



Security Council

Seventy-fifth year

8756th meeting

Thursday, 10 September 2020, 10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Abarry (Niger)

Members:

Belgium	Mr. Kridelka
China	Mr. Zhang Jun
Dominican Republic	Ms. Morrison González
Estonia	Mr. Jürgenson
France	Mrs. Broadhurst Estival
Germany	Mr. Sautter
Indonesia	Mr. Djani
Russian Federation	Mr. Kuzmin
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Ms. DeShong
South Africa	Mr. Matjila
Tunisia	Mr. Ladeb
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Farrey
United States of America	Ms. Norman-Chalet
Viet Nam	Mr. Dang

Agenda

Children and armed conflict

Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children's rights

Letter dated 1 September 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the Niger to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2020/881)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

(spoke in English)

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Children and armed conflict

Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children's rights

Letter dated 1 September 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Niger to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2020/881)

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund; Ms. Marika Tsolakis, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks; Hadiza; and Ms. Rimana Youssouf Assane Mayaki, Youth Parliament of the Niger.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2020/881, which contains the text of a letter dated 1 September 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the Niger to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, transmitting a concept note on the item under consideration.

The Council has before it the text of a statement by the President on behalf of the Council on the subject of today's meeting. I thank the Council members for their valuable contributions to this statement.

In accordance with the understanding reached among the members of the Council, I shall take it that the members of the Security Council agree to the statement, which will be issued as a document of the Security Council under the symbol S/PRST/2020/8.

I now give the floor to Ms. Gamba.

Ms. Gamba de Potgieter (*spoke in French*): I thank the Niger for organizing this open debate. I also welcome our young briefers. This debate is timely and relevant.

Yesterday we celebrated the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack. In 2011, resolution 1998 (2011) called to ensure that schools are protected and expanded the listing criteria of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict to include attacks on schools and attacks on, and threats to, education personnel. In 2014, in resolution 2143 (2014), the Council recognized that the military use of schools is critically affecting children's access to education but decided not to expand listing criteria, calling instead for Member States to take "concrete measures" to deter the military use of schools. Some Member States took up that challenge and launched the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, which today boasts 105 signatories, demonstrating that where there is a will, there is a way. Such progress is welcome but, unfortunately, it is not enough.

I am concerned that this violation does not decrease over the years. On the contrary, there seems to be an emerging tactic of war, particularly in the Sahel, where schools are targeted precisely because they are schools, and even more if they cater to girls.

In the past two years in Mali, for example, teachers were threatened and killed, education facilities demolished and learning material burned, leading to the closure of over 1,260 schools, even before the coronavirus disease. Similarly, the past 12 months have seen a rise in attacks against schools and protected personnel in Burkina Faso, including the burning of schools and the kidnapping of teachers, forcing 2,500 schools to shut down, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of education. In other parts of the world, such as Asia and Latin America, we are also seeing an increase in attacks on education in indigenous communities. While some conflict-affected States, such as the Philippines, Myanmar and the Central African Republic, have adopted legislation that protects schools from attack and criminalizes the six grave violations, they are still at the early stages of implementation and more needs to be done to speed delivery.

The present pandemic has made things worse. Closed schools and crumbling economies generate push-and-pull factors that favour the recruitment, use, sexual exploitation and child marriage. Lockdowns have restrained and diminished children's access to essential services. Empty schools may be an incentive for parties to conflict to loot or use schools for military purposes.

Cycles of violence against schools affect students, teachers, parents and communities alike. Parents are fearful of sending children to school, teachers leave schools due to insecurity and children are denied an education, which is the single-most important tool they need to overcome despair and build a future. This must stop.

Schools must remain safe havens where girls and boys can obtain education, without discrimination and without fear. Even at times of war and pandemic, we must do our utmost to ensure that all children, including those undergoing reintegration processes, receive quality education. Education is not a choice, but a right. Attacks against schools and their military use is an attack on education, producing negative effects on children and societies in multiple ways. I therefore urge all parties to conflict to better protect students and education personnel and to respect the civilian nature of school infrastructure. And I remind Governments that they have a duty to protect education, even at times of war and pandemics.

It is to be hoped that these measures and initiatives, including this open debate, will increase the momentum for action to improve the protection of schools and end attacks on education. Let us act now

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Gamba de Potgieter for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Fore.

Ms. Fore: On behalf of everyone at UNICEF, we welcome the adoption of this important presidential statement (S/PRST/2020/8) to protect education from attack. We thank Permanent Representative Abdou Abarry for making this issue a priority during the Niger's presidency of the Security Council.

The coronavirus disease has disrupted learning for over 1 billion children worldwide. But at the same time, we must remember those who have no education waiting for them, including many of the 75 million children who live in countries in conflict.

Today's armed conflicts are increasingly protracted and complex in cause, consequence and character. They are also increasingly violent and marked by an alarming contempt for international humanitarian law by parties to conflict — State and non-State alike. This week, as schools around the world prepare to open their doors in the midst of the pandemic, we have an opportunity to

once again shine a light on those places where going to school can be dangerous and even deadly.

Last year alone saw 494 verified attacks on schools, and there have been more than 13,000 since monitoring and reporting began. These attacks are seemingly designed with one purpose in mind: to rob children, communities and countries of any semblance of safety, hope or optimism for the future.

One-fifth of last year's verified attacks took place in West and Central Africa, including in the Sahel region. And year over year the number is rising. In Burkina Faso, 55 schools were attacked in just the last year and a half. Conflict-related insecurity, combined with the pandemic, resulted in the closure of over 2,500 schools as of August. This leaves nearly 350,000 girls and boys without an education. In the Niger, over 340 schools have been closed owing to insecurity — more than a three-fold increase since the start of 2020.

It is important to remember that the Sahel is already home to a disproportionate share of the world's children who need humanitarian protection and assistance. About one in four who need support live in 10 countries in West and Central Africa, including the Sahel.

But the denial of education is just part of the challenge faced by these children. Out-of-school children — and children living in conflict generally — face a world of danger. They are at a higher risk of recruitment by armed forces or groups, gender-based violence, child marriage and early pregnancy, abuse and trafficking. And numbers cannot capture the heartbreaking cost to the spirits of these young people when their schools are attacked.

For one moment, look through the eyes of Mohammed, a 12-year-old. Mohammed was forced to flee Banki in north-east Nigeria, because his school was attacked and set on fire. He explains:

“I was at school when I heard shouting, and we ran. A classmate of mine opened the gate. They destroyed everything we worked on in our books, and they burned them. One of my teachers was killed.”

Mohammed has seen things that no child should ever see. His experience reminds us that protecting schools from attack and providing education in the midst of emergencies is more than a humanitarian need — it is a moral obligation.

To children and communities alike, in the 30 years since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is clearly a moral obligation that we are failing to meet, because the reality is that our words about protecting schools from attack — our policies, pronouncements and normative frameworks, and even our laws — do not reflect the situation on the ground for students, for teachers, for schools.

Along with our humanitarian partners, UNICEF's teams on the ground are doing all that they can to respond to the needs of out-of-school children — from providing essential learning materials, such as school kits and textbooks in Burkina Faso, the Niger and Mauritania; to supplying tents for temporary classrooms; to re-building learning spaces and training teachers; to providing counselling and psychosocial support to children who have witnessed the worst of humankind; to working with governments across the Sahel to provide distance-learning opportunities, including through the use of radio, television and online tools. Around the world, UNICEF is using the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate the development and use of these tools worldwide — tools that can provide an excellent alternative to traditional classrooms for children living under conflict.

To support all of this work, we call on our generous donor Governments to commit to multi-year, flexible funding to help communities rebuild education systems over the long term. This area of work is critically underfunded in the Sahel — with a UNICEF funding gap of 66 per cent across seven countries in the region. This is one of the biggest funding gaps for education globally — a gap that must be urgently closed before countries lose an entire generation of young minds.

