



Security Council

Seventy-fifth year

8721st meeting

Wednesday, 12 February 2020, 10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Goffin (Belgium)

Members:

China	Mr. Zhang Jun
Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
Estonia	Mr. Volmer
France	Mr. De Rivière
Germany	Mr. Schulz
Indonesia	Mr. Siregar
Niger	Mr. Aougi
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. Pierce
United States of America	Ms. Norman-Chalet
Viet Nam	Mr. Dang

Agenda

Children and armed conflict

Integrating child protection into peace processes

Letter dated 5 February 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2020/97)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Children and armed conflict

Integrating child protection into peace processes

Letter dated 5 February 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2020/97)

The President (*spoke in French*): I would like to welcome the presence of Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Smaïl Chergui, African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, and Ms. Jo Becker, Chair of the Advisory Board of Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.

Mr. Chergui is joining today's meeting via video-conference from Addis Ababa.

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

I wish to draw the attention of the members of the Council to document S/2020/97, which contains the text of a letter dated 5 February 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Belgium 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 will refrain from reading out the text aloud, but would note that in this statement the Security Council, among other things, welcomes the development of the United Nations guidance on child protection in peace processes, encourages the Secretary-General to disseminate the guidance and promote its use in United Nations peace and mediation processes, and encourages all the relevant actors involved in peace and mediation processes to use the practical guidance as a tool. 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/2020/3.

I wish to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, to whom I now give the floor.

The Secretary-General (*spoke in French*): On this International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, I am pleased to join the members of the Security Council to present the United Nations guidance for mediators, aimed at better protecting children in armed conflict. Simply put, children should never be involved in conflict. And yet, as Graça Machel stated in her landmark 1996 report,

[m]illions of children are caught up in conflicts in which they are not merely bystanders, but targets. (*A/51/306, para. 1*)

Children under the age of 18 make up more than half of the population in countries affected by war. Unable to protect themselves against its impact, those children are among the most vulnerable people. Approximately 250 million children live in countries impacted by a conflict. In 2018, more than 12,000 children were killed or maimed in conflict, the highest number since 1996, when the General Assembly created the post of Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. More than 24,000 cases of violence have been documented and verified, compared to 21,000 in 2017. Attacks on hospitals and schools deprive children of vital education, treatment and emergency care and force families to leave their homes. In war zones, children are often subjected to atrocities, including sexual violence and abduction. Some are trained to handle deadly weapons or are used as cooks or messengers. Such violence has long-lasting traumatic effects on children and the communities and societies of which they are a part. It fuels the resentment and frustrations that lead to extremism, creating a vicious cycle of tension and violence.

(spoke in English)

I thank the Council for its systematic engagement on this issue in several resolutions over the past 21 years. We have made some progress in raising awareness of violations, partly due to the monitoring and reporting mechanism established by the Council in 2005. The

statistics that the mechanism has yielded are incomplete, but they paint a damning picture and raise questions of responsibility and compliance. Over time, they have the power to change behaviours, prevent grave violations and protect children. My Special Representative is working to improve the protection of children, from the Central African Republic to Myanmar and Yemen and everywhere else in the world. South Sudan is an example of how the protection of children can bring parties to conflict together and build confidence and peace. Parties to the peace agreement signed the Comprehensive Action Plan to End and Prevent All Grave Violations Against Children with the United Nations, in the presence of my Special Representative in Juba last week. It comes at a crucial moment for South Sudan and has the potential to build confidence between the parties in the context of a peace process that, as members know, is facing many obstacles.

Elsewhere, 12 parties to conflict have been removed from the list of those responsible for violations after complying with their commitments under an action plan. Sustained advocacy has led to changes in the law and better cooperation with Government departments and the military. In Afghanistan, for example, child protection units have been established in every province and the recruitment and use of children has been made a criminal offence. Campaigns, including Children, Not Soldiers and the new ACT to Protect Children Affected by Conflict, have helped to bring about a global consensus that children should never be used in conflict. However, despite those efforts, the figures on grave violations against children in conflict continue to rise. Greater awareness and better monitoring do not account for that increase. It is the result of ongoing and worsening hostilities and the shameful disregard for civilian lives. We must all do more.

The practical guidance for mediators that we are launching today is the next step in our strategy to put children at the heart of protection, peacebuilding and prevention efforts. It recognizes that the children's needs and rights must be considered in all phases of conflict, from prevention efforts to mediation and recovery, through sustainable inclusive development. The guidance is based on principles that outlaw discrimination and put children's interests first. It provides the means for mediators and negotiators to conduct a children's rights-based analysis of conflict and welcomes the involvement and participation of children with the appropriate support. By integrating

specific measures to protect children in peace processes, we can achieve concrete results for children and for peace. When the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo ended the recruitment and use of children, it helped to build confidence and create momentum to move the peace process forward.

I thank all those who were involved in developing the guidance, especially my Special Representative, Ms. Virginia Gamba, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations, UNICEF and other stakeholders that have direct experience in the fields of mediation and child protection in civil society. I strongly encourage all Member States, regional and subregional organizations, mediators and other actors involved in peace processes to make full use of the guidance and to circulate it widely to achieve the greatest possible impacts. However, as important as this guidance is, it is not enough. I urge all Member States to take concrete actions to prioritize the protection of children affected by conflict at the national, regional and global levels, and my Special Representative stands ready to support all Member States in those efforts and, in particular, is doing so at the present moment in Mali, Syria and Yemen.

Last September, I stood on the north lawn of the United Nations complex and looked around at 3,758 backpacks that had been laid out by UNICEF colleagues to resemble a graveyard. Each backpack represented a child killed in conflict in 2018. Standing in the cemetery of dreams was devastating, and I am sure that many here experienced it for themselves. It is our fundamental duty as leaders to do everything in our power to protect children — our future — from the chaos and madness of wars that have nothing to do with them. Together we are beginning to make progress, but we need to continue on that path, and I urge members to make it a priority for the Council.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Chergui.

Mr. Chergui (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank you, Sir, and the Belgian presidency for including this important issue in our discussions. I would like to underline the exceptional nature of the address by His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, to the Security Council today. I know how great his commitment is to young people in general and to young people in fragile situations in particular. Reconciliation

processes in conflict-affected societies are of particular interest to him, and we agree. His statement in this Chamber will raise the profile of the noble cause of the protection of children in armed conflict, a topic that Belgium, like the African Union, has long been put on the international agenda at the United Nations but, above all, through His Majesty the King's support for UNICEF and development cooperation.

I also take this opportunity to welcome the commitment shown by Her Majesty Queen Mathilde. As Honorary President of UNICEF-Belgium and a Sustainable Development Goals Advocate, she has participated in numerous humanitarian missions, particularly on the African continent. Her Majesty has systematically emphasized the rights of children. I know how much the issue, particularly the question of physical and psychosocial rehabilitation for child victims of armed conflict, is close to her heart and I thank her for it.

