



Security Council

Distr.: General
15 November 2022

Original: English

Children and armed conflict in Mali

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 fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali. It covers the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2022, and the information provided focuses on the six grave violations committed against children, the perpetrators thereof and the context in which the violations took place.

Highlighted herein are trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by all parties to the conflict. The report also contains information on progress made in ending and preventing violations, including through dialogue with parties to conflict. The report concludes with a series of recommendations to end and prevent grave violations against children in Mali and improve the protection of children.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. It covers the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2022 and describes trends and patterns of grave violations against children that have occurred since the previous report ([S/2020/1105](#)) and the progress made in ending and preventing such violations, in follow-up to the recommendations contained in the previous report and to the conclusions of the Working Group ([S/AC.51/2020/11](#)). The violations presented herein have been verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in Mali, which is co-chaired by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Where possible, perpetrators of grave violations are identified. The ability to verify information was at times hampered by limited child protection capacity, insecurity or access restrictions. Therefore, the information contained herein does not represent the full scale of violations committed in Mali during the reporting period.

2. The report is focused on trends of violations perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, including armed groups that have formed since the previous report of the Secretary-General. In the annexes to the most recent report on children and armed conflict ([A/76/871-S/2022/493](#)), Ansar Eddine, as part of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), and Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), as part of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), were listed for the recruitment and use of children and for perpetrating rape and other forms of sexual violence against children. The Platform coalition, including affiliated groups, was listed for the recruitment and use of children.

II. Overview of the political and security situation

3. The reporting period witnessed major political and security developments, including presidential and legislative elections in March and April 2020. Widespread protests followed the legislative elections, culminating in a coup d'état on 18 August and the detention of the then President of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, and other civilian and military officials. Mr. Keita subsequently resigned and announced the dissolution of the Government and the National Assembly. On 25 September, retired Colonel-major and former Minister of Defence Bah N'daou was sworn in as interim President. A change in the leadership of the transitional Government resulted from a second coup d'état, on 24 May 2021, and the former Vice-President of the 2020 transitional Government, Colonel Assimi Goita, was sworn in as the President of the new transitional Government, on 7 June. New legislative and presidential elections to bring the transition to its end, scheduled to be held in February and March 2022, were delayed. In response, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions, including the closing of land and air borders and the suspension of commercial and financial transactions and assistance, which remained in place during the reporting period.

4. There was limited progress in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015, as attention was diverted away by the increased focus on the political transition. Little progress was observed with regard to the finalization of the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme required by the Agreement. Apart from one session held in 2020, planned disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes in the regions of Kidal, Gao

and Timbuktu were postponed on several instances and ultimately did not take place, owing to the non-compliance of signatory parties to the Agreement, coupled with the August 2020 and May 2021 coups d'état. Between June and July 2020, the country task force, alongside the National Directorate for the Advancement of Children and Families, was involved in the accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes in the Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu regions to verify the presence of children among armed group combatants. No children were identified. Furthermore, at the time of reporting, the socioeconomic reintegration of former combatants had not begun, despite the availability of World Bank funding, because armed groups had not submitted their lists of candidates.

5. The human rights situation remained worrisome throughout the reporting period, owing to an intensification of violence against civilians by armed groups, notably those designated as terrorists by the United Nations and community-based armed groups. In some instances, counter-terrorism or military operations conducted by the national armed forces had an adverse impact on human rights, in particular in central Mali. Children in conflict-affected areas continued to suffer grave violations perpetrated by all parties to conflict. Recruitment and use, abduction of children and attacks on schools were the violations that reflected the highest increase since the previous report. There were also concerns regarding the spillover of armed group activities into neighbouring countries and the impact on the protection of children in those countries.

6. Owing to challenges related to the prosecution of alleged terrorism-related offences, due process rights, including those of children, were undermined. MINUSMA supported the efforts of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to prevent violent extremism in prisons by building capacity to detect signs of radicalization and establishing a prison intelligence system. In March 2022, the Ministry worked towards the establishment of a mechanism to promote the deployment and increase the presence of judicial authorities in the north and centre of Mali, including through security support for personnel and infrastructure. On 15 March, with technical support from MINUSMA, the draft law on the reform of the Military Code was finalized with a view to strengthening the effectiveness of the investigation and prosecution of offences committed by the Malian Defence and Security Forces.