But we must also recognize that this work — as vital as it is — treats only the symptom, not the disease of attacks on education. Treating the disease means going beyond what we have done so far. Otherwise, how can we — who have the power to change this — look a child like Mohammed in the eye and tell him we are doing everything we can to make life better for him and his classmates and teachers?

In short, we need the Council's help to treat the disease itself. I call on members to lend their voice and influence to condemn all attacks on schools and students alike — whether through resolutions or presidential statements, such as the one we are uniting behind today; to take concrete measures to fulfil

obligations and commitments to protect education from attack; and to end impunity for those who violate international law — both parties to conflict and individual perpetrators — whether at the national level or through international tribunals. Let us match words with consequences.

I call on members to demand that all States endorse the Safe Schools Declaration — as Saint Vincent and the Grenadines did yesterday, becoming the 105th state to do so — and to take steps to fully live up to their commitments. There is no excuse. We must protect education from attack and end the military use of schools now.

And finally, I call on members to follow the lead of Niger and encourage future Council Presidents to make education under attack a regular thematic topic for the Council's deliberations — not just around the International Day to Protect Education from Attack, but on a sustained basis during the year.

The security of countries and our world is directly tied to the education and protection of the children within these countries. Peace and prosperity — in the short and long terms — cannot be separated from a child's ability to learn and build a future for themselves.

Finally, we urge the Council to continue making this issue a priority, and give Mohammed — and every child living through the horror of conflict — a chance to build their future and contribute to the lasting peace that we all seek.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Fore for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Tsolakis.

Ms. Tsolakis: I thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter, Executive Director Fore, the civil-society briefers and Council members.

I am honoured to address the Council today on behalf of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. We commend the adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/2020/8 and the other actions that Member States have taken to protect schools and universities in armed conflict.

Just yesterday, the United Nations observed the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack, and 105 States, including the majority of the

members of the Council, have now endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration.

But despite those advances, violent attacks on education are occurring at an alarming rate in conflicts around the world. Research by our coalition identified at least 11,000 incidents of attacks on education globally over the past five years. In at least 34 countries around the world, schools have been used for military purposes by both State forces and non-State armed groups.

The Sahel region is an area of critical concern. In Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, armed groups increasingly threaten, abduct and kill teachers, and burn or bomb schools. Both military and armed groups have used dozens of schools as execution sites or bases.

In 2020, we have already documented nearly 100 incidents of attacks in the region. Those attacks have ripple effects. Teachers flee or stop working. Classes are suspended. And, fearing that they may be next, schools in surrounding areas also shutter, affecting the learning of hundreds of thousands of students.

A teacher in Burkina Faso whose home was burned down after he was assaulted by an armed group stated, “I teach, but I cannot forget”. Victims suffer lasting psychological and economic impacts yet seldom receive the vital support that they need.

When schools in the region shut due to the coronavirus disease, armed groups used force to keep them closed. In Mali, 27 attacks on schools and nearly 500 threats against schools or teachers were reported in June 2020 alone, when classes resumed. In Burkina Faso, 13 schools were attacked in the last weeks of July in a single district.

However, the monitoring and reporting of such attacks, and accountability for them, remain challenging in the Sahel. United Nations staff and other partners face security and physical barriers to documenting violations. In Mali, the United Nations verified 55 attacks on schools in 2019, yet only a small number of those could be attributed to a particular perpetrator.

We also know that women and girls are often deliberately targeted in attacks on education and suffer distinct and lasting consequences; however, limited gender-disaggregated data hinders effective gender-sensitive prevention and response.

Many States that have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration are finding ways to prevent and respond

to attacks on education and reduce the use of schools for military purposes, as are some non-State armed groups. For example, working with the national Government and using the Declaration, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali secured the evacuation of two primary schools occupied by armed groups in 2019. In the 12 countries that endorsed the Declaration in 2015 and had experienced military use, incidents of use by armed forces and groups have declined.

The Security Council should continue to lead the agenda on ending attacks on education and holding the perpetrators of such violations accountable.

We urge the Council to take the following steps: endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration in a gender-responsive manner and refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes; support United Nations country teams to safely engage with parties to conflict, including signing action plans to end and prevent attacks on schools; ensure that United Nations peace operations and special political missions have a child-protection mandate and the backing necessary to effectively monitor and report on attacks on education and the military use of schools, including through more consistent disaggregation of data related to attacks on education; and address the protection of students, teachers, schools and universities through the Council’s protection-of-civilians and youth, peace and security agendas, and more systematically address sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school through its sexual violence in conflict agenda.

The Council can make tangible improvements to the safety and security of schools and universities in the Sahel and around the world.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Tsolakis for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Hadiza.

Hadiza (*spoke in French*): Allow me to thank the Government of the Niger for initiating this meeting between children and decision-makers. I would also like to thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the Permanent Mission of the Niger to the United Nations in New York and the country office of Save the Children in the Niger for its commitment to children.

My name is Hadiza. I am a student. In 2019, I received a prize for excellence in literature, known as “Miss Literature”.

I am strongly committed to the fight for access to education for children in conflict-affected zones. I believe that when education is targeted, it becomes impossible to ensure safe education for all children. That is all the more difficult for those who already lived in difficult situations prior to conflicts.

I was born in a region affected by crisis with the lowest the school enrolment rate in the country. It is in that very region where we now see conflict in the Niger. I am particularly moved by the situation of the thousands of children torn from their school desks and endlessly displaced, sometimes without their parents. Some of them children are facing their fifth or sixth displacement.

Beyond the abuses committed, the coronavirus disease pandemic has further complicated the lives of children. This complication is seen in the stress that has produced different reactions: increased anxiety, withdrawal, agitation and suffering from nocturnal incontinence. This situation has become even more difficult with school closures and physical distancing, which does not allow children to freely enjoy their time together.

I have witnessed various examples of difficulties that children are facing. I remember the village on the banks of the Komadougou river, where my father created a school. The village was very hostile to the school. However, through awareness-raising meetings that he organized in the community, my father taught me that education is the most effective weapon for changing the world.

In 2006, all of the children that he taught rose to a higher class. Unfortunately, with the heightened insecurity, the village was attacked, pillaged and burned, and the schools were also attacked. The majority of these children were taken away and integrated into armed groups.

You, Mr. President, will agree with me that when a school is attacked and children are obliged to flee their villages, everything is unjustly affected. For me, defending the right to education of all children in crisis situations is to defend the rights of adults to survival. As they say where I am from, in Hausa, “Children are the hope of tomorrow.”

What is most deplorable is that it is these same children, whose futures are hijacked, who return by night to slit their parents’ throats and kidnap their brothers and sisters, sometimes for ransom and sometimes for sexual purposes. I recall a 12-year-old child named Adi, who was very intelligent and full of hope for his studies. He was abducted by his uncle, a member of an armed group, and we have not seen him since then. However, we will never forget his commitment and his dreams of succeeding at school. All these acts were committed because the perpetrators did not want local children to attend Western schools.

I will never tire of talking about the continuous difficulties facing us. On 6 February 2015, when I was just 13 years old, the town where I was living was attacked and all of our schools were closed. I also remember a 9-year-old girl named Fatima, an internally displaced person, whose father had his throat cut before her very eyes. Imagine all of the trauma she has experienced; her mother, too, continues to suffer unjustly as a result of her husband’s death. This situation of vulnerability means that Fatima has no feeling of control or belonging. Would any of those present here wish to see their children suffer in that way? No, they would not, so something must be done.

In the light of the scale of the conflict in the Sahel, it is necessary to implement a strategy that would ensure that children, particularly girls, can go to school. It is for all of those reasons that I would, first, ask the Security Council to ensure the protection of schools from attacks by parties to conflict around the world and safeguard the rights and duties of children; secondly, I would ask United Nations entities to mobilize international cooperation to fight the increased threat of attacks against schools by parties to armed conflict and to step up international efforts towards the prevention of violence against children, particularly by mobilizing young people and children and combating the use of technology by parties to a conflict; and, thirdly, I would ask the Government of the Niger to create distance-learning classes so that all Nigerien children, especially those who are out of school, can have access to quality education, to provide those children with information-technology resources adapted to the situation — solar computers, solar lamps, solar radios and so on — and to reaffirm its commitment to protecting education from violence and conflict and preventing schools from being used for military purposes.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Hadiza for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mayaki.