(spoke in English)

I thank the presidency for the invitation to participate in this high-level debate on integrating child protection provisions in peace negotiations and peace and ceasefire agreements. Indeed, children must be at the heart of all our efforts to prevent and resolve violent conflict, including concrete measures to avert and respond to all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation. During peace negotiations, the best interests of children must be the first priority and no related decision should entail any further violence for them.

Conflict disproportionately affects children, who may become victims of forced participation in conflict or be killed, maimed, recruited, used, sexually exploited, trafficked or denied access to humanitarian assistance. Schools and hospitals are attacked, preventing children from accessing basic services, such as education and health care, in contravention of international law. It is imperative — in fact, integral to sustainable peace — that violations of children's rights be not only prevented but addressed before, during and after conflicts. Unaddressed violations of children's rights perpetuate a culture of impunity, injustice and lawlessness that may have given rise to the conflict in the first place and provide fertile ground for a relapse into violent conflict.

If guns are to be sustainably silenced in Africa, fundamental rights and liberties, including the rights and welfare of children, must be protected through the

rule of law. That is one of the principles that underpins the African Peace and Security Architecture and the African Union's efforts in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts in Africa.

Given the devastating impact of violent conflict on children and particularly on the erosion of their basic human rights and freedoms, it is critical that all actors engaged in mediation and peace processes incorporate child-protection language and provisions in peace agreements.

It is important to highlight that our Peace and Security Council, at its 491st meeting, held on 9 March 2015 in Addis Ababa, reiterated that the African Union should include children's interests in peace agreements, in the post-violence arrangements for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and truth and reconciliation commissions.

Over the years, the African Union and the regional economic communities and mechanisms have invested time and resources in ensuring that peace processes and peace agreements systematically address and prevent violations of children's rights, as well as provide for the meaningful participation of children in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts on the continent. There are several concrete examples of the efforts of the African Union and other partners in this regard, including the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi; the Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement; the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan; and last year's Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic.

In Burundi, in addition to a declaration that was agreed in December 2008, which mandated the parties to immediately and unconditionally release children recruited or used, the Arusha Agreement provided that no child shall be used directly in armed conflict and that children shall be protected in times of armed conflict. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, on its part, obliged its signatories to demobilize all children in their ranks, and a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration commission was established to oversee this. A provision in the 2015 South Sudan Agreement states that the parties shall offer special consideration to conflict-affected children and provides for a child-friendly transitional justice system. In the Central African Republic, where I had the honour to mediate the peace agreement, we addressed all violations against

children and provided a full-fledged monitoring and verification system headed by the African Union.

While our continental organization, the African Union, has this rich experience integrating child rights, protection and welfare into peace processes, we are yet to establish a standard framework or guidelines for doing so. That is why the African Union welcomed and participated in the high-level dialogue organized last year by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, in partnership with the Government of Belgium, in Brussels, to deliberate on a draft practical guidance on the integration of child-protection issues in peace processes.

In this regard, in addition to our zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse in peace-support operations, I welcome and am proud of the African Union's contribution to the Secretary-General's practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict. This will be an invaluable tool not only for African Union mediators and special envoys but also for African Union member States engaged in peace processes.

Let me reiterate once again my appreciation to Belgium and its King Philippe and Queen Mathilde for having created this timely opportunity for all of us to contribute to restoring precious smiles to our children's faces and to giving them hope for the future.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Chergui for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Becker.

Ms. Becker: I am honoured to address the Council today on behalf of the Watchlist of Children and Armed Conflict, a global network of human rights and humanitarian organizations devoted to protecting and promoting the rights of children in armed conflict.

In 1996, when Graça Machel delivered her seminal study on the impact of armed conflict on children (see A/51/306), she deplored the fact that up until then, no peace treaty had ever acknowledged the existence of child soldiers. Without such recognition, she said, there could be no effective planning for peace. Since then, the Security Council has repeatedly called for the inclusion of child protection in peace processes. But in reality, peace agreements that address child protection are still rare. They are the exception, not the norm.

The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict conducted an analysis of ceasefire and peace agreements to assess how well they addressed child protection. We were pretty discouraged by the results. We looked at all the documents in the Department of Political Affairs peace agreements database, going back to 1999, the year when the Security Council first took up the issue of children and armed conflict. The documents included peace and ceasefire agreements as well as declarations and other communiqués.

We found that of 444 documents, fewer than 18 per cent included child-protection provisions, and many of those did so only in the most general way — for example, by calling for the protection of women, children and other vulnerable groups. This simply is not good enough. We know that children suffer disproportionately in war; they also benefit less in peace.

Peace processes and agreements do more than end war. They establish a framework for transition and the political, social and economic agenda for peace. They establish priorities for post-conflict investment and resource allocation. When children are excluded, their needs and their rights become invisible. The result is underinvestment and a lack of critical programming. In such circumstances, we cannot be surprised if new grievances emerge and former child soldiers take up arms again.

Addressing the needs of conflict-affected children in peace processes is not just a moral or a legal imperative — it is crucial to a durable peace.

Our experiences with peace processes to date highlight some critical gaps. Peace agreements are most likely to address the issue of child soldiers, but they often fail to address justice for child soldiers as victims or accountability for the leaders who recruit them. This failure contributes to impunity and continued cycles of recruitment and re-recruitment.

Provisions on children associated with armed forces or groups are sometimes too narrow, focusing only on child combatants and failing to include girls or those who did not bear arms. In Liberia, for example, community groups needed to advocate after the signing of the 2003 peace agreement to ensure that disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) efforts included all affected children.

Despite the years of attention to the issue of child soldiers, some peace agreements still fail to

address them at all. The 2015 Bamako Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, for example, does not mention the issue or include children in its DDR provisions, despite high-level advocacy by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict.

Peace processes also fail to include channels for child participation. In South Africa, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that few children approached it to tell their stories until they convened special hearings for children and youth. Once organized, those hearings drew enormous input. Libya is another missed opportunity. In 2018, more than 75 public consultations for peace were held across the country, involving more than 7,000 Libyans. Special consultations were held for women, for university students and for the displaced, but none were specifically designed to include children.

Institution-building often ignores children. Guatemala's peace agreement, for example, included provisions to strengthen the justice system for adults, resulting in funding, training and monitoring. But justice systems for children were never even considered at the negotiating table and received no resources.

Some take the view that general provisions to benefit the population at large will automatically trickle down and benefit children, but our experience is that that is not the case. We have learned that specificity is essential. In that regard, we also have some good examples to learn from. One of the first peace agreements to address children was the 1999 Peace Agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. It called for particular attention to child soldiers, including the mobilization of resources and their inclusion in DDR efforts. That paved the way for the formal demobilization of nearly 7,000 children. Later studies found that the response in Sierra Leone was far more effective and integrated than in many other conflicts and that children who were demobilized appeared to be doing as well as other children in their communities.

As the Secretary-General mentioned earlier, Colombia is a particularly good model where an explicit agreement on the release of children under the age of 15 by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo helped build trust between the parties ahead of the Final Agreement for the Termination of Conflict and the Construction of a

Stable and Lasting Peace. The peace agreement itself references children dozens of times, with detailed provisions regarding health, early-childhood education, food security, including school feeding programmes, and a truth, justice and reparations system mandated to pay special attention to crimes against children.

