



Security Council

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Letter dated 23 December 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

The Kingdom of Belgium was Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict for the period 2019–2020. With the present letter, in my capacity as Chair, I wish to complement the regular annual reports of the Working Group with a number of observations and reflections on the mandate on children and armed conflict in general and the role of the Working Group in particular, based on the experiences of the past two years. In doing so, I build on the example of my predecessor from the Kingdom of Sweden.

General observations

The year 2020 marked the fifteenth anniversary of Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) which established the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. 2020 also marked the twentieth anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

In 2019, more than 25,000 grave violations against children in 19 country situations were verified by the United Nations. The denial of humanitarian access saw a notable increase. The steady erosion of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and respect for civilian lives, in particular those of children, continues. Incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence and attacks on schools and hospitals are not decreasing, and coronavirus disease (COVID-19) further exacerbates the situation.

Nearly 25 years after the groundbreaking Machel report on the impact of armed conflict on children ([A/51/306](#)), unabated attention and collective action remain indispensable. In that regard, the continued strong support for and unity with respect to the mandate on children and armed conflict among the members of the Security Council is encouraging. Indeed, time and again, the Working Group has found consensus on the protection of children in some of the most divisive country situations. This shared commitment to protecting children affected by armed conflict is fundamental to ending grave violations of children's rights.

In 2019–2020, the Security Council advanced the children and armed conflict agenda with two new presidential statements

On 12 February 2020, the Security Council, under the presidency of Belgium, adopted presidential statement [S/PRST/2020/3](#), calling for the dissemination and use



of the United Nations practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict, as encouraged by the Council in presidential statement [PRST/2017/21](#) and resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#).

On 10 September 2020, the Security Council, under the presidency of the Niger, adopted presidential statement [S/PRST/2020/8](#), condemning attacks on schools and calling for special attention for the situation of girls, who are disproportionately affected by such attacks. According to the Secretary-General, 2019 witnessed almost 500 attacks on schools, with the proportion committed by State actors nearly doubling.

On 23 June 2020, under the presidency of France, the Security Council published press statement SC/14224, marking the fifteenth anniversary of the Working Group, established by resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#), and welcoming its contribution to preventing and responding to violations and abuses committed against children affected by armed conflict.

Collaboration with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict is the leading United Nations advocate for the protection and well-being of children affected by armed conflict. Over the past two years, her Office has produced 14 reports a year to the Security Council, the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly.

The Chair of the Working Group and the Office of the Special Representative maintain a close working relationship, consistent with their respective mandates. Together, we developed a yearly work plan to maintain the focus of the Working Group and adapt its activities to the publication of the country reports of the Secretary-General. I recommend that this practical working arrangement be maintained and wish again to underline my gratitude for the excellent collaboration with the Special Representative and her entire team.

Adopting conclusions and ensuring follow-up

Adopting conclusions on country situations of concern remains the core business of the Working Group. Over the past two years, 13 conclusions have been adopted unanimously.

To safeguard the relevance of the recommendations and actions agreed in those conclusions it is key, firstly, for the reports of the Secretary-General to cover relatively short reporting periods (a maximum of two years, if possible) and, secondly, for the Working Group to aim for the adoption of conclusions shortly after the publication of the reports of the Secretary-General. A rate of six to seven conclusions per year is desirable, thereby covering all the 14 current situations of concern for which parties to conflict are listed every two years.

Increasing the impact of the conclusions through better follow-up remains essential. I recommend that the reports of the Secretary-General and conclusions are discussed by the Working Group with relevant actors in the respective country situations of concern, including through regular videoconferences. Contacts with the country task forces on monitoring and reporting are key in that regard. The videoconferences are one of the few opportunities that those implementing the monitoring mandate on the ground have to engage with the Working Group. Other actors, including the Secretariat, the broader United Nations membership and relevant civil society actors, should also be associated with such outreach efforts. In my view, such follow-up should not be limited to New York but also take place in the country situations of concern themselves.

An exhaustive overview of the conclusions adopted, as well as follow-up meetings, is available in the annual reports of the Working Group.