Ms. Mayaki (*spoke in French*): My name is Rimana, and I am in my last year of school. I hope that I will pass my exams and start at a prestigious university next year. I had no problems in my time at school. My path was laid out for me, and that was because I grew up in Niamey. But what if I had grown up in Diffa or in Tillabéri, like Nura or Omar? Imagine an 8-year-old child sitting in a classroom who suddenly hears gunfire. In a panic, he flees and is hit by a stray bullet.

Yes, like many other countries, the Niger has not been spared by armed conflict. Terrorist groups have progressively carried out appalling attacks and undermined our development efforts in fields as vital as health care, security and, above all, education. Like Nelson Mandela, they understood that education is the most powerful weapon we have to change the world. It is very easy to destroy this weapon. At least 350 public schools have been closed in the Tillabéri region, as reported by Nigerien public radio on 19 February. In Diffa, a local representative told Voice of Africa that schools had been burned down and teachers had received death threats.

In 2015 alone, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs situation report dated 2 November reported that more than 12,000 schoolchildren were deprived of education in Diffa. What can the situation be like today? The terrorists do not want children to learn and become open to the world, with heightened awareness and tolerance of diversity. The violence has several causes: poverty, unemployment and erroneous religious ideologies. But if we look more closely, above all it is because the terrorists did not benefit from an education that enabled them to conceive of the fact that humankind has many mindsets and personalities and that words can have a positive impact. Because they did not learn that, they prefer to instigate a climate of terror that would force parents to marry off their daughters for fear of exposing them to insecurity at school. That could also be said to be the cause of illiteracy for an entire generation, who, without expertise of any sort, will be unable to compete in the job market.

In addition to being deprived of schooling, what will happen to a generation whose childhood was marked by the noise of gunfire and the sight of the corpses of their loved ones? Receiving an education is not a crime.

Neither is living. On the contrary, these are rights established in articles 28 and 6 of the international Convention of the Rights of the Child, on the right to education and life, respectively. Investigations must be carried out, and the guilty must be prosecuted. As for the victims, since their memory cannot be erased, they must be provided psychological and financial assistance.

I hope that my words made sense and have shown how much we owe it to ourselves to act. Know that the issues of armed conflict and schooling are at the heart of the concerns of the Parliament over which I preside. I have in mind the efforts made by my colleagues in Diffa and Tillabéri, the visits to administrative and local elected leaders and to other bodies, such as the High Authority For Peacebuilding, in order to ensure that talks move forward, to raise awareness of violent extremism among youth and even to create their own non-governmental organization to those ends.

In addition, during our previous session, we hosted the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice, to whom we voiced our indignation directly. For two hours, we were able to share our views and our recommendations.

I hope that, in the near future, Nura of Diffa will be able to live in a safe environment and receive a quality education.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Mayaki for her briefing.

I shall now like to make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the Niger on behalf of the three African members of the Security Council — the Niger, South Africa and Tunisia — as well as Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (A3+1).

I would like to thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Gamba de Potgieter, and the Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms. Fore, for their complementary presentations, which provide us with good material for today's discussion. I note that this meeting takes place within the framework of the commemoration of the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack. What could be more normal, on this occasion, than to listen to the voices of the victims of this phenomenon that we denounce, who, from the depths of their distress, tell us that it is time for us to act.

Hadiza and Rimana, two young girls from the Niger, whose poignant testimonies we have just followed, remind us how urgent it is to listen to the Secretary-

General's call for a ceasefire and the African Union's call to silence the guns in Africa for peace to prevail, create the conditions to protect schools from attacks and to promote quality education for all children, particularly children affected by conflict and violence. I tell Hadiza and Rimana that they can rest assured that we have listened to them and that their messages give us additional reasons to act. The information that Ms. Marika Tsolakis, from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks, just shared with us allows us to assess the impact of attacks on schools, this savagery of our time, on children's education, especially for young girls.

When access to education is taken away from a child in a conflict situation, it is a tragedy that also takes away what most children want and are entitled to — an opportunity to learn and develop their imagination in a safe and healthy environment. All too often, in situations of armed conflict, schools and associated people, who are entitled to protection, are subject to attacks and threats of attack. That is why it is essential that we assess the progress made since the adoption of resolution 1998 (2011) and subsequent related resolutions, and renew our commitment to provide an adequate learning environment for all children.

The A3+1 recognizes the important new developments in protecting schools worldwide from attacks and threats of attacks. In that connection, the signing of an action plan to deter attacks on schools between an armed group in the Central African Republic and the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict is worth noting. Such actions should be replicated in other conflict situations to promote the main objective of protecting schools and people operating in those environments.

We commend efforts made in Mali, for example, where the Government has effectively implemented the commitments made in the Safe Schools Declaration, as well as in Burkina Faso, with the provision of distance education — because of the coronavirus disease pandemic — to children affected by the conflict, in collaboration with UNICEF, UNESCO and regional bodies.

As the world strives to adapt education to the difficult context of the global pandemic, greater emphasis must be placed on the need to provide quality education to children, including those in vulnerable situations, such as internally displaced persons, refugees, children

with disabilities and children removed from conflict in reintegration programmes.

We are equally concerned about the particular vulnerabilities of girls in conflict contexts, compounded by social burdens, all of which have a serious impact on their education. In many parts of the world, girls are much less likely to return to school after school closures or the destruction of school infrastructure. In countries affected by conflict, girls are half as likely to be enrolled in school as those living in countries at peace. They are also more likely to experience sexual and gender-based violence on their way to school. Particular attention should be paid to the issue of violence and trauma suffered by girls in conflict situations, with a view to better defining the means and other strategies to be put in place to help them.

In the absence of rapid and comprehensive action, the reduction in access to education due to conflict, insecurity and the coronavirus disease will have disastrous consequences. The presidential statement adopted today (S/PRST/2020/8), at the initiative of the Niger and the Kingdom of Belgium, specifically focuses on the targeting of schools within the broader framework of the protection of children in armed conflict and calls for bold efforts to address the harmful effects of such attacks, including child labour, the forced recruitment of children by armed groups and early marriage.

Girls like Rimana, from whom we heard today, tell us that there are other ways to do things, for example, in the Sahel region or the Lake Chad basin, where armed terrorist groups specifically target schools. We all remember the tragedy of the girls of Chibok, Nigeria, ripped away from their schooling and from the affection of their families by fanatics from the terrorist group Boko Haram.

Between April 2017 and December 2019, Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger saw a six-fold increase in the number of schools closed due to violence. In the first seven months of this year alone, more than 90 incidents of attacks on education occurred in the central Sahel. In some parts of the region, the insecurity situation has led to a disturbing pattern of school closures; in December 2019, more than 3,300 schools were reported closed due to insecurity, disrupting the education of more than 650,000 children in the three countries. In 35 conflict-affected countries around the world, the education of 75 million children and adolescents is being disrupted by this situation.

Schools have become the target of armed terrorist groups, particularly in the Sahel, because, as centres of knowledge, they are a crucible of knowledge. Schools shed light, whereas the ideology of violence carried by terrorist groups is nourished by ignorance and obscurantism. Educated children are the spearhead of a responsible society; they are the pillars on which a strong nation is built.

States must therefore commit themselves to adopting legislation and policies focused on the protection of children and which are gender-sensitive and in conformity with international humanitarian law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. They must also commit to greater respect for the civilian character of schools. To be effective, such protection mechanisms should involve, in addition to States themselves, all other partners in education, should be based on monitoring and communication, and raise awareness about the unacceptability of attacks on schools. If such a system is to work efficiently, there is also an urgent need to increase resources that can create the conditions for teachers and students to engage in appropriate online and blended-learning modalities so that no child is left behind.