Some peace agreements have included specific protections for schools, which are often targeted during armed conflict or used for military purposes. For example, the 2002 ceasefire agreement between Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stipulated that, within 160 days, school buildings occupied by either party would be vacated and returned to their intended use.

In 2016, based on broad consultations and analysis, Watchlist prepared a checklist for provisions related to children and armed conflict in ceasefire and peace agreements. The checklist inspired the United Nations and Member States to develop the guidance that is being launched today. Some of the key components that we identified include the following: prioritizing child protection in the agendas of peace talks from the very beginning; ensuring that all parties explicitly agree to end the six grave violations against children, including by naming them as violations of ceasefire agreements; including specific provisions for children associated with armed forces or groups, including adequate resource mobilization and inclusion in DDR processes; including protections for education, including agreements by parties to vacate and rehabilitate schools that have been used for military purposes; ensuring that children's needs and rights are adequately addressed and resourced in post-conflict programming, including their physical and mental health needs, education and vocational and economic opportunities; ensuring that transitional justice, accountability and reparations mechanisms specifically address violations against children and solicit children's views; and ensuring that monitoring and implementation mechanisms for peace agreements address all child protection provisions and provide for civil society participation to promote transparency and accountability.

We welcome the new guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict and encourage the Secretary-General to ensure its broad dissemination within the United Nations system.

Finally, the Security Council can also help ensure child protection in peace processes. We urge the Security

Council to take the following steps: first, request that all conflict analyses include an assessment of the impact of armed conflict on children to ensure that such issues are dealt with at the beginning of any peace effort; secondly, ensure that country-specific resolutions on peace processes emphasize the need for explicit and comprehensive provisions for child protection; thirdly, urge mediators, the United Nations, parties to conflict and other stakeholders to ensure the meaningful participation of affected children and that their views are taken into account; fourthly, ensure dedicated and adequately resourced child protection capacity in United Nations peace operations and political missions; fifthly, request the Secretary-General and United Nations Special Envoys to ensure that child protection is addressed in all reports on peace processes and the monitoring and implementation of peace agreements; and, lastly, as a foundation for accountability, insist that the Secretary-General's annual list of perpetrators of violations against children be accurate and evidence based, utilizing the data collected by the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict established through resolution 1612 (2005).

We appreciate the Security Council's attention to this important issue.

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

On behalf of the Council, I welcome His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, who will make a statement on behalf of the Kingdom of Belgium. I request the Protocol Officer to escort His Majesty to a seat at the Council table.

His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, was escorted to a seat at the Council table.

King Philippe (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Chergui and Ms. Becker for their enlightening briefings and calls to action.

Thirty years ago here in New York, King Baudouin addressed the Heads of State and Government gathered at the World Summit for Children on the occasion of the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. He recalled the importance of making Governments and the public aware of the fragility and vulnerability of children and the importance of their family environment. Since then, the United Nations has done impressive work to defend the cause of children affected by armed conflict. Belgium has made that

issue a constant priority of its foreign policy. Queen Mathilde has been dedicated to it for many years.

The subject remains a burning issue as geopolitical tensions have reached their boiling point since the beginning of the century. Today, one child in five suffers the negative impact of armed conflict throughout the world. That statistic cannot leave us indifferent. It represents real instances of girls and boys who are fleeing clashes, maimed, exploited, killed, sexually abused and recruited by armed groups — millions of young lives injured in both body and spirit.

Saving those children requires an ongoing policy, joint prevention and remediation efforts and the tireless marshalling of financial and human resources. We must help these children to recover and thrive. We must revive their hope and help them regain their lives. By listening to them, acknowledging their suffering and reintegrating them into society through unrelenting support, we will break the cycle of violence and make lasting peace possible.

In 1999, the Security Council adopted resolution 1261 (1999), the first of its kind on the situation of children in conflict. Since then, the Council has continuously called for peace processes to incorporate, from the outset, essential elements for the protection of children's rights. In several peace negotiations, the protection of children has received meaningful attention, which is to be welcomed, but inclusive processes remain the exception. Too often, the plight of children remains neglected. Their voices, rights and needs are hardly taken into account. We need to do much better. The future of societies affected by hostilities is at stake. Experience shows that, at times, parties to conflict can agree more easily on measures to assist children than on other issues. That focus on children can build trust. A child protection agreement can serve as a springboard and catalyst for broader agreements. It is with that in mind that the guidelines on the protection of children in negotiations and peace processes have been developed. Their integration into peace negotiations will lead to concrete improvements in the lives of children affected by conflict.

Belgium is deeply committed to multilateralism and the United Nations. My country is committed to defending, not its own interests, but the fundamental values that inspire the Charter of the United Nations and form the basis of decent societies. That sincere conviction is reflected in our contribution to the

work of the United Nations — in the participation of Belgian soldiers in peacekeeping operations and in our investment in all organs of the United Nations, including the Security Council. It is also reflected in the concern that brings us together today.

Every child has the right to grow up in a home and in a safe environment and to receive quality education. Every time we save a child from war, help her rebuild or return her to school, those dreams are again made possible. It is a lifelong victory. We facilitate reconciliation and, perhaps, even prevent the emergence of another conflict. That is the responsibility we all shoulder. The year 2019 marked the end of a very challenging decade for children in conflict zones. It is up to us all to ensure — with just and concrete measures — that 2020 marks the start of a decade of hope for all children.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, for his statement.

His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, was escorted from the Security Council Chamber.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to those other members of the Security Council who wish to make a statement.

Mr. Siregar (Indonesia): At the outset, I am honoured to warmly welcome Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians, together with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belgium, on the occasion of their official visit to the United Nations.

I am equally honoured to welcome the Deputy Foreign Minister of Estonia.

I would like to extend my appreciation to Belgium for organizing today's briefing. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General and the briefers for their comprehensive presentations.

We welcome the adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/2020/3, initiated by Belgium earlier today.

Today's briefing is timely. We witness children still bearing the brunt of protracted conflicts all over the world. There are more than 24,000 grave violations against children in 20 country situations. Those numbers are testament that today's agenda item remains a concern for all of us here.

My country has not turned and will not turn a blind eye to the needs of protecting children in armed conflict situations. Much has been done, but there are challenges ahead in ensuring child-rights-based protection in armed conflicts. In that context, let me underline three points for us in building pathways for child protection measures.

First, we must materialize our normative commitments into actions. We do not start from zero. Most of us here in the Council are parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. They laid normative foundations for our actions in child protection. The Council adopted resolution 2427 (2018), recognizing that child protection has to be specifically integrated into all peace processes, with strong emphasis on the best interests of children.

In that spirit, Indonesia has always been committed to implementing those normative foundations on the ground. Our peacekeepers, for example, consistently conduct child protection mandates within civil-military coordination activities by providing health care for children and their mothers and engaging children through sports, education and other social activities. True action speaks louder than words.