7. The reporting period was marked by an increase in violence and criminal activities, in particular in the central and northern regions. Armed attacks became more sophisticated, increasingly frequent and better coordinated, employing improvised explosive devices, remote-controlled explosive devices and indirect fire, among other tactics. The armed groups signatories to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali lacked control over some of the areas in which they operate, which led to a substantial increase in the activities of armed groups designated as terrorists by the United Nations, such as JNIM, which includes Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), targeting the Malian armed forces, MINUSMA and international forces operations, and civilians. Armed groups designated as terrorists expanded their influence and some acted as the main security providers, thus yielding varying levels of acceptance from local communities. On 17 February 2022, the President of France announced that French forces and other international forces operating alongside Operation Barkhane forces and as part of Task Force Takuba would begin a coordinated withdrawal from Malian territory. The groups stepped up their rhetoric and attacks.

8. Humanitarian access in northern and central Mali, as well as in some areas of the south, became increasingly challenging owing to an increase in and expansion of intercommunal violence, attacks by armed groups and military operations. The destruction of bridges and roads, the use of improvised explosive devices and the use

of siege tactics against villages by armed groups hindered people's access to services and livelihoods and the delivery of humanitarian services, exposing civilians, including children, to increasing food insecurity. The number of security incidents affecting humanitarian personnel, mostly banditry-related, remained high. The humanitarian situation was marked by a rising number of internally displaced persons in northern and central Mali. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, numbers of internally displaced persons spiked; there were 350,110 such persons in Mali as at 31 March, a majority of whom are children. Persistent food insecurity and malnutrition increased the risk of families resorting to negative coping mechanisms, such as encouraging children to join armed groups or giving away women and girls in exchange for protection or as a way to gain the favour of armed groups.

9. The beginning of the reporting period was marked by the eruption of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the imposition of measures to contain it, which had socioeconomic consequences. In Mali, the closure of schools, together with other COVID-19 measures, including curfews and restrictions on social gatherings, prompted the closure of some child-friendly spaces and disrupted children's routines and social support, leading to further psychosocial distress and further increasing the risk of grave violations against children.

10. Access to education for children was strongly affected throughout the reporting period. As of March, 1,731 schools were closed affecting 519,300 children and 10,032 teachers, owing mainly to insecurity and attacks and threats of attacks against schools and related protected personnel.

III. Grave violations against children

11. The country task force verified 2,095 grave violations against 1,473 children (1,134 boys, 314 girls, 25 sex unknown), including some children who were victims of multiple violations. The total represents a considerable increase compared with the previous report, which covered a longer period (two years and nine months), during which 1,764 grave violations affecting 1,092 children were verified. In addition, the country task force late-verified 100 grave violations, notably recruitment and use (90), sexual violence (4), killing and maiming (3), abduction (2) and attacks on hospitals (1).

12. In the majority of violations verified during the reporting period (1,161 or 55 per cent), it was not possible to attribute responsibility to a particular party to the conflict. Most of the remaining cases were attributed to armed groups (805 or over 38 per cent). Government security forces were responsible for 129 grave violations, or 6 per cent of the total, representing an increase from the previous reporting period, during which they were responsible for less than 3 per cent of violations. Overall, the Mopti and Gao regions were the most affected, recording the highest number of grave violations – 559 and 539, respectively – followed by Timbuktu (342), Kidal (289), Ségou (129), Ménaka (113) and other regions (124).

13. All categories of violations increased throughout the reporting period, except for rape and other forms of sexual violence, which are, however, estimated to be highly underreported. The recruitment and use of children was the most prominent grave violation, increasing sharply compared with the previous period and peaking in 2021. Of particular concern was a considerable increase in the number of verified attacks on schools and a more than fourfold increase in the number of verified cases of abduction of children compared with the previous period. The safe access of humanitarian actors to conflict-affected populations, including children, as well as the detention of children for their alleged association with armed groups, were also issues of great concern for the protection of children.

14. The documentation and verification of information continued to be a challenge, owing to conditions of insecurity and restricted access to some of the conflict-affected areas. The COVID-19 pandemic further limited monitoring and reporting activities owing to movement restrictions. Therefore, the data contained in the present report do not represent the full extent of grave violations committed in Mali during the reporting period. However, the country task force was able to continue most of its monitoring and verification of grave violation activities through established networks.

A. Recruitment and use of children

15. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 901 children (754 boys, 147 girls) aged between 4 and 17 years, including 572 who were below the age of 15 at the time of recruitment. The total represents a considerable increase compared with 516 in the previous report. An average of 38 children were recruited and used per month during the current reporting period, compared with an average of 16 children per month during the previous period.

16. Of the total, 661 cases were attributed to armed groups, 98 to the Malian armed forces and 142 cases to unidentified perpetrators. Establishing responsibility for the recruitment and use of children was not always possible, because in many cases children either could not clearly identify the names of the groups with which they were associated, or would not for fear of reprisals.

