

Article

Six grave violations against children in times of war

How children have become frontline targets in armed conflicts.

UNICEF



JN073959/Clarke for UNOCHA

Available in: English [Français](#) [Español](#) [العربية](#)

26 August 2021

From widespread killing, maiming, abduction and sexual violence to recruitment into armed groups and strikes on schools and hospitals, as well as essential water facilities – children living in conflict zones around the world continue to come under attack on a shocking scale.

To better monitor, prevent, and end these attacks, the United Nations Security Council has [identified and condemned](#) **six grave violations against children in times of war**: Killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups; attacks on schools or hospitals; rape or other grave sexual violence; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children.

To mark the 25th anniversary of Graça Machel's report on the impact of armed conflict on children, UNICEF has [released a statement](#) with the Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict calling for urgent action to protect children in war.

Armed forces and armed groups are required by international humanitarian law to take measures to protect civilians, including children, who are particularly vulnerable during times of war.



© UNICEF/UN0332638/Rose

A girl leans on a crutch at a displacement camp in Sévaré, Mali.

1. Killing and maiming of children

Killing and maiming of children can be a result of direct targeting or indirect actions, including torture. Killing and maiming can occur through crossfire, landmines, cluster munitions, improvised or other indiscriminate explosive devices or even in the context of military operations, house demolitions, search-and-arrest campaigns, or suicide attacks.

For example, the use of explosive weapons – particularly in populated areas – continues to have a devastating impact on children. In 2020 alone, explosive weapons and explosive remnants of war were responsible for at least 47 per cent of all child casualties. Between 2005 and 2020, more than 104,100 children were verified as killed or maimed in situations of armed conflict, with more than two-thirds of these verified since 2014.



© UNICEF/UN0202141/Rich

Two children recruited by an armed group stand during a ceremony for children who have been released in Yambio, South Sudan.

2. Recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups

Recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups refers to compulsory, forced, or voluntary conscription or enlistment of children into any kind of armed force or armed group. Children continue to be recruited and used by parties to conflict at alarming rates. The use of boys and girls by armed forces or armed groups can be in any capacity, including as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers and spies, or when they are subjected to sexual exploitation.

Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher. The UN Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting, or their equivalent, verified the recruitment and use of at least 1,000 children in at least 15 different countries over this period.



© UNICEF/UN0300571/Filippov

A girl looks up in a classroom in eastern Ukraine.

3. Attacks on schools or hospitals

Attacks on schools or hospitals include the targeting of schools or medical facilities that cause the total or partial destruction of such facilities. Schools and hospitals should be protected spaces, where children are safe even in times of conflict, yet continued attacks on such facilities have underscored the catastrophic impact of armed conflict on children's rights, including rights to education and health.

Between 2005 and 2020, the United Nations verified more than 13,900 incidents of attacks, including direct attacks or attacks where there has not been adequate distinction between civilian and military objectives, on educational and medical facilities and protected persons, including pupils and hospitalised children, and health and school personnel.

These attacks not only put children's lives at risk, but also disrupt their learning and limit their access to medical assistance, which can have a lifelong impact on their education, economic opportunities and overall health.



© UNICEF/Kokic

A girl presses her hand against the wire mesh of a window in Nigeria.

4. Rape or other grave sexual violence

Rape or other grave sexual violence includes acts of rape, other sexual violence, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, enforced prostitution, forced marriage or pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or sexual exploitation and/or abuse of children. In some cases, sexual violence is used to intentionally humiliate a population or to force people from their homes.

Between 2005 and 2020, parties to conflict raped, forcibly married, sexually exploited, and committed other grave forms of sexual violence against at least 14,200 children. However, the widespread stigma around rape and sexual violence means it is a particularly under-reported issue affecting children in conflict. Sexual violence disproportionately affects girls, who were victims in 97 per cent of cases from 2016 to 2020.



© UNICEF/UN0202117/Rich

A boy who was abducted by an armed group looks out of a window of a UNICEF-supported childcare centre after being released, in South Sudan.