Secondly, child protection has to be addressed comprehensively. Child protection in armed conflicts should encompass all phases of conflicts, from preventing the six grave violations against children in armed conflict and breaking the cycle of child soldiers to advancing family- and community-based reintegration. That full cycle of comprehensive child protection measures has been integrated into United Nations peacekeeping mandates on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Having the largest child-protection section in any United Nations peacekeeping mission, Indonesian peacekeepers in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) have been actively engaged in conducting interventions to separate children from armed groups, including their repatriation, and preventing violations and abuses against children. Lessons from MONUSCO should also be replicated in all peacekeeping missions.

Thirdly, enhancing support on child protection measures is vital. Countries are not all on the same page in providing protection measures for children in armed

conflicts. International cooperation and the sharing of best practices in that area are necessary. All parties involved in a peace process should develop capacity, sensitivity and awareness to the needs of children. That includes parties to conflicts, mediators, negotiators, child advisers and humanitarian actors. On that note, we welcome the launching of practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict. The guidance would serve as an excellent tool to ensure child protection in peace processes. Indonesia looks forward to cooperating with other Member States to ensure better protection for children in armed conflicts.

Children are not soldiers. Children are our future. By ensuring children of their rights, we have invested in creating future peacebuilders and development drivers. By doing so, we invest in long and durable peace.

Mr. Volmer (Estonia): We thank Belgium for organizing today's meeting and all briefers for their excellent presentations. We also express our appreciation for the role Belgium plays in strengthening the protection of children in armed conflict, including through its leadership of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

The Security Council has repeatedly condemned the widespread violations and abuses committed against children in armed conflict. Over the past two decades, that has been accompanied by the Council's increasing and systematic engagement on the issue of the protection of children in armed conflict, including a clear recognition that child protection needs to be integrated into all peace processes. We are very grateful to Ms. Becker for the overview of the situation.

We strongly support this objective, but we have to agree that gaps remain in its translation into action. In peace processes child protection issues continue to be addressed on an ad hoc basis, with children's rights, specific needs and concerns insufficiently addressed. We therefore thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and all other contributors for the preparation of the practical guidance to protect children in situations of armed conflict. We see the guidance as a valuable addition to the instruments at our disposal, providing a systematized compilation of practical and concrete guidelines, including examples of best practices. We welcome the fact that the guidance is firmly based on international humanitarian and human rights law. We

also emphasize that the integration of child protection into peace processes needs to be gender-sensitive and take into account the needs of girls and boys.

Given the wide array of parties involved in peace processes, we appreciate that the guidance can be adjusted and drawn upon by various actors, including the United Nations system, regional and local organizations, and civil society. It is now equally important to ensure that the guidance is widely disseminated and integrated into ongoing and future peace processes. Estonia will contribute to that effort.

As noted in the guidance, we need to ensure accountability for all violations and abuses against children in armed conflict. We call on all States to exercise their criminal jurisdiction over the perpetrators of these crimes and to make further efforts to strengthen national and international accountability mechanisms. We recall that, under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the conscripting or enlisting of children into armed forces and sexual violence constitute war crimes.

We affirm our continued support for the work of the Special Representative and her Office, including the close cooperation between her Office and UNICEF. We also reiterate the need for the allocation of sufficient resources for United Nations child protection activities and the importance of child protection advisers in political and peacekeeping missions.

If left unaddressed, the violations and abuses committed against children in conflict have lasting negative consequences for children, their families and entire communities, leading to a continued cycle of violence and injustice. We see the guidance as one of the tools to help break this cycle.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I want to thank Their Majesties for graciously being with the Security Council today. It enhances the reputation of the Council to have them here. I also want to thank them for the amazing efforts that Belgium has long made on the issue of children in armed conflict. I am very pleased to be able to salute those efforts and the progress that this important dossier has made under Belgian leadership.

I also wish to welcome the ministers here today and thank them for being with us. Finally, I would like to thank the Secretary-General, Commissioner Chergui and Ms. Becker for their important briefings.

We have all seen and heard of the dreadful and lasting effects that global conflicts have on children, their communities and their future, so I will not repeat them. Instead, I would like to highlight a couple of case studies that really illuminate how this impact devastates children's lives.

In Syria, as stated in the recent report on children's rights by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, children continue to be "[r]obbed of their childhood and forced to participate in a brutal war" (*A/HRC/43/CRP.6, p.1*). They have been killed, maimed, raped, abducted and detained. They have been forced to act as combatants and, in the case of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), as executioners. Places where they are meant to be safe and nurtured, such as schools and hospitals, have been targeted.

Over 2.5 million children have been displaced in Syria, leaving many at the mercy of the elements and without adequate sustenance or services. And that trend is far from over. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock told the Council last week (see S/PV.8715), the bombardment of Idlib has seen the continued killing of civilians and attacks on civilian objects, and the displacement of more than 300,000 children in north-eastern Syria since early December alone. And, as the Commission of Inquiry report finds, the mental health of children is and will continue to be deeply affected for years to come. Children and young people have sustained crucial damage to their long-term prospects and a huge number have missed out on years of education.

Turning to Mali, children continue to suffer the effects of the ongoing conflict, particularly in central Mali, where they are killed and maimed as direct targets of attacks in the course of intercommunal violence. Insecurity, attacks and threats on schools and teachers, the absence of State authorities and a lack of equipment have led to the closure of more than 900 schools, at the last count. As with Syria, children are suffering both the immediate effects of conflict and long-term effects on their mental well-being, as well as a lack of access to services such as medical care and attention.

In Cameroon, the impact of conflict on children in the Anglophone region is significant. Children's education is used as a political bargaining chip by the separatists, who have closed down schools and taken children hostage. UNICEF estimates that 80 per cent of

schools have remained closed since 2016, and the ban on education has affected more than 600,000 children.

The scale of the impact of conflict on children is clear, but when it comes to peace and efforts for peace, their needs and their views are often neglected. That is why we welcome the launch today of the United Nations practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict. As the guidance points out, the Security Council has highlighted on numerous occasions the importance of integrating child protection issues into mediation and peace processes. Doing so is essential in order to ensure that negotiating parties commit to upholding their international, regional and national child-protection obligations; to guarantee that the special needs of children and young people are taken into consideration and embedded in efforts to build and sustain peace; and to improve the sustainability and success of peace efforts, given the central role of children's issues in reconciliation and development in post-conflict situations.

We welcome the Secretary-General's personal investment in the guidance and we look forward to its broad dissemination. I also take this opportunity to urge all mediators, facilitators and negotiators involved in peace and mediation processes to use it as a tool in their work, noting that engaging on issues of children and armed conflict may open doors to discussion of other priorities.

In the Arria Formula meeting that we hosted alongside Belgium and Poland in November, the United Kingdom called for the United Nations system to take a more holistic and coherent approach across its departments and agencies to ensure that child protection and development was integrated across the conflict cycle. This guidance is a very good example of that, and we hope there will be further efforts to integrate approaches across the United Nations system.