17. Among the identified perpetrators, armed groups signatories to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali were the main perpetrators, representing 58 per cent of the total. Some 356 children were recruited and used by CMA (MNLA (146), Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) (127), Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA)-CMA (43) and an unidentified member of CMA (40)), followed by: Platform (163) (Ganda Lassal Izo (54), Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) of the Dawsahak (36), Ganda Izo (26), Groupe d'Autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA) (22), Ganda Koy (21), Front de Libération des régions du Nord (FLN) (3) and MAA-Platform (1)); Dozo traditional hunters (50); JNIM (44) (Front de libération du Macina (FLM) (29) and unidentified JNIM (15)); Dan Nan Ambassagou (DNA) (25); ISGS (11); Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad (CPA) (5); an unidentified group of MSA (3); MSA of the Chamanamas (3); and Mouvement pour l'unification et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) (1). The Malian armed forces were responsible for the recruitment and use of 98 children.

18. The most affected regions with the highest number of violations were Kidal (266) and Gao (260), followed by Timbuktu (171), Mopti (96), Ménaka (75), Ségou (24), Douentza (8) and Koulikoro (1).

19. In addition, the country task force late-verified the recruitment and use of 90 children (64 boys, 26 girls), which occurred before the reporting period and were attributed to MNLA (32), GATIA (17), MSA of the Dawsahak (9), Ganda Izo (7), FLM (5), MSA (5), MAA-CMA (4), HCUA (4), unidentified perpetrators (3), DNA (2), Malian armed forces (1) and Ganda Koy (1) in the regions of Ménaka (55), Kidal (17), Gao (11), Mopti (6) and Timbuktu (1).

20. A total of 98 children (84 boys, 14 girls), including 70 below the age of 15, were recruited and used by the Malian armed forces between April and December 2020 (1), in 2021 (8) and in the first quarter of 2022 (89). The children were recruited in the Gao (74), Timbuktu (23) and Ménaka (1) regions and were used to perform domestic chores and run errands. The children remained associated with the Malian armed forces for periods ranging from three months to two years, and 88 of them were still being used at the time of reporting.

21. Children remained associated with parties to the conflict for periods ranging from a few days to almost five years. Many of them were trained to use weapons and at least 97 were used as combatants. The others were used as drivers, couriers, guards and patrollers, to perform domestic chores and operate checkpoints, and for sexual purposes. Of the 901 children recruited and used during the reporting period, 616 were released and 270 remained associated with parties to the conflict. The whereabouts of 15 children remained unknown at the time of reporting.

22. An increasing trend was observed in the number of cases of the recruitment and use of children since the previous report. From April to December 2020, 245 children were recruited and used, an average of 27 children per month; from January to December 2021, 424 children were recruited and used, an average of 35 per month; and from January to March 2022, 173 children were recruited and used, an average of 58 per month. An additional group of 59 children was separated from parties to conflict during an unspecified period between 2020 and 2021. Child recruitment was largely based on community-level recruitment; in many instances, families encouraged children to join the groups. With the closure of thousands of schools in the country, lack of opportunities for livelihoods or prospects of a better future and increasing food insecurity, many children saw few alternatives to joining armed groups.

23. During the reporting period, 147 girls aged between 4 and 17 years, including at least 94 under the age of 15, were recruited and used, more than doubling compared with 60 girls in the previous period. At least 16 girls were sexually abused during their association with armed groups. The other girls were mostly used as cooks, to fetch firewood and to run errands. The gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and increased access to services and programmes for survivors of sexual violence may create opportunities to better identify girls associated with armed groups.

Deprivation of liberty of children for alleged association with armed groups

24. During the reporting period, 38 boys were captured during military operations or arrested by the Malian Defence and Security Forces and international forces for alleged association with armed groups in Mopti (12), Gao (10), Ségou (3), Ménaka (2) and other regions (11). Of the total, 25 boys were handed over to state child protection structures in accordance with the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups, signed in 2013 by the United Nations and the Government of Mali. The other 13 children were detained by national authorities for longer periods and in contravention of the Protocol. Five of them, including a foreign national, remained detained in Bamako pending their age assessment. A 17-year-old boy was prosecuted as an adult and sentenced to life imprisonment.

25. The release of children from detention continued to be hampered by the lack of valid civil documentation to prove their age. The country task force advocated the adoption by the national authorities of credible alternatives for assessing the age of children.

