in Rier before being recruited into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces.

51. Among the children abducted during the reporting period, 15 girls were verified as having been used for sexual purposes. In July 2019, in Makerenga, Western Equatoria, a 13-year-old girl and her mother were abducted by SPLA-IO. They were forced to trek all day through the bush, during which two SPLA-IO soldiers took turns to rape the girl. After several days at an SPLA-IO camp, the girl and her mother escaped. In another case, in July 2018, in Western Equatoria, a 17-year-old girl was abducted, along with other civilians, by SPLA-IO as it raided and looted homes in Bazumburu. The abductees were forced to trek for three days before reaching an SPLA-IO camp in Nadiangere. During the three-day trek, the girl was raped several times by different SPLA-IO soldiers. The girl reported that, upon reaching the camp, the female abductees, including children, were separated from the male ones and instructed to carry out domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and thatching roofs. Some of them were forced to marry soldiers. After three months, the girl fell sick and was released when the forces were redeploying to Kasia via Momboi from Nadiangere.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

52. The United Nations verified 10 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, a significant decrease from 1,496 incidents during the previous reporting period.⁴ Four of the incidents occurred in the second half of 2018, with six incidents in 2019. Most of the incidents were attributed to SPLA-IO (6), followed by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (2), crossfire between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and NAS (1) and unknown armed persons (1). The United Nations also documented four incidents for which the verification process is ongoing. Incidents occurred in Jonglei (6), Central Equatoria (2), Western Bahr el-Ghazal (1) and Eastern Equatoria (1).

53. The decline is largely attributed to the reduction of conflict across the country due to various ceasefire agreements between the parties to the conflict, the signing of the Revitalized Agreement and the unification of various armed groups into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces.

54. In some instances, denial of humanitarian access was caused by administrative and bureaucratic impediments to delivering aid to children in areas under opposition control. In April 2019, humanitarian workers distributing food packages to children in Panyume, Central Equatoria, were stopped by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces on the orders of the commissioner for Kuperu county to prevent humanitarian assistance to civilians in areas controlled by SPLA-IO.

55. Humanitarian supplies were looted and humanitarian workers were harassed while providing humanitarian assistance. In March 2019, the vehicles of a humanitarian organization delivering nutrition assistance and services to children in Patuet payam, Duk Panyang county, Jonglei, were attacked and looted by SPLA-IO. During the attack, all the nutrition supplies and materials were looted and the humanitarian workers were harassed, which had a negative impact on the delivery of nutritional assistance to malnourished children through the organization's feeding programme.

⁴ Information relating to the denial of humanitarian access to children is presented pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and follows the guidelines of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict. The information presented herein does not necessarily give an exhaustive view of the full humanitarian access situation in the countries concerned.

56. Humanitarian workers were also killed in the line of duty. For instance, in October 2019, three aid workers (one woman and two men) working for the International Organization for Migration and performing Ebola screenings in the community were killed by crossfire during fighting between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and NAS in Morobo county, Yei River state. Following the incident, the operations of humanitarian workers were suspended, which had an adverse effect on children.

V. Challenges and progress in addressing grave violations against children

A. Engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, including through the implementation of action plans

57. The United Nations continued to engage with parties to conflict to advocate the ending and prevention of grave violations against children and the adoption and implementation of action plans.

58. Between September and December 2018, following sustained engagement with the SSNLM leadership during the integration of SSNLM into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, the United Nations, together with the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, undertook joint visits to the SSNLM military bases in Western Equatoria to screen, identify, verify and release children associated with the armed group; 201 children (132 boys and 69 girls) were identified and subsequently released in early 2019.

59. In February 2019, the United Nations established a Joint Verification Committee, consisting of high-level representatives from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, SPLA-IO, SSOA and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, and a Joint Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, consisting of a liaison office between UNMISS on the one hand and the Government of South Sudan and other parties to the conflict on the other hand. The Joint Verification Committee is tasked with conducting joint monitoring and verification and raising awareness of the six grave violations against children in South Sudan.

60. By the end of 2019, the Joint Verification Committee had visited 28 military establishments, including South Sudan People's Defence Forces barracks (13), SPLA-IO cantonment sites (10), SSOA cantonment sites (1) and military training centres for unified forces (4). The formation of the Joint Verification Committee played a significant role in building confidence and trust among the parties and improving United Nations access to military barracks and cantonment sites. The work of the Joint Verification Committee also resulted in the release of 110 children (107 boys and 3 girls) from SPLA-IO (32), SSUF/A (36), SSNLM (40) and SSOA (2).