We would like to renew our calls for children's views to be taken into account on issues that affect them, in accordance with best practice, and for the Security Council to do more to implement resolution 2282 (2016), which recognizes that security, development and human rights are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, I wish to thank the Secretary-General for presenting the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations

of armed conflict, as well as the other speakers for their observations. I also welcome Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians. Their presence confirms Belgium's commitment to this issue, which has also been demonstrated through Belgium's extraordinary work as Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

We welcome the practical guidance, and commend the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and her team, as well as the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UNICEF, for preparing that document. The provisions on the protection of children should be a high priority in mediation processes. We are confident that this guidance will assist us in placing children at the heart of mediation efforts, thereby improving the chances for sustainable peace. We therefore encourage the Secretary-General to disseminate this guidance with a view to promoting its use in peace and mediation processes, and we encourage all actors involved in those processes, including civil society, to use it as an effective tool to channel the protection and rights of children into peace negotiations.

The growing number of children in armed conflict and the disproportionate way in which they are affected is terrifying. The severity and extent of the short- and long-term repercussions of armed conflict on children are a source of deep concern. Nevertheless, as we commemorate the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, that tool is inspiring and encouraging.

We are aware that addressing grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict is a sensitive issue that requires the skills necessary to address it. That is why, although we consider the guidance to be user-friendly and flexible, designed with confidence-building in mind and taking into account the context of the situation, it is also paramount for mediators to have an expert on the issue, or a staff member from UNICEF, the Office of the Special Representative or a child protection adviser, on their team.

It is essential to take into account the point of view of children, as well as to include provisions on their protection at an early stage in peace processes, thereby increasing the possibility of preventing future violations and ensuring their protection. One example of that is the peace process in Colombia, in which the

protection of children served as the starting point for dialogue with the armed groups.

Peace agreements should be not only reactive but also preventive. The protection of children must be included as a priority in the implementation of agreements. The sustainability and viability of peace agreements will depend largely on that. The number of peace agreements that make specific reference to child protection is very low. We hope that more peace and ceasefire agreements will include provisions pertaining to child protection. It is a matter of making it a regular feature of peace negotiations and agreements, as the Security Council has explicitly requested in resolutions on the subject.

The Dominican Republic has endorsed the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and the Paris Commitments, and has also joined the ACT to Protect Children Affected by Conflict campaign. The future of children affected by the conflict is threatened when warring parties continue to commit violations against them and impunity remains the norm. As former Executive Director of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Eva Smets, has emphasized, children are our reason to fight for the elimination of the worst aspects of war, but they are also our hope for success.

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): I deliver this statement on behalf of the three African members of the Security Council: the Niger, South Africa and Tunisia.

We would like to extend a special and warm welcome to His Majesty King Philippe, King of the Belgians, and Queen Mathilde, who have graced us with their presence today. We would like to pay tribute to the sterling work that they have done in the area of children and armed conflict.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome and thank Secretary-General António Guterres; the African Union (AU) Commissioner for Peace and Security, Ambassador Smaïl Chergui; and Ms. Becker, Chair of the Advisory Board of the non-governmental network Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, for their insightful briefings this morning. We would also like to welcome the presence of the Deputy Ministers in the Chamber.

We welcome the development of the practical guidance for mediators to better protect children in situations of armed conflict, and commend the

Kingdom of Belgium for convening this meeting and for the important work it is doing in its chairmanship of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

We believe that the protection of children should be addressed at all levels, including in preventive diplomacy, the mediation of peace processes and with regard to peacekeeping as an important part of the mandate of the protection of civilians. It is imperative that all concerned parties ensure that the protection, rights and well-being of children are integrated into peace processes, peace agreements and post conflict-recovery and reconstruction phases. That realization on the part of warring parties and mediators can be instrumental in fostering dialogue, building confidence among parties and assisting in bringing immediate and long-term benefits to children. We believe that ending and preventing conflict-related violations against children in armed conflict is not only a moral imperative, but that it also contributes to building sustainable peace.

We would like to underscore the important role played by local communities in the integration of children who have been affected one way or another by armed conflict. Communities remain the first point of contact for those children and therefore play a critical role in contributing to and paving the way for a better future for them. In that regard, it is imperative for such communities to be equipped with the requisite resources to ensure that all aspects, including child protection, counselling and skills to handle such cases, are made possible.

We have observed that not all resolutions regarding the issue include the perspectives of parents and their role as primary caregivers. In that regard, we, as the Security Council, should consider including the concept of the role of parents in the outcomes of the Council in the future.

We believe that the development of integration programmes for children who are affected by armed conflict should take into account the perspectives of the children themselves. It is within that context that national and local programmes should not disregard the experiences and voices of children; instead, those should be used to design and develop suitable programmes for affected children.

We recognize that in addressing grave violations against children in armed conflict, general approaches are often applied. It is imperative that Member States

also take into account country-specific situations, which may require tailored measures to address the issues.

The three African members of the Council are pleased with the efforts of the AU and subregional groups in advocating for increased focus on issues related to children and armed conflict and prioritizing the implementation of relevant continental protocols and charters. The inclusion of the protection of children against grave violations in political and peace agreements, such as in the case of the Central African Republic, is a significant development. Its implementation should demonstrate the benefits of such initiatives and will also serve as a model to be replicated in other conflict situations. As we continue to strengthen our efforts to silence the guns in Africa, we acknowledge that achieving Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, a prosperous Africa and a better life for African children will not be possible if wars and conflicts are not brought to an end and if the rights of the child are not protected.

We welcome the call for regional organizations to increase their capacity to address the multiple challenges brought about by the issues of children and armed conflict. We will continue to support all efforts throughout the conflict spectrum to address the plight of children, who are the most vulnerable in such situations.

The three African members of the Council would like to conclude with a quotation by former President Nelson Mandela, who said:

“Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation.”

That is true for all nations, because protecting the rights of children secures a better future for them. Every effort should be made at the national, regional and international levels to prevent and resolve conflicts through peaceful negotiations and mediation in order to secure our children’s future.

The three African members of the Council welcome and support the presidential statement presented by Belgium (S/PRST/2020/3).

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I thank the King of the Belgians for his participation in the Security Council today, as well as the Belgian presidency for taking the initiative to convene this meeting, which further demonstrates its

commitment to the protection of children in armed conflict. I commend in particular Belgium's work as Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, as we commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of its founding resolution (resolution 1612 (2005)).

Since 1999, the Security Council has called on all parties to conflicts to include the issue of child protection in their peace negotiations. In 2007, the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles called for the inclusion of child-specific provisions in peace and ceasefire agreements. Despite the significant progress that has been made in that area, the current situations in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, the Sahel, Afghanistan and elsewhere are a daily reminder that much remains to be done.

Today we welcome the official launch of the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict, which we have just endorsed. We thank the Secretary-General, his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and all those who contributed to the development of the practical guidance. It serves as a genuine toolbox that is flexible and adaptable. Negotiators and mediators will now have a compass to guide them in integrating child protection into their work.