The maintenance of reliable statistics on schools that have been destroyed will enable a better understanding of the extent of the phenomenon and allow for rehabilitation and reconstruction operations, with the support of UNICEF and other relevant United Nations entities. These rehabilitation and reconstruction operations are, in our view, the best way to strengthen the role of schools as a vector for promoting and consolidating peace, because, as we said earlier, it is through education that we combat not only obscurantism and fanaticism, but also terrorism.

Before I conclude, I am pleased to announce that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has just endorsed the Declaration on Safe Schools, joining the 104 countries that have already signed it.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I shall now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Kridelka (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): Yesterday we celebrated the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack, thanks to the

initiative and unwavering commitment of Qatar and its Permanent Representative, whom I thank, and with the full support of the Niger in its capacity as President of the Security Council.

The International Day serves above all as a wake-up call. Last year — as the briefers explained today — the United Nations recorded nearly 500 attacks on schools in various conflict zones. Since 2010, the number of serious violations verified by the United Nations has tripled. In the Sahel, the number of schools closed as a result of violence has increased six-fold since 2017, which has had a particularly strong impact on girls. Hundreds of thousands of girls and young women are at risk of never going back to school and even of becoming victims of assault, forced marriage, exploitation and sexual violence. Entire generations are being robbed of their hopes and entire communities are being robbed of their future.

Just recently, we were all shocked by the violent attacks targeting students preparing for their exams in two provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country that President Abarry knows well. Students were killed, others were raped and hundreds have had their exam dates postponed due to violence and insecurity. This is alarming to us, which is why I would like to congratulate President Abarry on taking the initiative to convene today's meeting. It is also why we fully support the presidential statement that Belgium co-facilitated and which was adopted today under the Niger's effective presidency (S/PRST/2020/8).

It is our collective duty to protect the right to quality education for all. In this context, I would like to draw the attention of the Security Council to four points: the fight against impunity, our role as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, the Security Council's mandate on children in armed conflict, and the training of peacekeeping personnel.

First, the fight against impunity is a cornerstone for Belgium. We therefore welcome the fact that the presidential statement condemns the lack of accountability for violations committed and calls on Member States to ensure the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for attacks in violation of international humanitarian law. In accordance with Council resolutions, the full range of justice mechanisms must be used, including national, international or mixed criminal courts and tribunals and, of course, transitional justice mechanisms.

Secondly, my goal as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, as Council members know, is to adopt conclusions on each of the 14 situations of armed conflict in which parties are committing grave violations against children. We are, of course, working closely with Special Representative of the Secretary-General Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, whose commitment and dynamism I commend. The increased frequency of reports boosts the relevance of the conclusions that we adopt on the basis of those reports. In this way, we can keep the pressure on parties in order to improve efforts aimed at preventing grave violations against children and protecting children in armed conflict.

Thirdly, as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, Belgium is striving to uphold the main thrust of the mandate given to us by the Security Council with regard to children in situations of armed conflict and, in particular, the integrity and impartiality of the mechanism for listing parties that engage in violations of the rights of the child. This mechanism gives the United Nations the opportunity to work with listed parties to prevent grave violations and improve the situation of children. It remains a valuable, powerful and results-oriented tool. Highlighting violations of children's rights and denouncing their perpetrators are indeed indispensable preliminary actions.

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the monitoring and reporting mechanism. The mechanism deserves our continued support to ensure the systematic collection of information on the six grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. In the same vein, we welcome the fact that today's presidential statement calls on the Secretary-General continue monitoring and reporting on the use of schools by the military in violation of international humanitarian law.

This brings me to my last point. Last February, we adopted a presidential statement calling for the use of the practical guidance for mediators to better protect children in situations of armed conflict (S/PRST/2020/3). In view of the Secretary-General's call for a comprehensive ceasefire in response to the coronavirus disease pandemic, it is more relevant than ever that child protection issues, including attacks on schools, be at the centre of mediation efforts as well as at the centre of training for peacekeeping personnel.

Finally, we call on all States to join the 2015 Safe Schools Declaration and congratulate Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on doing so.

We call on all States to also ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to endorse the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and the Paris Commitments.

I would like to conclude with the words of our young partners — the young Faisal, who asked us yesterday during the celebration of the International Day for the Protection of Education against Attacks if we can really build back better when the most important tool for this purpose is constantly under attack. I would like to welcome our two young briefers today from the Niger, Ms. Rimana Mayaki and Ms. Hadiza, who explained to us the concrete role that young people in the Niger play to enhance the safety of schools. They are both models for young people of the South and the North. "Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world," Rimana told us, and I would like to end with that quotation.

Mr. Jürgenson (Estonia): We thank all the briefers for sharing their views today. We particularly value the direct experiences shared by Ms. Mayaki.

We also express our gratitude to the Niger for drawing the Security Council's attention to this topic, including its excellent work, with Belgium, in finding an agreement on the presidential statement (S/PRST/2020/8) adopted by the Council. We strongly support the statement and hope that it mobilizes further efforts to protect schools by the Council, Member States, the United Nations system and international and regional organizations, as well as civil society.

Estonia strongly condemns all violations of international law, including attacks against schools. We are alarmed by attacks on schools and hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, the occupied Palestinian territory, Afghanistan and Somalia. We share the deep concern about the sharp increase in the number of schools forced to close, including due to insecurity, with almost 650,000 children affected in the Sahel since 2017. We call on parties to armed conflict to immediately cease attacks and threats of attacks against schools and other educational facilities, as well as on students, teachers and other persons entitled to

protection. I want to particularly highlight the following points in that regard.

We need to continue to improve the monitoring and reporting of attacks on education, including by disaggregating data by gender. We also need to strengthen accountability for these attacks. In addition to the national level, the United Nations monitoring and reporting mechanism plays a key role in detecting attacks against schools and related personnel, as well as engaging with parties to address and prevent them. The Secretary-General's report (S/2020/525) serves as a tool for early warning and the basis for engagement with parties, but also as a step towards ensuring accountability for grave violations against children. The mechanism needs sufficient human and financial resources. We continue to strongly support ensuring continued dedicated child protection capacity in United Nations missions.

In the broader context, we welcome all initiatives at the national, regional and international levels that aim to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict, including from attacks against schools. Estonia has endorsed the Paris Principles and the Paris Commitments, as well as the Vancouver Principles, and joined the group of over 100 countries endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration earlier this year.

There is a need for the better protection of women and girls. Girls attending, or on their way to, school are often targeted because of their gender, and they face specific consequences of attacks, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, such as forced marriage, pregnancy as well as the subsequent stigmatization, further undermining their access to education.

With specific attention needed for children in vulnerable situations, Estonia continues to support access to education and psychosocial services to refugee children in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and East Africa, as well as internally displaced persons in eastern Ukraine. Access to safe, quality education for children affected by armed conflict has an important role in their reintegration and in breaking the cycle of recruitment and violence.

The number of verified attacks against schools remains high and continues to increase. As the evidence shows, the attacks have not decreased in the context of the coronavirus disease pandemic, while the vulnerability of schools and students has been compounded by it.

School closures heighten the risk of child recruitment, sexual violence, child and forced marriage and child labour. We underline the importance of reopening schools where it is possible, safe and secure, in dialogue with all parties, communities and children.

We agree with you, Mr. President, and all speakers today that there are clear steps that we can, and should, take to protect schools, students and teachers. Grave violations against children are unacceptable. But it is also one of the most effective ways by which we can address sources fuelling conflict and violence and ensure peace and security in the long term.

Mr. Dang (Viet Nam): I would like to extend our gratitude to Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, for their invaluable briefings. We also thank the other briefers for their in-depth remarks. We commend the Niger for organizing this very timely and important debate today. We also commend the Niger and Belgium for their hard work in the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and for the preparation and negotiation of the presidential statement (S/PRST/2020/8) adopted today.