Global horizontal notes

Global horizontal notes on children and armed conflict are compiled by the Office of the Special Representative and produced by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a quarterly basis and are an essential part of the monitoring and reporting framework of the mandate on children and armed conflict.

Discussions in the Working Group on the global horizontal notes allow for regular updates on situations under consideration, as well as emerging situations of concern. A new format for the notes was introduced in 2019 in order to improve the focus on prevention, early warning and the implementation of measures to better protect children. In 2020, the Office of the Special Representative included a COVID-19 section. Members of the Working Group also welcomed the inclusion of visual aids as part of the UNICEF presentation of the notes.

Field visits of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and the Security Council

Field visits have long been part of the toolbox at the disposal of the Working Group. In December 2019, the Working Group undertook a field visit to Mali, building on experiences from previous visits to South Sudan (2018), the Sudan (2017), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2014), Myanmar (2013), Afghanistan (2011) and Nepal (2010). These trips have significant added value in terms of following up on conclusions and action plans and improving the interaction between the Working Group and actors in the field. They also provide the opportunity to reinforce the efforts and advocacy of the United Nations on the ground.

The choice of field visit destinations should be made in accordance with, *inter alia*, reporting cycles and the adoption of conclusions, the separate field visits of the Special Representative and input from her office, specific country concerns requiring additional attention and the reporting and mandating cycle of the Security Council itself. The lack of budget for the field visits of the Working Group remains a hurdle to full participation.

Belgium had planned for one field visit per year, as recommended by its predecessor. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, these plans had to be altered. In the future, the option of a virtual visit could be reconsidered.

The Security Council itself also carries out field visits, presenting further opportunities to mainstream child protection issues. The Council, in its resolution [2143 \(2014\)](#), stressed the importance of the consideration of violations and abuses against children in armed conflict, including through incorporating a children and armed conflict dimension in the terms of reference of Security Council field visits.

Monitoring, reporting and holding perpetrators to account

Accountability for all violations and abuses against children is at the heart of the mandate on children and armed conflict. The monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict is an indispensable instrument in that regard. The importance of maintaining its strengths, including the integrity and impartiality of the listing mechanism cannot be overstated. Evidence-based listing and delisting, accurately reflecting the data collected and verified by the monitoring and reporting mechanism, according to the criteria included in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict of 2010 ([A/64/742-S/2010/181](#)), are of paramount importance. It provides leverage to the United Nations to work with listed

parties to improve the situation of children on the ground and is therefore a precious and powerful tool.

Mainstreaming the children and armed conflict agenda

From its very first resolution on children and armed conflict, the Security Council formally acknowledged that the protection of children in armed conflict is a fundamental peace and security concern. The protection of children thus cannot be viewed as a niche subject confined to the Working Group. Rather, the issue requires attention across all thematic and geographic discussions taking place in the Council and in all its other subsidiary bodies. I would like to draw your attention to a range of opportunities to further mainstream children and armed conflict.

- **Monthly previews of the programme of work.** Belgium began a new practice of convening monthly meetings to identify opportunities with regard to the mandate on children and armed conflict on the Security Council agenda for the month ahead. Such opportunities may include regular briefings and consultations related to children and armed conflict country situations of concern or negotiations of mission mandates and sanctions regimes. The meetings include technical experts from the Office of the Special Representative, UNICEF and the Department of Peace Operations, which gives Council experts a regular forum in which to engage on children and armed conflict issues with the relevant United Nations counterparts. In this regard, I also wish to highlight the quarterly updated Children and Armed Conflict Dashboard¹ of the Security Council Affairs Division, which features children and armed conflict-related provisions in Council decisions since 2008;
- **Ensuring child protection capacity in United Nations missions.** In its resolution 2225 (2015), the Security Council recognized the role of United Nations peacekeeping operations and political missions in the protection of children and particularly the crucial role of child protection advisers in mainstreaming child protection and leading monitoring, prevention and reporting efforts in missions. It called for the systematic assessment of the need for child protection capacities during the preparation and renewal of each peacekeeping operation and political mission. Member States should therefore ensure that missions and child protection actors have the necessary financial and human resources to effectively monitor and report on grave violations against children, engage with parties to conflict and carry out other crucial protection roles, including facilitating the release of children from armed forces and groups.
- **Regular videoconferences with country task forces on monitoring and reporting.** Often held in the run-up to mandate renewals, videoconferences of the Working Group were useful to take stock of children and armed conflict-related aspects of mandates and to assess whether existing language was deemed sufficient. This practice also provides country task forces on monitoring and reporting with the opportunity to have a direct line to the Working Group through which they can highlight their most pressing challenges and concerns, as well as better understand the Working Group and its working methods and priorities. In view of the experiences of videoconferences with the country task forces on monitoring and reporting of Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Yemen, I recommend that this practice be continued, with the aim of approximately 8 to 10 such videoconferences per year.