5. Abduction of children

Abduction of children refers to the unlawful removal, seizure, capture, apprehension, or enforced disappearance of a child either temporarily or permanently. Whether it's an intentional act of violence or retaliation, to instill fear among populations, or to forcibly recruit and/or sexually abuse children, abduction is one of the most pervasive violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

Between 2005 and 2020, at least 25,700 children were verified as abducted by parties to conflict. Boys account for three quarters of verified instances of abducted children. However, girls remain at risk of being abducted, including for the purpose of sexual violence and exploitation. In many cases, children who are abducted are also victims of other grave violations, such as killing, maiming, sexual violence or recruitment into armed groups. They might also be held hostage or arbitrarily detained.



© UNICEF/UNI200697/Filippov

Unexploded ordnance is pictured in a suburb of Donetsk, eastern Ukraine.

6. Denial of humanitarian access for children

Denial of humanitarian access for children includes the intentional deprivation or impediment of humanitarian assistance essential for children's survival by parties to the conflict, including willfully impeding the ability of humanitarian or other relevant actors to access and assist affected children in situations of armed conflict.

The United Nations verified at least 14,900 incidents of denial of humanitarian access for children between 2005 and 2020, with eighty per cent of those verified cases taking place from 2016 to 2020, underscoring enhanced efforts to document and verify these incidents. Warring parties often deny humanitarian actors access to those in need or prevent assistance from reaching civilian populations. Civilians are also denied aid when humanitarian workers are targeted and treated as threats.

Between 2005 and 2020, more than 266,000 grave violations were verified against children, committed by parties to conflict in more than 30 conflict situations across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The actual number is undoubtedly far higher as access and security constraints, as well as the shame, pain and fear that survivors suffer often hamper the reporting, documentation and verification of these violations.

What UNICEF is doing



© UNICEF/UN0326770/

A Syrian refugee holds a box of supplies in Lebanon.

UNICEF and partners are continuing to provide care and protection for children living through war, advocating on their behalf, and engaging with all parties to conflict to ensure their rights are upheld. In addition to providing emergency and longer-term assistance to children, UNICEF and its partners have also trained governmental officials and parties to conflict on child protection, and raised awareness with governments, communities, and families on the risks facing children in armed conflict.

However, we need sustained public and political pressure to ensure children are no longer targets in war. That is why UNICEF has issued a call to action to protect children in war. Read [UNICEF's change agenda for protecting children in armed conflict](#).

Related topics

[Exploitation of children](#)[Sexual exploitation](#)[Humanitarian Action and Emergencies](#)[Children's rights](#)[Armed conflict](#)[Global](#)

More to explore

 [Appeal](#)

Humanitarian crisis grows for world's children

As UNICEF launches record appeal, converging forces of conflict, climate change, poverty, and the impact of COVID-19 are undoing decades of progress

[View the appeal](#)

 [Statement](#)

26 August 2021

Joint statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore and Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict Virginia Gamba on the 25th anniversary of Graça Machel's seminal report on the impact of war on children

[Read now](#)





Programme

UNICEF in emergencies

Humanitarian action is central to UNICEF's mandate and realizing the rights of every child.

[Explore our work](#)



Appeal

Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal

UNICEF is working to reach the most vulnerable children and families with life-saving support

[View the appeal](#)

UNICEF Home

[What we do](#)
[Research and reports](#)
[Stories and features](#)
[Where we work](#)
[Press centre](#)
[Take action](#)

About us

[Work for UNICEF](#)
[Partner with UNICEF](#)
[UNICEF Executive Board](#)



- Evaluation
- Internal Audit and Investigations
- Transparency and accountability
- Sustainable Development Goals

Related UNICEF sites

- UNICEF Blog
- UNICEF Data
- UNICEF Parenting
- Voices of Youth
- Global Shared Services Centre
- Support UNICEF
- ЮНИСЕФ на Русском

BECOME A DONOR



Contact us Legal

Report fraud, abuse, wrongdoing