61. In February 2019, the United Nations engaged with the leadership of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, SPLA-IO and SSOA and advocated the training and appointment of more child protection focal points within the armed groups. To date, 300 child protection focal points (260 men and 40 women) have been appointed and trained, including from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (150), SPLA-IO (100) and SSOA (50). The child protection focal points have been key in facilitating child protection training sessions and raising awareness among the armed forces and armed groups. In addition, the child protection focal points are being used to monitor grave violations and report to their commanders and the United Nations. For instance, at the Rajaf unified training centre in Central Equatoria and at the MirMir cantonment

site in Unity state, the focal points identified over 40 children, who were then released, including 32 from SPLA-IO, 2 from SSOA and 6 from SSNLM.

62. The process of drafting the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations commenced in February 2019. The United Nations hosted a three-day consultative workshop to draft a comprehensive action plan, with representatives from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, SPLA-IO, SSOA, government ministries and civil society, and technical support from the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the United Nations Children's Fund. The inclusiveness of the drafting team reflected the ambitions laid out in the Revitalized Agreement, in which the formation of unified forces was one of the central tenets. From 4 to 8 September 2019, the Special Representative visited South Sudan to carry out advocacy for the action plan. The Special Representative met with the then First Vice-President Taban Deng, several ministers, the leadership of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and representatives of armed groups, who committed to accelerating the process for putting in place measures to protect children. During her visit, a child protection office at the headquarters of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, which was built with the support of the country task force on monitoring and reporting and which serves as a coordination centre for child protection activities, was also inaugurated.

63. On 7 February 2020, the parties to the Revitalized Agreement signed and endorsed the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations. The action plan was signed by the South Sudan Chief of Defence Forces on behalf of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity, whose primary responsibility it is to implement the action plan. It was further endorsed by the representatives of SPLM/A-IO and SSOA. The signing was witnessed by the co-chairs of the country task force on monitoring and reporting and by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. The action plan is comprehensive in nature because it addresses all six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict and because all the parties to the Revitalized Agreement are working within the same action plan. The action plan is also binding on any armed groups that may be integrated into the national army in the future.

64. Although the United Nations is supporting the implementation of the comprehensive action plan by the Revitalized Transitional Government, the uncertainties and delays that surrounded the formation of the Government and the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the establishment of a national task force and state task forces to oversee the implementation of the action plan.

65. In support of the implementation of the comprehensive action plan, the United Nations delivered child protection training sessions benefiting a total of 4,386 security forces (3,892 men and 494 women), including government security forces (2,811 men and 398 women), SPLA-IO (1,012 men and 88 women) and SSOA (69 men and 8 women). The training sessions focused mainly on international humanitarian law and international human rights law and the responsibility of the parties to the conflict to protect civilians, particularly children and women, during armed conflict.

66. Furthermore, in line with the Policy on Child Protection in United Nations Peace Operations, the United Nations conducted child protection awareness-raising sessions for the armed forces and armed groups, as well as for community members. The awareness-raising sessions benefited 28,116 participants (20,868 men and 7,248 women), including government security forces (18,629 men and 7,141 women), SPLA-IO (2,120 men and 106 women) and SSOA (119 men and 1 woman). In addition, 12,753 community members (7,089 men and 5,664 women) benefited from the awareness-raising sessions. Communities in areas prone to the recruitment of children

were specifically targeted to highlight the dangers that armed conflict posed to children. Furthermore, 5,869 United Nations personnel (4,935 men and 934 women), including military, police and civilian personnel, benefited from child protection mainstreaming and induction activities. The trained personnel were key in gathering information and supplementing the work of the UNMISS child protection advisers.

B. Release of children and the programmatic response to grave violations against children

67. Between July 2018 and June 2020, engagement by the United Nations and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission with armed forces and groups led to the release of 475 children (345 boys and 130 girls), including 346 children (227 boys and 119 girls) released from SSNLM, 85 children (75 boys and 10 girls) from SPLA-IO, 36 boys from SSUF/A, 4 children (3 boys and 1 girl) from pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO, 2 boys from SSOA, and 1 boy each from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SSNPS. The children from SSNLM and pro-Taban Deng SPLA-IO were mostly released during the armed forces integration into the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, while the children from SSUF/A were released by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces after their capture during fighting between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and SSUF/A in the Bahr el-Ghazal region. In addition, the United Nations verified 117 children (102 boys and 15 girls) who had either escaped or been spontaneously released by parties to conflict, including 88 children (77 boys and 11 girls) from SPLA-IO, 19 children (15 boys and 4 girls) from NAS, 9 boys from the South Sudan People's Defence Forces and 1 boy from SSNPS.