¹ www.un.org/securitycouncil/fr/content/repertoire/research-tools/children-and-armed-conflict.

- **Invitations to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the United Nations Children’s Fund and relevant civil society actors to brief the Security Council or sanctions committees.** To complement the reporting of the Secretary-General and panels or groups of experts in the framework of sanctions committees, Member States of the Security Council can invite the Special Representative or civil society actors to report on child protection issues in regular meetings of the Council and its subsidiary organs. Examples include: a briefing by the Special Representative, Virginia Gamba, to the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1533 \(2004\)](#) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo on 22 May 2020; a briefing by the Executive Director of the United Nations Children’s Fund, Henrietta Fore, at the Security Council briefing on Yemen on 15 May 2019; and a briefing by the Chair of the Advisory Board of the non-governmental organization (NGO) network Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Jo Becker, at a Security Council debate on children and armed conflict on 12 February 2020.
- **Arria formula meetings.** Member States may wish to use Arria formula meetings as a flexible and informal forum for deliberations. In 2019 and 2020, these included an Arria meeting on protecting children in the context of shrinking humanitarian space (February 2019), an Arria meeting on the reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (November 2019) and an Arria meeting on access to education in conflict and post-conflict contexts (October 2020).

Engaging with the United Nations Children’s Fund and the Department of Peace Operations

UNICEF and the Department of Peace Operations bring a unique perspective on children and armed conflict-related issues and make an important contribution to the work of the Working Group. They play a key role in the implementation of the mandate at the field level, including as Co-Chairs of the country task forces on monitoring and reporting, as well as the entities on the front line for the release of children from armed forces and armed groups. UNICEF also plays a key role in the provision of humanitarian services to children and families affected by all grave violations, including for mental health and psychosocial support, case management services and the reintegration of formerly associated children.

UNICEF and the Department of Peace Operations are both available to the Working Group to provide additional context or technical expertise on child protection issues generally or on country-specific issues. The sections of UNICEF and the Department of Peace Operations at Headquarters responsible for the implementation of the mandate have direct access to their field colleagues and are able to provide informed and timely analysis on Working Group issues as needed.

Engaging with civil society

Transparency towards and engagement with representatives of civil society has been an essential part of the mandate of Belgium in the Security Council, both in general and as Chair of the Working Group.

Civil society actors play an important role in implementing and advocating for the children and armed conflict agenda. In resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#), the Security Council underlines that the monitoring and reporting mechanism must operate with the participation of and in cooperation with national Governments and relevant United Nations and civil society actors, including at the country level. Civil society actors in

the field can often contribute with unique insight on the local context, benefiting from access and trust within communities.

The commitment of Belgium to maintaining close contact with civil society actors is also in line with the Security Council's recognition of the importance of strong civil society networks for accountability. In addition, civil society actors play a critical role in the prevention of and response to all grave violations against children, including for humanitarian assistance to children affected by armed conflict, in particular children released from armed forces and non-State armed groups.

I therefore recommend to the next Chair the continuation of the practice of holding regular NGO round tables.

Conclusion

As the mandate of Belgium in the Security Council draws to its conclusion, I reiterate my country's longstanding commitment to the protection of children affected by armed conflict. Chairing the Council's busiest subsidiary body in terms of meetings and output is both an honour and an important responsibility. I wish the future members of the Working Group and its Chair success in further implementing and strengthening the mandate on children and armed conflict.

It is difficult to imagine a more relevant, important and urgent task, and I wish you good luck.

I should be grateful if you could have the present letter circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Philippe Kridelka
Ambassador
Permanent Representative