B. Killing and maiming of children

26. A total of 408 children (275 boys, 116 girls, 17 sex unknown), some as young as three months old, were killed (144) and maimed (264), compared with 495 child casualties verified during the previous reporting period. Violations were attributed to ISGS (53), DNA (8), Dozo traditional hunters (6), Fulani armed elements (6), JNIM (5) (including unidentified JNIM (3) and FLM (2)), MNLA (5), MSA of the Dawsahak (3) and Ganda Izo (2). Other child casualties were attributed to the Malian Defence and

Security Forces (18) and Operation Barkhane (2). The remaining child casualties (300) could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator, including some casualties that occurred during clashes between parties to conflict. Violations were verified in the regions of Mopti (178), Gao (122), Timbuktu (35), Ménaka (21), Ségou (18), Bandiagara (16), Kidal (12) and Douentza (5) and in Bamako (1). Of the total, most (314) were killed or maimed during attacks by armed groups against the civilian population, with children caught in direct hostilities during rocket attacks and crossfire. The remaining 94 children were killed or maimed as a result of improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war. In addition, the country task force late-verified the killing (2) and maiming (1) of 3 boys by unidentified armed perpetrators (2) and DNA (1) in the Timbuktu (2) and Mopti (1) regions, which occurred in previous reporting periods.

27. The number of verified child casualties increased during the reporting period, with 130 violations verified from April to December 2020, 201 in 2021 and 77 from January to March 2022. The trend observed in the previous report continued, with Mopti recording the highest number of child casualties (178) and can be explained by the continuation of violence in the region. The region of Gao also registered a sharp increase in the number of child casualties (122) compared with 69 children killed or maimed as at the writing of the previous report. In 2021, ISGS alone killed or maimed at least 34 children in separate incidents in four villages in the Gao region. The increasing trend in Gao can be explained by the increased intensity of intercommunal conflict consisting of armed confrontations and attacks by armed groups on the civilian population.

28. The absence of state authority and security forces in parts of the northern and central regions created a vacuum in which civilians continued to face heightened security threats. For example, in June 2020, in the Mopti region, five children all under 2 years of age were killed in an attack by unidentified armed perpetrators on a village when armed elements burned down their house and all other houses in the village.

29. The presence and use of improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war continued to be a major cause of the killing and maiming of children during the reporting period. For example, in September 2020, a bus was blown up by an improvised explosive device placed by unidentified armed perpetrators on the Gao-Gossi road in the Gao region. Three children were injured, including two boys aged 4 and 17 and a 4-year-old girl. The injured children were admitted to the hospital and received medical treatment. In another incident, on 14 January 2021, three children were killed and two maimed when an explosive remnant of war detonated while they were looking for grass for their animals in the Mopti region.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

30. The country task force verified that 50 children, all girls aged between 12 and 17 years, were subjected to sexual violence during the reporting period, compared with 74 child survivors verified as at the writing of the previous report. Violations occurred in the Gao (18), Mopti (13), Bandiagara (5), Timbuktu (4), Ségou (4), Ménaka (3), Douentza (2) and Kidal (1) regions. As conflict-related sexual violence against children continued to be highly underreported, actual cases are believed to be much higher. Most verified cases could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator (39); the remaining cases were attributed to the Malian armed forces (9) and to MSA and JNIM (1 each). Of the total verified cases, the highest number was recorded in 2021 (35), with 7 cases between April and December 2020 and 8 between January and March 2022. In addition, the country task force late-verified sexual violence perpetrated in previous periods against four girls aged between 13 and 17 years by the Malian armed forces (3) and MSA (1) in the Mopti (3) and Ménaka (1) regions.

31. Of the 50 girl survivors verified during the reporting period, 16 were exposed to rape and other forms of sexual violence during their association with armed groups. In most cases, their association with the groups was the result of abduction. For example, in July 2020, in the Ségou region, a 15-year-old girl was forcibly married to a member of an unidentified armed group and taken to live with him. Local authorities were alerted, and, after mediation, the girl returned to her family. In another incident, in October 2021, during an attack by an unidentified armed group on a village in the Gao region, 11 girls, some as young as 13 years of age, were abducted and then forcibly married to combatants belonging to the group.

32. Monitoring and reporting on rape and other forms of sexual violence continued to be limited by several factors, including prevailing insecurity in the northern and central regions, fear of reprisals, lack of protection for victims and witnesses, lack of holistic and continuous service provision to survivors, limited access to justice, and sociocultural barriers that tend to stigmatize survivors of sexual violence.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

33. A total of 240 attacks on schools (186) and hospitals (54) were verified during the reporting period, representing an increase from the previous report (216). The education and health systems remained deeply affected by conflict, intercommunal violence and overall insecurity, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of their fundamental rights to education and basic health care.

34. A total of 186 attacks on schools were verified in the Timbuktu (65), Mopti (62), Ségou (44), Gao (8), Sikasso (2), Bandiagara (2), Douentza (2) and Ménaka (1) regions, representing a substantial increase from the previous reporting period (169). Most of the violations could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator (175); the remaining cases were attributed to JNIM (7) and FLM (4).