Children are our future and the next generation of hope, peace and development of each nation and the world. Yet an increasing number of children today are still suffering from impacts of armed conflicts on a daily basis, with limited or no access to education and other essential services.

As shown in the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2020/525), in 2019 more than 25,000 grave violations against children were verified, 494 of which were attacks made on schools. We are deeply concerned over the increasing acts of violence against children, notably attacks against schools and the use of schools for military purposes. We remain further concerned, as these situations have been further exacerbated due to the global outbreak of the coronavirus disease pandemic.

We join other Member States in strongly condemning attacks on objects protected under international law, especially schools. We call on all parties concerned to put an end to such practices.

The protection of children in armed conflicts is the crucial work of the Security Council within the framework of its mandate in maintaining international peace and security. More important, it is the primary

role and responsibility of each Member State to enhance protective measures for children.

In that regard, we emphasize the role of education as an important means of preventing armed conflict and addressing violations against children in conflict areas. Every child deserves an opportunity to attend schools so as to be equipped with knowledge about their rights and ways to ensure those rights.

It is imperative that we continue to make concerted efforts to enhance concrete measures to immediately address attacks against schools, rebuild school facilities and ensure access to education for children in conflict-affected situations. Schools must be a safe space in conflict zones to shelter children. We must not allow schools to become targets of attacks, or be used for military purposes.

While immediate action is urgently needed, it is also vital that we address the root causes of attacks against schools in a comprehensive manner, focusing on conflict prevention, mediation and the creation of an environment that promotes and protects children's rights in situations of armed conflict.

As we just discussed a few days ago, the coronavirus disease pandemic has further complicated our joint efforts to address conflicts and humanitarian issues. In that regard, it is also important to maintain and galvanize political will and resources to protect children and schools. In doing so, we call on parties to armed conflict to fully respect and abide by international law, including international humanitarian law. In that connection, we would like to highlight the key international frameworks on the protection of children and education, including the Safe School Declaration and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. We call on countries that have not done so to consider joining these frameworks. In this vein, I would like to join our colleague from Belgium in congratulating Saint Vincent and Grenadines on recently joining the Declaration and the Optional Protocol.

For its part, Viet Nam reaffirms its strong commitment to the protection of children and their essential education. We welcome the adoption today of presidential statement S/PRST/2020/8, which once again reaffirms our commitment towards safeguarding and protecting children in armed conflict. We look forward to working actively with the international community in this endeavour.

Ms. Norman-Chalet (United States of America): We very much thank the Niger's efforts to focus today's discussion on such an important topic. We thank as well Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter, Executive Director Fore, Ms. Marika Tsolakis, Ms. Rimana Youssouf Assane Mayaki and Hadiza for their insightful and compelling remarks.

The United States remains fully committed to supporting the United Nations critical work to address the effects of conflict on children. There is no issue more important than those affecting the next generation of leaders and citizens in the world. It is only when we support every child in reaching their fullest potential that we will create a safer and more secure world. Our support also extends to the protection of families, teachers and schools whenever possible, so that children can retain safe and equitable access to quality education.

As Rimana highlighted earlier, schools should provide a safe space free from the threat of violence. When protected, schools also serve as a hub for other life-saving and life-sustaining services. Furthermore, safe access to education is critical to breaking the cycles of poverty and social grievance that underpin countries' vulnerability to violent extremism and future conflict. Therefore, we cannot approach the pursuit of peace and international security without considering the consequences of failures to uphold the laws that protect children and schools.

The irony, of course, is that terrorists often deliberately target or use schools because schools are critical to building resilient communities and also represent Government institutions. This lack of respect for the civilian character of schools can place them at heightened risk of attack. In some cases, malign actors use education to perpetuate prejudice, intolerance and distorted views of history or of others in their community. Meanwhile, armed groups also target schools and routes to schools to abduct children and youth, often for the purpose of recruiting them as soldiers or into forced marriage, sexual slavery or other horrific activities.

In that regard, I want to highlight that women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and early and forced marriage amid conflict, and tend to be deliberately targeted by groups that oppose gender equality in education. The threat of rape, sexual assault and abduction on their way to school, or because they

want to seek an education, severely constrains women's and girls' mobility and, along with other harmful gender norms, often compels them to stay home.

We note that the Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict has made progress on numerous conclusions documents, including those recently finalized on Iraq (S/AC.51/2016/2), Colombia (S/AC.51/2020/5) and Somalia (S/AC.51/2017/2). We very much appreciate Belgium's work in this area. This important work goes on as we continue to discuss the Sudan. We also appreciate Special Representative Gamba's ongoing commitment to preparing the reports, including important details on abuses and violations against children. As we know, however, our work is far from over.

In the Central Sahel, for example, attacks on children continue to increase; close to 5 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance. The surge of violence across Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger is having a devastating impact on children's survival, education, protection and development. Hundreds of children in the region, as we heard just this morning, have been killed, maimed or forcibly separated from their families, while thousands of school closures have affected almost 650,000 children. The violence prompting these closures must stop immediately, its perpetrators must be brought to justice and children's access to education must be restored.

These tragedies in the Sahel serve to illuminate the fact that armed conflict impacts children in ways beyond affecting their immediate safety. These children require holistic interventions that support their ability to contribute to peaceful societies, including the provision of equal access to education, age-appropriate vocational training, and job opportunities for both boys and girls. They also need familiar, safe and nurturing routines — particularly within families and in supportive school environments — to heal, build resilience and cope with stress and trauma.

That is why the United States Government prioritizes not only life-saving child protection programming but also efforts that support children's longer-term recovery, including through education. To demonstrate the United States Government's commitment to the children, families and communities in the Sahel in this regard, we recently provided \$2.3 million to extend Education Cannot Wait, Burkina Faso's first emergency

response programme, to sustain education services in conflict-affected communities.

We will continue to invest in preventative, responsive and gender-sensitive programming to protect children from violence, including in their schools. The Trump Administration remains as committed as ever to empowering children by promoting their access to essential social services, including education, and increasing their participation in processes that affect their lives and shape their future.

Ms. Morrison González (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to thank the briefers for their important observations and recommendations. Rimana Youssouf Assane Mayaki's testimony attests to the importance of protecting schools from attacks and her courage impels us to act.

We are grateful to the Niger for hosting this timely debate, in particular since we just commemorated the International Day to Protect Education from Attack yesterday. We also thank the Niger for its efforts with regard to presidential statement S/PRST/2020/8, which was adopted today.

In conflict-affected countries, armed forces and armed groups continue to violate international law and attack schools and use them for military purposes. This impacts the future of entire generations of children and dashes any hope of returning to normal life.

The most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2020/525) states that there were 494 verified attacks on schools in 2019, primarily in the Syrian Arab Republic, Palestine, Afghanistan and Somalia. It also indicates that the Sahel region has sometimes experienced the spillover effect of armed groups' activities affecting other countries, including cross-border attacks on schools. The impact of these attacks, along with the coronavirus disease pandemic, is devastating for students, but also for teachers and communities in general.

As a result, there has been a dramatic decline in school attendance, leaving untold numbers of children without education, facing psychological trauma and serious injury and, all too often, costing them their lives. Without access to education, an entire generation living in conflict will grow up without the skills to support their countries' economies and political and social development, thus exacerbating the cycle in which children remain trapped.

We condemn all attacks on schools and their use for military purposes. We call on all parties to conflict to put an immediate end to that practice. The Safe Schools Declaration has been a positive channel for increased commitments to protecting children in armed conflict and their right to education. For example, the Governments of Burkina Faso, Mali — and your country, Mr. President, the Niger — and others in the region have endorsed the Declaration, joining 105 other States around the world, including the Dominican Republic. I take this opportunity to congratulate Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on having also endorsed the Declaration yesterday.

However, increased international attention to the Sahel region and the security situation there is vital. We encourage those Member States that have not done so to support the Safe Schools Declaration in order to make that agenda universal and foster increased action in that regard.