The guidance also illustrates what France believes successful mediation should look like, namely, combining short-term diplomacy to pacify tense situations with long-term stabilization, which is essential for sustainable peace. Child protection makes it possible to provide for a long-term approach. We must take care to ensure that the guidance does not become a dead letter. All actors must take ownership of and unequivocally support its content — it is not just child protection specialists that are concerned here. This is a major challenge the guidance must tackle: its principles are well known, but not yet sufficiently disseminated or systematized. The issue of children in conflict needs to be mainstreamed, as we say in good French. In that connection, I would like to make the following three proposals.

First, Special Representatives of the Secretary-General should be systematically made aware of the principles of the guidance before taking office.

Secondly, they could present their actions and priorities in this area to the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in order to ensure that

child protection is taken into account throughout their mandates.

Thirdly, and finally, the issue of children in armed conflict could be a fully-fledged axis of cooperation between the Security Council and the African Union in the coming years.

In that regard, we cannot allow the measures put in place by the Security Council to be paralysed in any way. The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in armed conflict is more crucial than ever, and I call upon all those concerned to give it full effect. The Working Group in particular should be able to adopt its conclusions on Yemen, the Central African Republic and Afghanistan, which were negotiated several months ago. We also renew our call for the universal ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, as well as the endorsement of the Paris Principles and Paris Commitments.

France's commitment to protecting children in armed conflict situations is well known. It is a priority that we defend at the United Nations but also on the ground, together with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UNICEF and a highly committed civil society, represented by Ms. Becker. I commend their indispensable work and wish to assure them of our continued support and efforts in this area.

Mr. Dang (Viet Nam): Viet Nam would like to thank the Belgian presidency for convening this briefing. In particular, we express our gratitude to His Majesty King Philippe and Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of the Belgians for their presence here today. We also thank the Secretary-General and the other briefers for their insightful remarks.

Children's issues are always close to our heart. Viet Nam underwent decades-long wars. Our millions of then-children grew up in times of war and suffered its consequences, with many losing their lives. We left wartime behind half a century ago, but the pain of war is still strongly felt in many parts of our country. Paradoxically, hundreds of thousands of our children born many years after the end of those wars are the ones who continue to endure that pain, without even knowing what caused it. Such situations and far more heartbreaking ones are prevalent nowadays in many conflict-affected areas. The tragic situation of those millions of children is a poignant reminder of our

unfulfilled promise to protect our children and build a peaceful world for them.

The protection of children in armed conflict is therefore the crucial work of the Security Council, in line with its primary responsibility to maintain international peace and security. It is also the obligation of each and every of us here as a member of the international community. It is our moral imperative to defend our defenceless children.

Commitments have been made. Our primary focus now is to translate them into reality by taking concrete actions. We welcome the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict as an outstanding example in that regard. We commend the tremendous efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, her team and others for their meaningful work and believe that the practical guidance will contribute to better protection for our children. In that connection, let me share our observations on some of critical issues that the practical guidance touches upon.

First, the practical guidance should be a living document. The success stories of many countries shared in the guidance will surely inspire many more to come. Those moving testimonies show that, with genuine efforts, we can make a difference to the lives of millions of our children. In that regard, we welcome the recent signing of the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all grave violations against children in South Sudan. We encourage the continued compilation of experiences and lessons learned to further improve the guidance so as to make it more responsive to rapidly changing situations. We also hope that the guidance can be brought into full play at the national level with customized application in order to adapt it to the national context, while being mindful of the specificities of each situation.

Secondly, with regard to cooperation between the United Nations and regional organizations, it is obvious that the latter are reliable partners of the former in the maintenance of international peace and security in general and the protection of children in particular. As shown in the guidance, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development made great contributions to facilitating the implementation of action plans to end and prevent violations against children. Regional organizations, through engagement with the United Nations and their member countries, could serve as

bridge builders to connect national, regional and global efforts in a coordinated manner.

Thirdly, education is the cornerstone of reintegration programmes. With priority given to education, Viet Nam spares no effort to ensure children's access to education under any circumstances. During wartime, classes were held in any available place, be it in orchards, communal houses or even underground shelters. Those classrooms, though poorly made, not only helped our children overcome harsh war conditions but also nurtured in their hearts and minds a pure love for peace and a fervent hope for a better future. When it comes to reintegration programmes for children formerly associated with armed groups, education is also the best way for them to break obsessions of the past and regain the childhood and future they deserve.

More than 20 years has passed since our first debate on children and armed conflict (see S/PV.3897). Much has been achieved during those two decades, but much more needs to be done to save millions of children. The Security Council needs to demonstrate its responsibility, both through words and actions. We express our strong support for the presidential statement that was just adopted (S/PRST/2020/3). We look forward to its effective implementation.

Ms. DeShong (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): We join other members in thanking the King and Queen of the Belgians for participating in this meeting. We welcome the Foreign Ministers of Belgium and Indonesia and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Estonia. We also thank Secretary-General Guterres, Commissioner Chergui and Ms. Becker for their briefings.

With children constituting approximately half of the population of countries ravished by war and conflict and an estimated half of the world's refugee population, remediating the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on children remains critical to the work of the Security Council. As signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines stands in solidarity with Security Council members in endorsing the use of child-centred, gender-aware and gender-responsive comprehensive strategies in peace processes and post-conflict settings. We welcome the production of the adaptable practical guidance for mediators as part of the Council's essential child protection- and child empowerment-related peace and development work.

We are well aware of the atrocities committed against children, as chronicled in various Secretary-General reports, since the emergence of the children and armed conflict mandate, in 1996, and the Council's subsequent adoption of 12 resolutions, between 1999 and 2018, on all six of the grave violations against children. However, it is worth reminding members that in 2019, in spite of our work and that of Governments, civil society, communities and families, the killing and maiming of children reached a global record since the monitoring system's creation, in 2005. As we heard earlier from Ms. Becker, children also suffer the worst effects when schools and hospitals are attacked and when humanitarian access is denied.

The rate at which children continue to be abducted, recruited and used in active hostilities, including as suicide bombers, has continued unabated in several conflict-ridden regions. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remains particularly concerned about the recruitment and use of children. We are also deeply troubled by the high levels of reported cases of sexual violence against children, in particular girls, even while sexual violence in conflict remains underreported owing to stigma, lack of services and concerns over the protection of victims and survivors. That problem is exacerbated by endemic impunity and a lack of accountability for perpetrators at the individual, community and State levels.

The Security Council has articulated frameworks across its various mandates to address accountability and reparation. We regard mediation as a key mechanism in securing remediation and reparation for survivors, as a strategy for sustainable healing and as a means through which to ensure violations against children are prevented from occurring in the first place. Mediation provides a space where parties to a conflict assume ownership and responsibility for the final resolution, thereby increasing the likelihood of a lasting peace. However, as noted in the guidance document presented today, that can be compromised in the absence of child protection-focused analyses, the requisite resource persons with child-centred expertise, tailored psychosocial and reintegration strategies for children and respect for the right of children to be heard.