35. Attacks on schools involved destruction and burning of schools and school equipment, assault on and killing of education personnel, lootings, verbal and written threats against school personnel and students, and abduction of education personnel. A high number of schools were closed because of threats and attacks by armed groups. For example, in January 2022, unidentified armed perpetrators entered a school in the Timbuktu region during class. After making several threats, they drove the children away, burned school equipment and threatened to return if the school reopened. In January 2021, in the Douentza region, armed individuals from a group designated as terrorist by the United Nations set fire to a school, damaging its archives, premises and equipment.

36. Since 2020, the insecurity related to attacks and threats of attacks on schools and education personnel led to the withdrawal of teachers in the central and northern regions and further hampered access to education for children. Alarming developments continued to be observed in the Mopti, Timbuktu, Ségou and Gao regions, with the burning of schools, the killing of school directors, and threats demanding the closure of secular schools and the opening of Qur'anic schools. The closure of schools continued to increase throughout the reporting period as the conflict intensified. At the end of 2020, 1,344 schools had been closed nationwide. By the end of 2021, the number had increased to 1,632; by the end of March 2022, the number had reached 1,731.

37. The country task force verified the military use of four schools by Dozo traditional hunters (2) and unidentified perpetrators (2), all in the Mopti region. One of the schools, used by Dozo traditional hunters as their base for more than two years, was attacked in May 2021 by unidentified armed perpetrators, suffering damage to its premises. At the time of reporting, the country task force could not verify whether the four schools were still being used.

38. A total of 54 attacks on hospitals were verified, most of which were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (43), followed by JNIM and ISGS (3 each), FLM and DNA (2 each), and Malian Defence and Security Forces (1), in the Mopti (19), Gao (14), Ménaka (10), Timbuktu (7), Bandiagara (2) and Ségou (2) regions. The total represents an increase compared with the previous period, during which 47 incidents were verified. A total of 20 attacks were verified between April and December 2020, followed by 33 in 2021 and 1 in the first quarter of 2022. In addition, the country task force late-verified one attack on a hospital, attributed to unidentified perpetrators, which occurred in September 2019 in the Timbuktu region.

39. Incidents involved attacks on health-care facilities, looting of medications, threats and abduction of protected persons in relation to hospitals, carjacking of ambulances and other health centre vehicles, improvised explosive device attacks against ambulances, and preventing the provision of medical care, resulting in the death of patients, including children. For instance, in 2020, in the Mopti region, DNA elements stopped a vehicle belonging to a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was transporting a child patient. Owing to the resulting delay, the child died. In another incident, in July 2020, armed elements belonging to an unidentified armed group kidnapped a surgeon during an attack on the Bandiagara-Sévaré road. Three people were killed and four went missing during the attack. The surgeon, who was kidnapped to provide medical treatments to wounded members of the armed group, was released afterwards. In February 2022, armed elements belonging to a group designated as terrorist by the United Nations entered a village in the Gao region and threatened its inhabitants, ordering them to leave. The armed assailants burned down the community health centre and looted its medicines.

E. Abduction of children

40. The country task force verified the abduction of 175 children (109 boys, 58 girls, 8 sex unknown) by unidentified perpetrators (145), DNA (14), FLM (6), Dozo traditional hunters (4), ISGS (3) and MAA, MSA and Malian Defence and Security Forces (1 each). The violations occurred in the Mopti (79), Gao (51), Timbuktu (18), Ségou (16), Douentza (5), Kidal (3) and Ménaka (3) regions. The total represents a more than fourfold increase compared with the previous report (38 children) and can be explained by the growing insecurity and the intensification of armed groups' activities, as well as by the enhanced capacity of the country task force with regard to monitoring and reporting. In addition, the task force late-verified the cases of two boys abducted by FLM and Dozo armed elements in the Mopti region, which occurred before the reporting period.

41. Most abduction cases (106) occurred in 2021, while 68 occurred between April and December 2020 and 1 was verified in the first quarter of 2022. Of the 175 children, 107 were released or escaped, 5 were killed following their abduction, and the whereabouts of the other 63 children remained unknown at the time of reporting. While the purpose of the abduction could not be ascertained in 66 instances, 20 children were abducted for recruitment purposes, 13 girls for sexual purposes and forced marriage, 7 children who were accused of being traitors and one boy for not guarding the animals of an armed group. For example, in June 2020, unidentified perpetrators attacked a village in the Mopti region. Before fleeing, the attackers abducted 19 children, some as young as 4 years old. The children were taken to a nearby village and were interrogated for hours regarding the presence of traditional hunters and men in their village. The children were released on the same day and returned home. Some of them showed signs of ill-treatment.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

42. Humanitarian access continued to be gravely hampered, particularly in the central and northern regions owing to armed groups attacks on villages, counter-terrorism operations and intercommunal clashes. The country task force verified 321 incidents of denial of humanitarian access compared with 425 incidents during the previous reporting period. The violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (317) and JNIM (4) and occurred in the regions of Mopti (112), Gao (66), Ménaka (43), Timbuktu (42), Ségou (21), in Bamako (19), and in the regions of Kidal (7), Sikasso (6) and Koulikoro (5). The majority occurred between April and December 2020 (141) and in 2021 (159), while 21 incidents were verified between January and March 2022.