Attacks on education must be systematically investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. In that respect, support for and cooperation with international criminal-accountability mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court are key. Another important measure is the training of national defence and security forces in international humanitarian and human rights law.

Education must continue during armed conflict and be a channel for the promotion of peace, and provide physical and psychosocial support to students. To that end, States must cooperate with schools and university communities, civil society, community members and other relevant stakeholders to develop early-warning systems, risk-reduction strategies and comprehensive safety and security plans.

In that connection, while responding to the coronavirus disease pandemic, States must ensure that the reopening of schools is in line with the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

Female students and teachers living in conflict-affected countries are often targeted during attacks, experiencing terrible acts of violence within schools but also on the way to school. These include rape, sexual slavery and abduction. This puts at risk the critical education needed to address gender inequalities and discrimination. Without access by girls to education, women's participation in decision-making

and leadership in politics and in conflict prevention are greatly affected.

Today's debate further highlights the urgent need to ensure that all United Nations peacekeeping missions have a monitoring and reporting mechanism and can appoint senior child-protection and child-rights experts in peace missions.

Finally, as Malala would say, "Let us pick up our books and our pens; they are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world".

Children's right to education must be guaranteed and remain a priority during conflict so as to ensure a safe and peaceful future.

Mr. Kuzmin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I would like to express our gratitude to the delegation of the Niger for having taken the initiative to convene this important meeting. We would like to thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ms. Gamba de Potgieter; the Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms. Fore; and the other briefers for their Contributions to today's discussions.

The succession of never-ending armed conflicts and the alarming information that we receive periodically about civilian casualties, including children, are proof of the relevance of the topic of today's meeting.

Fifteen years ago, the Security Council adopted its flagship resolution 1612 (2005), through which the members of the Security Council unanimously showed their determination to protect the most vulnerable people in any armed conflict, that is, the children. In resolution 1998 (2011), the Council stressed in particular that it is unacceptable to attack the most important civilian objects: schools and hospitals.

Since then, the situation of children who, by accident and against their will, find themselves in situations of armed conflict is subject to continuous monitoring by the Security Council and its specialized Working Group. We hope that the presidential statement adopted today (S/2020/PRST/8) will enable us to strengthen the protection of children and respect for international law, particularly international humanitarian law.

We are in full agreement with the efforts of States to protect civilian objects, including schools, from unlawful armed attacks. We are heartened to see that existing norms of international humanitarian law

provide us with an answer to the question of which buildings are civilian objects and which are military, and under which circumstances. It is important that this statement be unequivocal on that account. It is necessary to respect universal norms of international humanitarian law and work on the basis of generally accepted international legal tools.

The Safe Schools Declaration is a political initiative by a small group of countries and does not yet enjoy universal support. Unfortunately, the presidential statement does not reflect one of the most relevant aspects of the agenda on children, that is, their repatriation from conflict zones. Recently the Russian Federation evacuated another group of Russian children from the Syrian conflict zone. We call on all Member States to step up their efforts to repatriate children who find themselves in conflict zones. Children should not suffer because of the unlawful terrorist activities of their parents and guardians.

How a State treats its children shows how civilized that State is. Syria, including with the support of the Russian Federation, has weathered the fight against international terrorism and against those who hatched the plan to destroy the Syrian State. Throughout the war, housing, hospitals and schools have greatly suffered, and the task now is to rebuild those facilities. Given the start of the school year, we should pay particular attention to rebuilding schools and ensuring that children have access to education. To that end, we need the necessary school equipment, which has been regularly sent to Syria as part of Russian humanitarian aid.

Russia shares the concerns on security in the Sahel. In that region, terrorist activity and inter-ethnic and intercommunal conflict are increasing, as is drug trafficking and organized crime. Armed groups openly resort to barbaric methods of warfare, deliberately targeting civilian objects, including schools. It is children who suffer from this situation. The coronavirus disease pandemic has rendered the situation in the region even more complex, heightening the distress of the population, including children.

In that connection, we reaffirm our full support to all of those who are fighting a tough battle against terrorism in the region. We are certain that even given the limitations resulting from the epidemic, African States and public institutions will be able to successfully overcome the challenges before them. The work done by the United Nations Office for West Africa and the

Sahel and cooperation with the African Union and other regional organizations should make this possible.

Mrs. Broadhurst Estival (France) (*spoke in French*): I wish to begin by welcoming your commitment, Mr. President, to the protection of children and schools as a priority of your presidency. We are also pleased to see the adoption today of presidential statement S/PRST/2020/8 on this very important topic, facilitated by the Niger and Belgium.

I thank today's briefers for their words and their actions. I also warmly congratulate, in particular, our young activists from the Niger for their testimony and their action on the ground. Through them, I pay tribute to the work of all the actors on the ground committed to child protection and education, especially in the extremely challenging context of the coronavirus disease pandemic. I also commend UNESCO's critical action on this issue, in conjunction with the other United Nations actors.

We have just commemorated the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack. This day and this debate remind us of a chilling reality, which many here have spoken about today. Attacks on schools persisted in 2019 and are continuing this year. The latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2020/525) has identified nearly 1,000 attacks on schools and hospitals, in full violation of international law. In the Sahel region, several thousand children have dropped out of school. The right to education for girls and adolescent girls, in particular, is under threat. Naturally, the coronavirus disease pandemic amplifies those difficulties. The closure of schools makes children, especially girls, more vulnerable to early labour and early and forced marriage.

In that context, the Security Council must remain mobilized, through its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and through its actions as a whole. In that regard, I reiterate the crucial implementation of resolution 2532 (2020), endorsing the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. I also commend the efforts of the Secretary-General, his Special Envoys and, of course, Special Representative Virginia Gamba de Potgieter — whose work I welcome — to ensure that the issue of child protection continues to be raised directly with parties to conflicts.

For its part, France will continue to play an active role. We will continue to call for the universal endorsement of the Paris Commitments, which make

schooling a priority in the fight against the recruitment and exploitation of children. We also call for the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, whose fifth anniversary we commemorate. In that regard, I commend the remarkable and critical work of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. These documents are important and complementary commitments to the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and all its protocols.

France has also made education a priority of its external action. It has significantly increased its bilateral aid in this area and actively supports UNESCO, in particular in strengthening the resilience of young people in the face of violent extremism in the Sahel. In addition, in 2018, France recommitted to the Global Partnership for Education with a contribution of €200 million for the 2018-2020 cycle. It will actively participate in the campaign to mobilize resources for the partnership's replenishment conference scheduled for the summer of 2021. Since girls in particular are victims of violence and inequality, France is also supporting the implementation of protective environments for girls in schools through the Priority for Equality initiative, which operates in the Sahel countries.

These issues remain at the heart of our commitment in the Sahel.

Mr. Sautter (Germany): This week, many of us here brought our kids back to school after the summer break. Teachers here in New York have made every effort to ensure a safe space in which they can feel protected. It is a scandal and a tragedy that many children in conflict-ridden parts of the world are going through very different experiences.

Today's briefers bear witness to one of the most serious violations of children's rights — attacks on schools. I thank Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Henrietta Fore, Marika Tsolakis and, in particular, our young briefers Rimana and Hadiza for their bravery in standing before the Council and recounting their stories of perseverance and courage.

In 2011, Germany put forward resolution 1998 (2011), which set in place important standards and provisions for the protection of schools and hospitals. In spite of progress that has been made since then, we see that attacks and threats of attacks against schools are on the rise. The initiative of the Niger and Belgium is therefore key. It is also important to update resolution 1998 (2011) with today's presidential statement

S/PRST/2020/8. It is important that we recognize the ongoing threat for children — especially girls, as many have mentioned today — arising from attacks on schools and that we prescribe relevant additional operative measures.

Let me say a few words on the role of schools. They are far more than places of education; they are safe spaces in which children can learn and play, places for friendships and social encounters and places of critical thinking and creativity. They are the places that are key to creative inclusive societies.