The practical guidance for mediators is an important document that can assist with mainstreaming child protection-focused action in confidence-building measures, security arrangements, governance and transitional justice systems and peacebuilding

processes. We agree with the representative of Viet Nam that it should be a living document, constantly updated with examples of good practice.

Children represent more than 20 per cent of our world population, but 100 per cent of our future. We cannot sit idly by while future generations face such uncertain prospects for life and livelihood. There can be no greater purpose to which we commit ourselves.

Mr. Kuzmin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Belgium for its initiative to convene today's meeting. We also thank His Majesty King Philippe for his encouraging and powerful statement, and Their Majesties for their efforts in the area of child protection. We further thank the Secretary-General and the briefers for their contributions to today's discussion.

The topic of child protection is of paramount importance to the Russian Federation. We attach great importance to the activities of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. It is a unique mechanism, currently headed by Belgium, which, for 15 years now, has facilitated more effective protection of children in conflict and has helped ensure accountability for violations and prevent future violence.

In various countries around the world engulfed in hostilities, children continue to endure brutal violence. Terrorists do not shy away from using even small children and bringing them into their ranks. Systematic recruitment of minors, denial of access to education and violence against children have become commonplace. The international community must not tolerate this situation. The hostages of terrorists' criminal activities also include their own families, their wives and children, who are stigmatized and discriminated against by society. No children caught in that devastating maelstrom should be marginalized by society. They have the right and should become full members of society once again. Their rehabilitation and reintegration is a crucial aspect of the children and armed conflict agenda today. This is an area where different state actors, civil society and international organizations can cooperate successfully and effectively, while complementing each other's efforts.

The Russian Federation fully understands the importance of reintegrating children affected by conflict. Of course, the priority here is our citizens, who, by a twist of fate, have found themselves in an exceedingly difficult situation. Since 2018, the Russian

Federation has spared no effort to ensure the return of Russian children from battlegrounds in Iraq and Syria and to ensure their ongoing rehabilitation. Many of those minors are trapped in prisons alongside their mothers, under investigation or having had prison terms of varying lengths handed down for participation in terrorist activities the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

More than 150 Russian children have already successfully been evacuated from Iraq and Syria. Just a few days ago, the Russian ombudsman on children brought 26 children out of Al-Hol refugee camp. Another nine children will be brought back to the motherland in the very near future. These efforts are ongoing.

Today a number of States are beset by armed conflict and are making meaningful efforts in this regard. Their positive example should serve as inspiration for others, yet they need support from the international community in the form of respectful, constructive dialogue in a manner that fully upholds the principles of State sovereignty.

The Special Representative, Ms. Gamba, at the request of the Security Council, has crafted voluntary guidance, which should undergird the efforts of the United Nations and its Member States both in addressing reintegration issues and, on the whole, incorporating child-protection issues in conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery.

Our hope is that, with this new mechanism, there will be more examples of the successful reintegration of child combatants, addressing the plight of children in conflict and improving the protection of children. Our overall efforts in the Security Council should foster progress to that end, for the benefit of children and our future.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): Once again China would like to welcome the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence of Belgium, Mr. Philippe Goffin, and is pleased to see you presiding over this meeting. I also thank His Majesty King Philippe of Belgium for his statement. I wish also to thank Secretary-General Guterres, Commissioner Chergui and Ms. Becker for their respective briefings.

China welcomes the presidential statement just adopted by the Security Council (S/PRST/2020/3) and appreciates the efforts made by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children

and Armed Conflict to promote the development of the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict.

Children represent the future and the hope of our world. They deserve the maximum protection and also happen to be the most vulnerable group. In 1999, the Security Council adopted its first resolution on children and armed conflict (resolution 1261 (1999)), which strongly condemned the targeting of children in armed conflict and called on all parties concerned to put an end to such practices.

For more than 20 years, the United Nations and the international community have made unremitting efforts to protect children in armed conflict, and this issue has received increasing attention. However, reality indicates that what we have done is still far from enough. Armed conflicts and terrorist activities continue to spread and, as a result, many children have been denied carefree childhoods, and others are struggling in difficult situations of violence, fear, hunger, disease and displacement.

The fundamental approach to protecting children from the harm of armed conflict is to stop and resolve armed conflicts. Disputes should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation on an equal footing, and the use or threat of force must be avoided. Greater attention should be paid to conflict prevention and the promotion of peace processes. In this regard, the special needs of children should be fully taken into account so as to ensure that children are free from the harm of conflicts and that their rights, including the right to education, are safeguarded.

The Security Council should in full earnest discharge its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and remain committed to facilitating the political settlement of conflicts through mediation. China firmly supports the Security Council in the fulfilment of its mandate under the Charter of the United Nations and continues to play an active role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, so as to allow children around the world to grow up in a peaceful, secure and stable environment.

The priority now is that countries in conflict should assume primary responsibility for protecting children in armed conflict. All parties to a conflict should prohibit the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The United Nations and the international community should fully respect the leadership of the countries concerned,

maintain close communication and coordination with them, support their capacity-building, mobilize international resources to address their practical difficulties, such as funding and technology, and promote their effective implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Since 2018, within the Framework of the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, the Chinese Government has provided financial and technical assistance to countries including Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to train officials and improve capacity-building in the area of child protection. Those efforts have produced positive results.

Going forward, a comprehensive strategy is needed to make the return of children to their families, schools and society a priority in post-conflict reconstruction. Even if children survive conflict, many of them may relapse into tragic situations owing to physical or mental-health issues and lack of education. China calls on the international community and the relevant United Nations agencies to work closely to support post-conflict countries in peaceful reconstruction, economic and social development, as well as the resettlement, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration of former child soldiers, in order to ensure that children have access to basic social services and can enjoy their rights to health and education.

Since 2000 China has helped Africa build more than 200 schools. Chinese medical teams have been saving lives and treating children in many parts of Africa, and many touching stories have been told of their devotion. It is worth mentioning in particular that the Chinese peacekeeping contingent deployed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been participating in the construction of the SOS Children's Village in the city of Bukavu since 2005. Despite the contingent's rotations over the years, its assistance to local children in the form of providing supplies and medical service has continued uninterrupted.

We hope that all countries will provide concrete support and continue to work to help the children of the affected communities and address the practical difficulties that they are facing in their daily lives. China stands ready to work with the international community in the maintenance of international peace and security, improve the situation of children in armed conflict and

provide all children worldwide with a shared future of peace, stability and happiness.

Mr. Schulz (Germany): I thank Their Majesties for the honour of their presence at today's Council meeting, and I thank Belgium for having arranged this briefing on a very important topic. Minimizing the impact of armed conflict on the lives of children requires our undivided attention. Therefore, let me express our heartfelt gratitude to Belgium for its tireless efforts to keep the rights of children at the top of the Council's agenda.

I wish also to extend a special welcome to the Ministers attending this morning's meeting, and I would also like to thank the Secretary-General, Commissioner Chergui and Ms. Becker for having shared their valuable insights. Their accounts have once again reminded us of the fact that the issue of children and armed conflict is more pressing than ever. More than 420 million children worldwide are affected by conflict.