43. Incidents included carjacking, threats and physical violence against humanitarian personnel, resulting in abduction, killing and injuries; break-ins into humanitarian premises; looting of valuables; burning of vehicles of humanitarian organizations; and restrictions on movement, affecting NGOs and United Nations entities. For instance, in 2020, one aid worker was killed, and five others were injured in three separate carjacking incidents in the Gao and Timbuktu regions. Some NGOs were forced to suspend their humanitarian activities, which prevented them from delivering humanitarian assistance to children. For instance, from January to March 2022, one international NGO temporarily suspended its activities in the Gao and Ménaka regions, owing to the growing insecurity that had directly affected it, and following the abduction of one of its aid workers.

44. Denial of access to basic services and restrictions on freedom of movement, including difficulties in gaining access to village markets, fields and pastures, and health care, made already vulnerable groups, notably children, more vulnerable. In addition, the use of siege tactics against villages by armed groups had long-term negative effects on education due to the interruption of school activities. Limited economic prospects and a lack of opportunities for decent work can also increase the push factors that make youth and children more likely to join armed groups.

45. The economic sanctions imposed by ECOWAS, including the closure of land and air borders, had an impact on humanitarian activities, such as operational disruptions to financial transactions, movement of humanitarian personnel, and delays in the delivery of goods. Some humanitarian assistance missions were cancelled owing to the volatile context.

46. Despite those constraints, humanitarian actors continued their efforts to deliver aid to vulnerable populations by engaging in dialogue with communities and parties to conflict and by adapting their operations where necessary.

IV. Progress in addressing grave violations against children

A. Legislative reform and combating impunity

47. The country task force and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict continued to advocate the revision and adoption of the draft national law on child protection, which currently foresees criminalizing, inter alia, the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 by armed forces and groups, by designating it a war crime. The advocacy is aimed at ensuring the revision of the draft law to broaden the criminalization of the recruitment and use of all children below the age of 18, in accordance with international standards, with a view to achieving the adoption of the revised law. To date, no step has been taken by the authorities towards the revision and adoption of the legislation.

48. The country task force also continued to advocate the validation of a draft law establishing a moratorium on the 30-day deadline for birth registration. The purpose of the legislation is to restore children's fundamental right to an identity and to birth registration by annulling the 30-day legal deadline for the registration of children.

49. The national technical monitoring committee for the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration held several consultations during the reporting period on the development of a draft bill on the protection of education from attacks. The draft bill was presented to the Malian authorities for adoption in January 2021.

50. The country task force continued to support the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission established in 2015, by promoting children's participation and appointing dedicated experts to support the preparation of the Commission's final report. The Commission broadcast radio messages in 2020 and 2021 across the country and organized consultation workshops with civil society. In July 2021, the Government adopted the national policy on reparations, drafted by the Commission after consultations with women and children in Bamako, Gao, Kidal, Mopti, Ségou and Timbuktu.

51. Little progress was observed with regard to the fight against impunity through the investigation of allegations and the prosecution and conviction of those responsible for sexual violence against children and other grave violations. Child survivors of sexual violence continued to face difficulties in gaining access to justice, for reasons including the absence of courts in certain areas, understaffing and the poor training of judicial personnel, the lack of medical services, the fear of reprisals and of stigmatization, the absence of protection for victims and witnesses, and being forced into amicable settlements.

52. As indicated in previous reports, hundreds of complaints of sexual violence from the 2012–2013 crisis, which were attributed to MNLA, Ansar Eddine and MUJAO, have been submitted since November 2014 before Malian courts by Malian non-governmental organizations on behalf of women and girl survivors of sexual violence between the ages of 9 and 55. Little progress was observed with regard to the prosecution of these cases, as a limited number of victims participated in hearings held by judicial and investigating authorities.