It is therefore all the more deplorable that for many children around the world, schools have become places of horror and grief, like in Syria, as German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said in the Council in February (see S/PV.8734), where the regime and Russia have been bombing civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals. That must end now. The Niger is another worrisome example. There too, attacks on schools have created a lot of harm and human tragedy.

Germany is also concerned about attacks on other educational facilities, such as universities. Some attacks deliberately target girls' schools and result in the most heinous crimes: human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence and abuse. Also, girls suffer disproportionately, even in instances where attacks on education do not target them specifically. The Safe Schools Declaration is crucial. We encourage all those who have not yet done so to endorse the Declaration and, more importantly, to implement it.

Because of the threat of the coronavirus disease, millions of children worldwide remain out of school. In situations of conflict, that is of particular concern; children are deprived of their basic education. They are also often stripped of any access to health services and regular food supply, as those functions and services are frequently provided through schools. We note with grave concern that children with disabilities might encounter heightened obstacles to returning to school once they are out. The Secretary-General has called on all Member States to adopt what he called "aggressive back to school strategies" and to prioritize the reopening of schools. Germany fully supports that call, which is of particular importance in situations of conflict.

Let me say a word on the annual report and listings. Attacks on schools and hospitals are a trigger for listing parties to armed conflict in the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed

conflict. The presidential statement that we have adopted today contains several concrete measures to enhance monitoring and reporting, for example, on the regional and subregional dynamics of armed conflict on children. The attacks and abductions carried out by Boko Haram are a visible example of violations of children's rights that have to be monitored, prevented and prosecuted cross-regionally.

We are also concerned about other violations, such as sexual and gender-based violence, some conducted by State actors, such as in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Germany's view, it is imperative that the findings of the Secretary-General's report consistently reflect the listing in the annexes. It is a question of credibility.

My last point is that, in our view, it is more important than ever that the Working Group, now in its fifteenth year, continues to closely monitor the situation of children in the conflicts on the agenda of the Security Council. Belgium has led the way. We welcome the new interactive dialogues with peace operations and UNICEF and hope that such formats are being continued.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that schools must be safe spaces — zones of peace — and parties to conflict need to understand that killing children, raping children and destroying schools and hospitals will never be a winning military strategy. It is a crime against humanity and a crime against our future, and it needs to stop.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China commends the Niger for organizing today's meeting and thanks Executive Director Fore and Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter for their briefings. I also welcome the participation of the representatives of civil society. I would like to thank Rimana in particular for her briefing; her story is very moving and thought-provoking.

In May, the General Assembly adopted resolution 74/275, proclaiming 9 September as the International Day to Protect Education from Attack. Yesterday, we jointly participated in the first celebration of the International Day. The initiative of the Niger, as President of the Security Council this month, to hold a debate on attacks against schools as a grave violation of children's rights is of special significance.

More than 20 years have elapsed since the Council first considered the issue of children and armed conflict (see S/PV.4037). It is regrettable that a quarter of the children in the world are still living in countries affected by violent conflicts. For them, education could have been an opportunity to change their destiny and break the vicious cycle of violent conflict. However, in the past five years, attacks on educational facilities have killed or injured more than 20,000 students and educators. Ruthless wars and cruel terrorist activities have deprived children of their innocence and right to education and, worse still, have undermined the potential of social progress and development.

Schools cannot fall victim to violent conflict. The international community must act to create a safe space for every child to realize his or her dream. In this regard, I would like to emphasize the following four points.

First, school should be a place of peace, free from the transgression of armed conflict. Attacks on schools constitute one of the six grave violations against children's rights. The prohibition against attacks on schools, as provided for in international humanitarian law, is a redline that cannot be crossed. The civilian character of schools must be respected. Any attacks on schools, students and teaching staff as well as the use of schools for military purposes must be condemned in the strongest terms and be stopped immediately. China welcomes the presidential statement just adopted by the Council (S/PRST/2020/8) and encourages the Secretary-General and the relevant United Nations agencies to continue, in accordance with their mandates, to strengthen the monitoring and reporting of such attacks in conflict situations.

Secondly, we should increase investment in education to prevent schools from becoming a weak link vulnerable to violent attacks. Education is an important means of peacebuilding, as it helps countries in conflict realize their vision of peace as they embark on a path of sustainable development. All countries should prioritize the development of education and increase investment in educational resources, including building and strengthening school infrastructure and expanding the resiliency of school premises against risks and shocks. At the same time, we should combine legal and administrative means to prevent schools from becoming targets of armed attacks. The international community and the relevant United Nations agencies should, on the basis of full respect for the ownership of the countries concerned, actively help these countries

strengthen capacity-building and resolve, inter alia, practical difficulties in financing and technology.

Thirdly, education cannot wait. The learning opportunities for children in conflict should be guaranteed. Education should not be subject to forced interruption because schools are destroyed by war, given that being away from schools may expose children to more threats of violence. It is urgent to restore and rebuild school buildings to create favourable conditions for children to return to school. Digital technology and remote learning have the potential to open up more learning opportunities for children affected by conflict and minimize the negative impact of school closures. The international community should help countries in conflict bridge the digital divide so that remote learning benefits every child. Relevant United Nations agencies should strengthen coordination to form synergy in expanding digital education in conflict areas.

Fourthly, we must keep children away from gunfire and effectively take responsibility for the next generation. Only by preventing and resolving conflicts can we protect children from being harmed by armed conflicts. The coronavirus disease pandemic has exacerbated the plight of children in conflict areas. All parties should therefore continue to provide humanitarian assistance to children in conflict, take measures to alleviate the impacts of unilateral sanctions on children and make the greatest effort to ensure their health and safety.

China calls on all parties to conflict to heed the call of Secretary-General Guterres for a global ceasefire and to promote, through consultation and negotiations, the process of peace and reconciliation. The Council should earnestly fulfil its primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, strive to settle disputes and conflicts through mediation, and create a peaceful and stable environment for children to grow.

Education is the foundation of a long-term plan. China has always made the development of education a strategic priority. At the same time, it attaches great importance to providing educational assistance to other developing countries. In the past five years, China has helped build 123 schools and vocational training centres for fellow developing countries. In Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, a vocational school that China helped to build can accommodate 500 students studying mechanical automation, agricultural-produce

food processing, and other disciplines. In the town of Al-Majadel, in south-eastern Lebanon, Ali, an 11-year-old boy, drew a picture for Chinese peacekeepers after learning that they were there to help build a square and renovate classrooms in his school. The two peace doves in the picture carry the flags of China and Lebanon, respectively. Clearly, Ali deeply longs for and cherishes the opportunity to learn.

Children in conflict have already experienced too much undeserved pain and suffering, yet so long as there is education, there is hope. Let us join hands and try our utmost to guarantee each and every child the right to education and protect his or her safety and healthy growth. Therein lies the meaning of all our work, which is also the basic premise for building a better future.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): We would also like to thank the Niger for organizing today's important debate. We would also like to thank all the briefers for their comprehensive and eye-opening presentations.

As Indonesia has repeatedly underscored, children are not soldiers. They are our future. Therefore, their rights must be ensured to enable them to become our future agents of peace. Access to quality education is a right for children that gives them the foundation to contribute to peace and security.

However, observations today show that conflict is obstructing children's right to education. Schools, which have traditionally been safe places, are targeted. In 2019, almost 500 schools were under attack. Children are also often attacked while on their way to or from school. Teachers and educators have also been targeted, as mentioned by Ms. Virginia Gamba and Ms. Henrietta Fore. Indonesia therefore remains deeply concerned over the resulting alarming number of children denied access to quality education and the increasing attacks on schools, including in the Sahel region. The presidential statement (S/PRST/2020/8) adopted today clearly demonstrates our solid and firm support for the protection of children and schools. We thank the Niger and Belgium for initiating the statement. Against that backdrop, allow me to highlight three pertinent points on this matter.