Germany therefore very much welcomes the launch of the practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict. The guidance for practitioners is needed to support those working in the field dedicated to ensuring that the protection and welfare of children are taken into account in all aspects of peace negotiations and agreements. Our commitment to children's rights remains firm, and we see our engagement in the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict as an important part of that. Germany is also proud to support UNICEF as one of the largest donors with its contributions especially dedicated to programmes in countries dealing with conflicts and crises in order to support the resilience and perspectives of children.

Many previous speakers have reminded us of the impressive achievements that have been realized in the past years. At the same time, we are all aware of the immense challenges that we continue to face in this context. I would like to refer to a few of the most pressing challenges.

First, too many children are in need of immense resilience in too many places on the Security Council's agenda. We are deeply concerned about the many cases of sexual- and gender-based violence. Our humanity is measured by how we protect the weakest, and it is obvious that we still have a long way to go. Although there is constant underreporting, owing to difficult

verification, the official statistics remain appallingly high. Those crimes require an adequate and resolute response. In line with resolution 2467 (2019), we need to ensure non-discriminatory and multisectoral assistance to all child survivors of sexual violence, as well as to children born of rape. That must also include access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Secondly, it is shocking to see that, more than 10 years after the adoption of resolution 1882 (2009), there still seems to be no end in sight for the killing and maiming of children. The Secretary-General has identified Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen as cases of particular concern. We continue to call for abolishing the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Yet in Syria alone air strikes, barrel bombs and cluster munitions have killed and maimed thousands of children, as just confirmed in the recent disturbing report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/43/CRP.6). The Commission's report on Syria documented the large-scale increase of aerial operations and ground offensive causing damage to key civilian infrastructure. As initiators of resolution 1998 (2011), on attacks on schools and hospitals, we condemn all such attacks on civilian objects in breach of international humanitarian law. We urge all States to sign on to the Safe Schools Declaration.

Together with its international partners, Germany continues to work hard to ensure that international humanitarian law is applied so as to prevent all grave violations. In that regard, we recall resolution 2427 (2018), which reminds all parties to armed conflict to comply strictly with the obligations applicable to them under international law for the protection of children in armed conflict. In echoing resolution 2427 (2018), let me also stress the need for accountability for all violations and abuses against children in armed conflict. All States need to continue to address impunity by strengthening national and international accountability mechanisms.

Germany reiterates its fullest confidence in the work of the International Criminal Court in ensuring accountability, as well as its support for international investigative mechanisms, such as those set up by the Human Rights Council. The well-being of children should be at the centre of all our actions. We need to ensure that children affected by armed conflict are able to participate in community-based programmes anchored in the child's rights approach that complements accountability mechanisms.

In view of the broad range of challenges, of which I just mentioned a few, we need to use all means, tools and instruments at our disposal, particularly in the field. Much of the concrete field-level work on the issue of children and conflict is entrusted to child protection advisers in United Nations peace operations. With the continued consolidation of protection functions in field missions, Germany renews its call to preserve that important function as a distinct role and for United Nations missions to be adequately resourced in that regard.

As was said earlier, we commend the work of Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba and her leadership role in the development of the practical guide for mediators to better protect children in armed conflict. The simple truth is that child protection requires the efforts of the entire international community. We therefore also welcome the efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to cooperate with the European Union, as well as NATO, where we have established the position of Senior Child Protection Adviser.

In conclusion, it is important that we today renew our commitment to delivering peace and access to basic services and education to a whole generation of children suffering in conflict situations around the world.

Ms. Norman-Chalet (United States of America): On behalf of the United States, as the host nation of the United Nations, we warmly welcome His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen of the Belgians to the United Nations and New York. We also warmly welcome you, Mr. Minister, and thank you for presiding over the Security Council today. We thank the Vice Foreign Minister of Indonesia and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Estonia for being here with us today as well.

There is perhaps no group of people harmed more by the absence of peace and security than children. In most cases, they are the most vulnerable among us. We therefore deeply appreciate the efforts of Belgium to highlight global child protection, including through leading consensus on conclusions on Syria, Burma and the Sudan and by chairing the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict since last year.

We also thank Secretary-General António Guterres, Commissioner Chergui and Ms. Becker for their briefings today. Yesterday Ambassador Craft (see S/PV.8717) noted that how we allocate our time defines

what we believe is important, and their presence here today affirms the importance of integrating the children and armed conflict agenda into our discussion on peace processes and conflict prevention. We thank them.

The importance of doing so was also reaffirmed by the Council in August 2019 (see S/PV.8591), as it has been by members, numerous resolutions and presidential statements since 1999. In August, we reiterated that those who suffer the most in war are often children and that our discussions about armed conflict cannot ignore the devastating impact that it has on them. We are hopeful that both the frequency of the Council's Working Group meetings and Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba's engagement and advocacy involving parties to armed conflict will increase.

Continued meetings, signed action plans and briefings like today's will all help generate needed progress. We should see the Council's unity on this issue as an opportunity to better protect children from armed conflict. And, by engaging with armed groups, building trust and offering alternatives to violence, as allowed by our mandate, the United Nations and other regional organizations, including the African Union and the European Union, can create new possibilities for sustainable peace. Today's adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/2020/3 recognizes just that.

As we see in countries around the world, conflict prevents children from achieving their potential and saddles them with burdens that no young person should have to carry. For example, in South Sudan most children have never known peace, but only the threat of violence, abduction and abuse. A pause in political violence has created space for advocacy, including the action plan signed last week. But the best protection for children in South Sudan will not come from an action plan; it will come from President Kiir Mayardit and Mr. Machar sitting down and negotiating a lasting peace. Today we call on South Sudan's leaders to finally

put aside their differences and prioritize the hopes of their nation's children.

In Colombia, the United States is dismayed by continuing violations and abuses against children. Yet recent trends give reason for optimism, as the Final Agreement for the Termination of Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace and the demobilization of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia are clearly improving circumstances for the nation's young people. Amid the regional fallout of the crisis in Venezuela, we also applaud President Duque Márquez's efforts to protect the children and Venezuelan refugees, including by granting citizenship to those born in Colombia.

In addition, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Nations efforts to extricate child combatants from armed groups have led to the signing of agreements to disarm and demobilize. In the Central African Republic, the engagement of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission with armed groups appears to offer the same inroads for education and change.

But beyond country situations on the children and armed conflict agenda, we are deeply concerned about the fact that at least 600,000 children in Cameroon have not been able to safely attend schools in the country's English-speaking regions for more than three years. That is a stark reminder that mediation requires follow-through to prevent children from once again falling prey to the deadly cycles of violence.

The Council has a duty to speak out on behalf of children, for they are our future and our hope. But to realize a future of greater safety and prosperity for all children, there must be meaningful action. That is what makes the children and armed conflict agenda so critical, and we are grateful for the opportunity to discuss its implementation today.

The meeting rose at 11.50 a.m.