B. Action plans and dialogue with parties to the conflict

53. The country task force and the Special Representative engaged with the national authorities to reinforce national systems to end and prevent grave violations against children. In September 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of the country task force, developed a draft national prevention plan to address grave violations committed by the Malian Defence and Security Forces. In February of that year, the Ministry of Defence finalized terms of reference for a coordination mechanism to be established between the Government and the United Nations to follow up on allegations of such the violations. The mechanism is included in the draft national prevention plan, which was pending adoption at the time of reporting.

54. The country task force continued its sustained advocacy for the release of children actually or allegedly associated with armed groups and detained by the Malian Defence and Security Forces or held in detention centres under the orders of prosecutors. In addition, in July 2021, the task force trained 21 magistrates and other judicial actors on the protection of children arrested or captured and detained for their alleged association with armed groups.

55. Efforts by the country task force to engage with armed groups to prevent and end grave violations against children continued. Dialogue continued with CMA

regarding the implementation of its action plan on the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children. Strategic meetings and several workshops were held to discuss the implementation of the action plan, including operational challenges and priority activities that needed to be expedited. The challenges included the identification and separation of and care for associated children; capacity-building on child protection for CMA focal points; and the preparation of a six-month road map to speed up the implementation of the action plan.

56. On 26 August 2021, the two factions of the Platform coalition each signed an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. The action plans are binding on the two Platform factions and affiliated groups. Platform-nominated focal points have started working with the country task force on the implementation of the action plans.

C. Release of children and programmatic response

57. The country task force worked in close collaboration with the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family and other partners to reinforce community-based mechanisms focused on the prevention of grave violations, namely the recruitment and use of children and the identification of and provision of care to children released from armed forces and armed groups and other vulnerable children at risk of violence, including recruitment or re-recruitment by parties to the conflict.

58. From 18 June to 8 July 2020, the country task force, alongside the National Directorate for the Advancement of Children and Families, was involved in the accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process in the Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu regions to verify the presence of children among the combatants and to separate them. Age screening was conducted for 426 combatants, and no children were identified among them.

59. The country task force supported the establishment and the functioning of five transit and orientation centres for children released from armed forces and armed groups and other vulnerable children in Gao, Kidal, Mopti, Timbuktu and Bamako. In addition to supporting the transit and orientation centres, the task force supported local and international NGOs to provide care services to children released from armed forces and armed groups in the Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Mopti and Timbuktu regions. From April 2020 to March 2022, 1,235 children (1,068 boys, 167 girls) were provided with adequate care services, including shelter, food, medical and psychosocial assistance, while in the transit and orientation centres or with temporary foster families. Of those children, 399 received holistic care in the second half of 2020, 554 others were supported in 2021, and 282 were supported between January and March 2022. A total of 583 of the children further benefited from socioeconomic reintegration support, including education, vocational training and income-generating activities, which allowed them to return to normal life and rebuild their resilience. Reintegration services were provided to a total of 394 children from April to December 2020, 111 in 2021 and 78 in 2022. The remaining children could not be provided with reintegration services owing to a lack of access to reintegration services in the areas where they were reunited with their families.

60. One of the major challenges that hampered the reintegration of children was limited access to some conflict-affected areas, such as the Kidal and Ménaka regions and some areas of the Gao, Mopti and Ségou regions owing to insecurity, which made it difficult to provide sustainable reintegration and to monitor the quality of services provided to children. In Gao, Kidal and Ménaka, the country task force established new partnerships or strengthened pre-existing collaboration with local and international NGOs to ensure the reintegration of children released from armed groups.

61. Between April 2020 and March 2022, 42 girl survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault or child marriage, received multisectoral assistance (medical, psychosocial or socioeconomic support and food/shelter) from UNICEF through implementing partners in Bamako and the Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu regions. In coordination with the national authorities, the United Nations supported the set-up of 10 integrated service centres to support multisectoral services for survivors of gender-based and sexual violence in a confidential and protective environment in Bamako and in the Gao, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Ségou and Sikasso regions. Multisectoral service provision to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence remained a major challenge. Owing to a lack of adequately trained staff, funding constraints and a limited number of service providers in certain regions, the availability of accessible assistance for survivors was considerably hampered and remains so. That situation was exacerbated by the ongoing insecurity and the overall climate of impunity and the limited access of humanitarian actors to areas outside of urban centres.