68. UNICEF and its implementing partners, together with the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, provided children with interim care, family tracing and reunification services, psychosocial support and education. As enshrined in the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups, released children were assisted alongside other vulnerable children in their communities of return to prevent stigmatization, minimize pull factors and promote acceptance by families and communities. The United Nations traced and verified 117 children who had escaped or been informally released by parties to conflict, and the children were given the required reintegration support by UNICEF and its partners. However, the general reintegration of children remains a big challenge as most communities where children are being reintegrated have no schools or vocational institutions. In some situations, children who completed primary school have no secondary schools to join in their localities. This exposes the children to higher risks of re-recruitment and other grave violations. The few children who are enrolled in the few vocational institutions often lack any economic opportunities to exercise their skills, given the general economic hardships and poor business environment in the country.

C. Legal framework and accountability

69. On 27 September 2018, South Sudan acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

70. Accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims of grave violations remain largely absent. Enforcement of domestic laws is hampered by resource constraints, institutional capacity challenges and lack of durable peace. During the reporting period, although travel sanctions were applied on some high-ranking

military and political figures, most perpetrators of grave violations against children remained unpunished. In the recently signed comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations, the parties committed themselves to investigating the six grave violations, criminalizing the violations where applicable and strengthening specialized units within the judiciary to investigate, prosecute and adjudicate.

VI. Observations and recommendations

71. I am encouraged by the overall decrease in grave violations against children in South Sudan since my previous report. I commend the parties to the Revitalized Agreement for their commitment to ending and preventing grave violations against children and encourage them to continue their efforts and their cooperation with the United Nations in this regard.

72. I remain concerned, however, that grave violations continue to be committed by all parties, including government security forces, and urge all parties to abide by their responsibilities under international humanitarian and human rights law.

73. I am also concerned about the continuing recruitment and use of children, which remains the most prevalent violation and often takes place in conjunction with the abduction of children. I call upon all parties to immediately cease this practice, release and hand over all children to child protection actors, in accordance with established protocols, and enable the reintegration of children into their communities.

74. I remain concerned about the ongoing killing and maiming of children and urge all parties to take all necessary actions to better protect children and prevent such violations. I further call upon the Government to invest in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes, security sector reform and demining efforts, especially with a view to ensuring that children are protected from explosive remnants of war.

75. I reiterate my concern about the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence, including gang rape, against children in South Sudan. I call upon the Government to put an end to these heinous crimes, including by strengthening the legal framework, establishing a specialized court to prosecute sexual and gender-based crimes and providing services, reparations and redress to survivors. I further encourage parties to the Revitalized Agreement to accelerate implementation of their respective action plans on addressing conflict-related sexual violence.

76. I underline the need to protect schools and hospitals from attack and for all parties to refrain from any military use of these civilian facilities, especially in the light of the current global health emergency. I further urge all parties to allow rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance to children.

77. I stress the need to address the prevalent impunity for violations against children and urge the Government to take the necessary measures to ensure that victims and survivors receive justice and perpetrators are held accountable. I further encourage the Government to engage with the United Nations to strengthen the overall legal framework to safeguard children's rights in South Sudan.

78. I welcome the accession by South Sudan on 27 September 2018 to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration. I encourage the Government to endorse the Principles and

Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers.

79. I welcome the inclusion of child protection provisions in the Revitalized Agreement and stress that the implementation of the peace agreement offers a unique opportunity to put the rights and needs of children at the centre of efforts aimed at achieving sustainable peace, justice and reconciliation in South Sudan. I underline the importance of taking child protection concerns into account in any future peace negotiations and, in this regard, call for the dissemination and application of the Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict.

80. I welcome the commitment of the parties to the Revitalized Agreement to the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations and I call upon them to fully implement all provisions of the action plan. In this regard, I reaffirm the commitment of the United Nations to support and monitor the implementation of the action plan.

81. I reiterate my deep concern about the escalating intercommunal violence throughout South Sudan and its devastating impact on children. I emphasize the importance of breaking this cycle of violence and impunity and addressing the underlying causes of conflict, and call upon the Government to take the necessary steps in this regard.

82. The conflict in South Sudan has had long-lasting and catastrophic effects on children that are bound to affect generations to come. I encourage the Government and the international community to make the protection of children in South Sudan a priority.

83. I call upon donors to redouble their efforts to provide financial support and technical assistance for sustainable, timely and appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation programmes for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, survivor-centred and gender-sensitive services and assistance programmes for survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform and demining efforts.