First, with regard to strengthening national capacities on child protection, national Governments have the primary role to protect all children and provide their educational needs. By strengthening national capacities, including education budget facilities,

Governments would be able to develop specific provisions that protect children's rights, specifically their right to education. National legislation and legal frameworks would be geared towards the protection of children and their education. Child protection should also ensure that there is no discrimination in education. Girls should have the same rights as boys in education, as well as in all walks of life.

Indonesia is committed to ensuring the accessibility of education at all levels and for all students. Today, we have the fourth largest education system in the world, covering approximately 646,000 schools, 3 million teachers and 60 million students. Over decades, there has also been a significant improvement in school enrolment at all levels in Indonesia. Our current priority is to improve the quality and learning outcomes of education. We do not stop there. We also share our experience with many countries and assist in rebuilding schools in our neighbouring countries.

Secondly, regarding the importance of promoting a multi-stakeholder approach, the national efforts of Governments and the continued support of United Nations agencies, regional organizations and civil society organizations are equally important in restoring safe access to schools. We commend the work of UNICEF. We also commend the support of peacekeeping missions, which continuously work hand in hand to rehabilitate, repair and replace schools that have been subject to attacks. They also need to find innovative ways to provide education in conflict areas.

Indonesian peacekeepers have contributed to promoting education through teaching activities and educational videotapes and books. Our peacekeepers in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, as well as in many United Nations agencies, have also engaged with children through civil-military cooperation and the use of smart cars as a tool for mobile learning.

As we discuss this important issue, it becomes more pertinent to once again promote community engagement and training for peacekeepers related to the issue of child protection.

Thirdly, protecting schools has been a dire challenge in armed conflict. It is even worse during the coronavirus disease pandemic. While many schools are opening in many countries, including here, after months of the pandemic, schools in conflict areas are closed indefinitely. For them, education becomes a luxury, and less a priority, due to the economic difficulties and

security concerns as a side effect of the pandemic. They do not have the luxury of having a virtual or digital education, as in many developed countries; hence our job to ensure concrete action and support for children in armed conflict.

Children affected by conflict now face heightened vulnerabilities because of the pandemic. Restrictions to mitigate its spread become a challenge for educational activities and response to violations against children.

As mentioned in the concept note (S/2020/881, annex) for today's debate, we strongly support the preservation of and respect for the civilian character of schools, including during the pandemic. Any attack should be condemned.

Indonesia also reaffirms the call for a global ceasefire that may become a critical moment to rebuild schools in conflict situations. That is needed for development to proceed and prosper. We also appeal to all stakeholders and donors to enhance the contribution and assistance to countries in need to ensure that children can have their education.

This year also marks 20 years since the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Protocol strongly condemns direct attacks on objects that have a significant presence of children, particularly schools. The issue at hand is not really the access to education but the safety and security to be educated. Children are not soldiers. They are our future. Their place is in school to study and reach their full potential.

Ms. Farrey (United Kingdom): I would first like to thank the Niger for organizing this debate to discuss such an important issue and to mark the first-ever International Day to Protect Education from Attack yesterday. I also thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba, Executive Director Fore and Mr. Tsolakis for their contributions to this discussion. We extend our sincerest gratitude to Rimana for sharing her personal experiences and efforts to promote girls' education. Her testimony attests to the importance of children's participation in discussions concerning peace and security issues that concern them. We very much hope that we still have the opportunity to hear from Hadiza, and we very much support her work to promote education.

Education is a human right. It plays a vital role in building stable communities founded on mutual respect, greater understanding and equal opportunity. Yet increasing numbers of attacks against educational facilities gravely undermine that right.

We are deeply concerned by the global increase in attacks and threats of attack on educational facilities, including in Burkina Faso and Mali. We welcome the Secretary-General's decision to include Burkina Faso and Cameroon in next year's annual report on children and armed conflict. We call on all parties to conflict to respect and protect access to basic human rights, including quality education, and put in place measures to end and prevent attacks on educational facilities.

We know attacks on educational facilities disproportionately impact girls and are often intended to impede girls' access to education. This is particularly troubling, as ensuring access to quality education for women and girls at all levels, including in situations of armed conflict, is key to eliminating gender inequality and discrimination. Girls already face significant challenges in the Sahel region and globally, including high levels of child marriage, sexual violence and harassment, and attacks and threats of attack make them even more vulnerable to violations. Mass school closures globally because of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have also exacerbated these challenges, particularly for girls, whose access to education is even lower in crises.

This is why the United Kingdom calls for 12 years of quality education for all girls by 2030. The United Kingdom is harnessing the full breadth of its efforts — diplomatic, humanitarian, development and military — to protect education from attack. We are providing \$117 million to Education Cannot Wait, the global fund for education in emergencies, \$6.5 million of which we announced this year as an additional uplift to support COVID-19 specific emergency education in fragile contexts. Our commitment includes up to \$39 million specifically earmarked for the Sahel and neighbouring countries, helping up to 100,000 children, 50 per cent of whom are girls, receive the quality education that they deserve.

The United Kingdom has also endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and accompanying Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. These instruments recognize the power of safe, inclusive, quality

education, from childhood to adulthood, to establish routine and purpose in chaos, supporting post-conflict reconstruction, reintegration and peace. More than 100 Member States have recognized this and endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration as a key tool for protecting education in conflict. I would like to join others in congratulating Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on endorsing it yesterday.

We know that some Member States are concerned that the Declaration and Guidelines are inconsistent with or go beyond existing law. We conducted a full review and concluded that the Guidelines complement existing international humanitarian and human rights law, reflecting the best operational practice that the United Kingdom already follows and facilitating compliance by providing clear, flexible and practical guidance.

We applaud the tremendous efforts of the Niger and Belgium to ensure that reference to the Declaration has been included in presidential statement S/PRST/2020/8, adopted today, in spite of opposition. We strongly urge Member States that have not done so already to endorse the Declaration and commit to avoiding military use of educational facilities. We offer our full support and assistance to those who take these critical steps.

Finally, armed forces are essential to protecting students, teachers and educational facilities in conflict zones. The United Kingdom Armed Forces is one of the first in the world to have a dedicated policy on human security, integrating into military planning and operations the Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines and relevant Security Council resolutions. We strongly urge Member States to integrate guidance on military use of educational facilities into military planning and operations.

Protecting education from attack is a strong investment in our collective global future. It is time we took it seriously.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Kuzmin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I have asked for the floor again in connection with the statement made by the representative of Germany, in which he said that Russia and the Syrian regime continue their bombing. I would like to ask his purpose in making such accusations. Because he has not been working at the United Nations very long, he

may not know that, here in the Security Council, we must comply with the norms of diplomatic politeness and etiquette. We do not call the Government of a sovereign State a “regime”, at least not here.

With regard to the accusations, the United Nations is often subject to attempted abuse and manipulation aimed at promoting narrow political interests. The representative of Germany probably knows that, facing certain pressures, the United Nations established the so-called Board of Inquiry to investigate a series of incidents that have occurred in north-western Syria, but the Board has actually refuted the accusations of strikes by the Russian Armed Forces on civilian objects, including schools. We held a special press conference on this topic at the United Nations on 16 September 2019, at which we provided evidence. We also circulated as an official document of the Security Council the materials resulting from this investigation by the Russian Ministry of Defence that clearly and firmly refuted these accusations.

Unfortunately, it has become a regular practice to trust unverified, clearly false data. We call such information fake. I presume that the representative of Germany has a big problem with information sources.

We are very well aware why he so painstakingly conceals them. I assure the Council that Russia will continue to comply with its obligations under international humanitarian law. The representative of Germany has highlighted on several occasions that the Russian Air Force is using effective systems to verify its targets, which rules out the possibility of striking civilian facilities.

The President (*spoke in French*): The representative of Germany has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Sautter (Germany): I would just like to say two short things.

First of all, I am encouraged to hear from our Russian colleague that Russia is taking the legal obligations under which we all stand seriously. As is often the case in life, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Secondly, with regard to my remarks on Syria, I should like to say that I have nothing to add and nothing to take away from what I said.

The meeting rose at 12.15 p.m.