D. Advocacy and mainstreaming of child protection

62. The country task force conducted training and awareness-raising initiatives to end and prevent grave violations against children. Some 137 officers of the Malian Defence and Security Forces were trained on the protection of children in armed conflict in the framework of the ongoing reform of the security sector. Members of the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission were trained on child protection during a four-day workshop on the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process. A total of 2,304 armed group combatants were sensitized on child protection and on the prevention of grave violations against children during the accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process from 18 June to 8 July 2020 in Gao, Kidal, Mopti and Timbuktu. The country task force also provided support to the national technical monitoring committee for the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration to organize workshops to strengthen the capacities of the regional committees on the operationalization of the Declaration. Training on the monitoring and reporting mechanism was delivered to 404 members of child protection partner organizations in the Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Mopti and Timbuktu regions. MINUSMA trained 3,368 peacekeepers on child protection. Furthermore, the country task force trained 83 senior officers of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel on legal instruments related to protecting children in armed conflict, as well as on the Force's role in ensuring the protection of children encountered during military operations.

63. Regular meetings were held between Barkhane forces, the country task force and the National Directorate for the Advancement of Children and Families on the protection of children during military operations and to ensure the swift handover to child protection actors of children captured by Barkhane during their operations.

64. The country task force continued to roll out the Act to Protect Children Affected by Conflict campaign in the Kidal, Ménaka and Mopti regions and organized several awareness-raising campaigns, including radio programmes on the impact of armed conflict on children.

65. In July 2021, the MINUSMA Force Commander formally released a revised directive on the protection of children by the Force, recalling its roles and responsibilities in that regard.

V. Observations and recommendations

66. I am extremely concerned by the considerable increase in the number of verified grave violations committed against children in Mali, in particular the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access. I urge all parties to conflict in Mali to immediately halt grave violations, release all children in their ranks and abide by international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

67. I am extremely alarmed by the upsurge in abductions of children and the elevated number of children killed and maimed. I strongly urge all parties to immediately release all abducted children. I further urge all parties not to target civilians, including children, and to take all necessary measures to avoid harm to children in the conduct of their operations.

68. I welcome the engagement of the transitional Government with the United Nations to address grave violations against children by the Malian armed forces. I am, however, concerned by the elevated number of cases of recruitment and use of children by the Malian armed forces. I urge the transitional Government to work with the United Nations, including by notifying the Organization of children associated with the Government's forces and releasing them. I also urge the transitional Government to reinforce effective age assessment procedures within the ongoing reform of the security sector, to include child protection provisions in the code of conduct and rules of engagement of the Malian armed forces and to institutionalize child protection training for them. I call upon the transitional Government to develop a national strategy for the prevention of grave violations against children with the support of the United Nations and my Special Representative. I encourage the international community to support the development of that plan, including through a subregional approach.

69. I welcome the release from detention by Malian authorities of children and call upon authorities to fully implement the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups and to work with the United Nations to review the cases of children whose age could not be determined and who remained detained for alleged association with armed groups. I further call upon national authorities and international forces to treat those children primarily as victims and I encourage the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel to fully implement the child protection aspects contained in its compliance framework.

70. I welcome the advances made in the transitional justice process and the promotion of children's participation therein. I remain concerned, however, by the prevalence of impunity for perpetrators of grave violations against children. I appeal to the transitional Government to pursue its efforts to promote accountability by investigating and prosecuting individuals accused of grave violations against children by ensuring disciplinary measures for grave violations against children, and to ensure that all victims have access to justice and are provided with comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive protection services. I call upon the transitional Government to finalize the revision of the draft child protection law, criminalizing the recruitment and use of children, including those between the ages of 15 and 17, as well as other grave violations against children, and to adopt the draft law establishing a moratorium on the 30-day deadline for birth registration.

71. Child protection provisions must be fully taken into account by all stakeholders engaged in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation. I further call upon the transitional Government of Mali to ensure that all disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and justice and security sector reforms take into account the specific needs of boys and girls, including through the

development of a gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.

72. I welcome the endorsement of the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles) and I call upon the transitional Government to endorse the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers. I also welcome advances in the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, including through the establishment of a national implementation committee and the revision of the bill on the protection of education from attacks. I call for the adoption and implementation of the draft bill.

73. However, the elevated number of incidents of attacks and threats of attacks against schools and related protected personnel remains a grave concern. Armed groups must stop and prevent such attacks and the military use of such facilities.

74. Sexual violence against children must end. In addition to prioritizing accountability, I call upon the transitional Government to ensure that survivors have access to the required services and assistance, as well as to justice.

75. I am concerned by the increasing number of incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children and urge all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access by humanitarian actors to children in need.

76. I welcome the signature by two Platform factions of action plans to end and prevent child recruitment and use. Furthermore, CMA and the United Nations continued their dialogue through workshops to accelerate the implementation of the 2017 action plan. I remain concerned by the continued recruitment and use of children by CMA and Platform. I call upon these parties to release all children from their ranks, to prevent further recruitment and use and other grave violations and to translate their commitments into action by fully implementing their action plans. I encourage the international community to support the implementation of all action plans, including through the provision of services to victims of grave violations.
