
STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN
Changing the odds
Save the Children

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their potential. In over 110 countries, we help children stay safe, healthy and keep learning. We lead the way on tackling big problems like pneumonia, hunger and protecting children in war, while making sure each child's unique needs are cared for. We know we can't do this alone. Together with children, partners, and supporters, we work to help every child become whoever they want to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Alvhild Strømme with support from colleagues across the Save the Children movement who provided cases, expert comments and review.

We would like to thank the research team from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) – Siri Aas Rustad and Gudrun Østby – for their background reports and analysis. We would also like to thank Professor Robert Doya Nanima and Dr Angela Nkatha Mutema for their analysis.

This report was made possible from contributions from Norad - the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation.

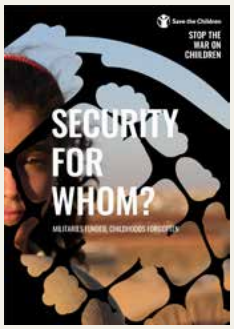
© Save the Children 2026
Cover page design: Afarin Alsharif
Graphic design: Afarin Alsharif

This publication is copyrighted, but may be reproduced by any method without fee or prior permission for teaching purposes, but not for resale. For copying in any other circumstances, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher, and a fee may be payable.

Want to explore the data we make use of here in more detail? Check out:
stopwaronchildren.org

Save the Children

PREVIOUS REPORTS ON THE WAR ON CHILDREN



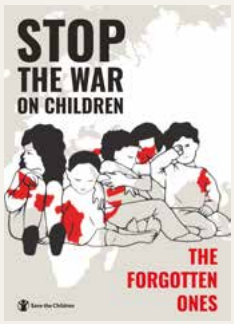
Stop the war on children – Security for whom? Militaries funded, childhoods forgotten, 2025



Stop the war on children – pathways to peace, 2024



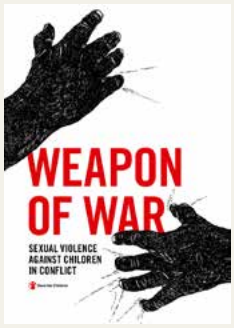
Stop the war on children – let children live in peace, 2023



Stop the war on children – the forgotten ones, 2022



Stop the war on children – a crisis of recruitment, 2021



Weapon of war – sexual violence against children in conflict, 2021



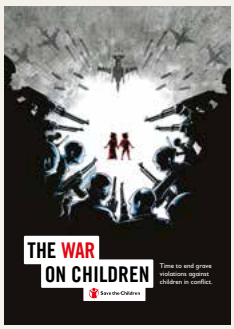
Stop the war on children – killed and maimed, 2020



Stop the war on children – gender matters, 2020



Stop the war on children – protecting children in 21st century conflict, 2019



The war on children – time to end grave violations against children in conflict, 2018

Photo used on cover:

Sami, 13, a young boy from Taiz, Yemen. Sami was shot while playing near his home.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)
PHOTO: AHMED ALBASHA / SAVE THE CHILDREN, 2025

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 8

1: MORE CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES 10
- The number and Proportion of Children Exposed to Conflict is Growing 10
- The Intensity of Conflict Impacting Children 11
- In Some Regions the Proportion of Children Living in Conflict Zones Has Grown Significantly 12

2: TWENTY YEARS OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN 16
- Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict in 2025 16
  - The Gendered Nature of Violations 18
  - Box: Interconnected Grave Violations in Sudan 18
- Twenty Years of Verified Grave Violations Against Children 20
  - Box: Children's Lives and Futures Under Attack in the Occupied Palestinian Territory .. 24
- Monitoring Visibility and Humanitarian Access 24
  - Box: The Long-Term Needs of Children Returning Home to Iraq 25
  - Box: Researching Children Soon After a Crisis in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso 25
  - Box: Preventing Recruitment: Lessons from Somalia and South Sudan 26
  - Box: Transferring Children from Security Settings into Care in Burkina Faso 26
  - Survivors of Child Recruitment in Colombia Share their Experiences 28

3: INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS: PROGRESS UNDER PRESSURE 32
- Accountability for Violations Against Children 33
- Putting Protection Commitments into Practice 34
  - Box: From Commitment to Accountability: National Laws on Child Recruitment in Africa 34

4: PROTECTION IN THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WARFARE 38
- New Technologies Mean New Risks for Children 38
- Digital Recruitment 38
  - Box: Preventing Recruitment in Digital Environments: Lessons from Colombia 39
- Children and Blast Injuries 40

RECOMMENDATIONS 42

METHODOLOGY 44

ENDNOTES 46

FOREWORD

In Yemen this past July, I met Mohammed, a teenage boy who travelled miles every day to attend a temporary learning space run by Save the Children. He was articulate and engaging, questioning me about books on leadership and recommending his own. Yet he told me that every year he deliberately fails his exams.

If he passes, he must leave school. Beyond its walls, he feared being drawn into conflict or dangerous work. School offered friendship, learning and safety. He was holding on to it the only way he felt he could. No child should have to make that choice.

This report shows that almost one in four children worldwide live in an area affected by conflict, compared with one in ten in the mid-1990s. What could be more important than their protection? Children's rights and needs must be at the centre of decisions about war, peace and security, and their protection is a core priority.

Every day, my colleagues meet children who want what Mohammed wants: peace, safety, time with their families, a chance to learn and a future they can look forward to. These aspirations should be at the centre of the decisions that shape their lives, instead children's rights and needs are too often pushed to the margins of negotiations about war, peace and security.

More than twenty years after the United Nations established its Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, this report documents sustained exceptional levels of harm. Almost 39,000 grave violations were recorded in our analysis of UN reporting for 2025. Behind these figures are children recruited and used by armed forces and groups, abducted, killed, maimed or subjected to sexual violence. They include attacks on schools and hospitals, and restrictions that prevent lifesaving assistance from reaching children.

These violations affect children whose bodies are still growing, whose identities and understanding of the world are still taking shape. The harm can endure a lifetime.

More than twenty years of monitoring have made violations visible and created opportunities to prevent further harm. This work must be protected, supported and translated into action. Governments and parties to conflict must uphold the laws of war. Those responsible for violations must be held accountable. Humanitarian assistance must reach children, and sustained investment must support their protection and recovery.

Examples of progress in this report show that change is possible. It requires political commitment, resources and persistence to reach and stay with children and communities, in emergencies and beyond.

When I think of Mohammed, I think of his curiosity and ambition. The children I met in Yemen spoke of becoming teachers, engineers, doctors and community leaders. Their hopes have survived years of conflict. Our responsibility is to help make those futures possible.

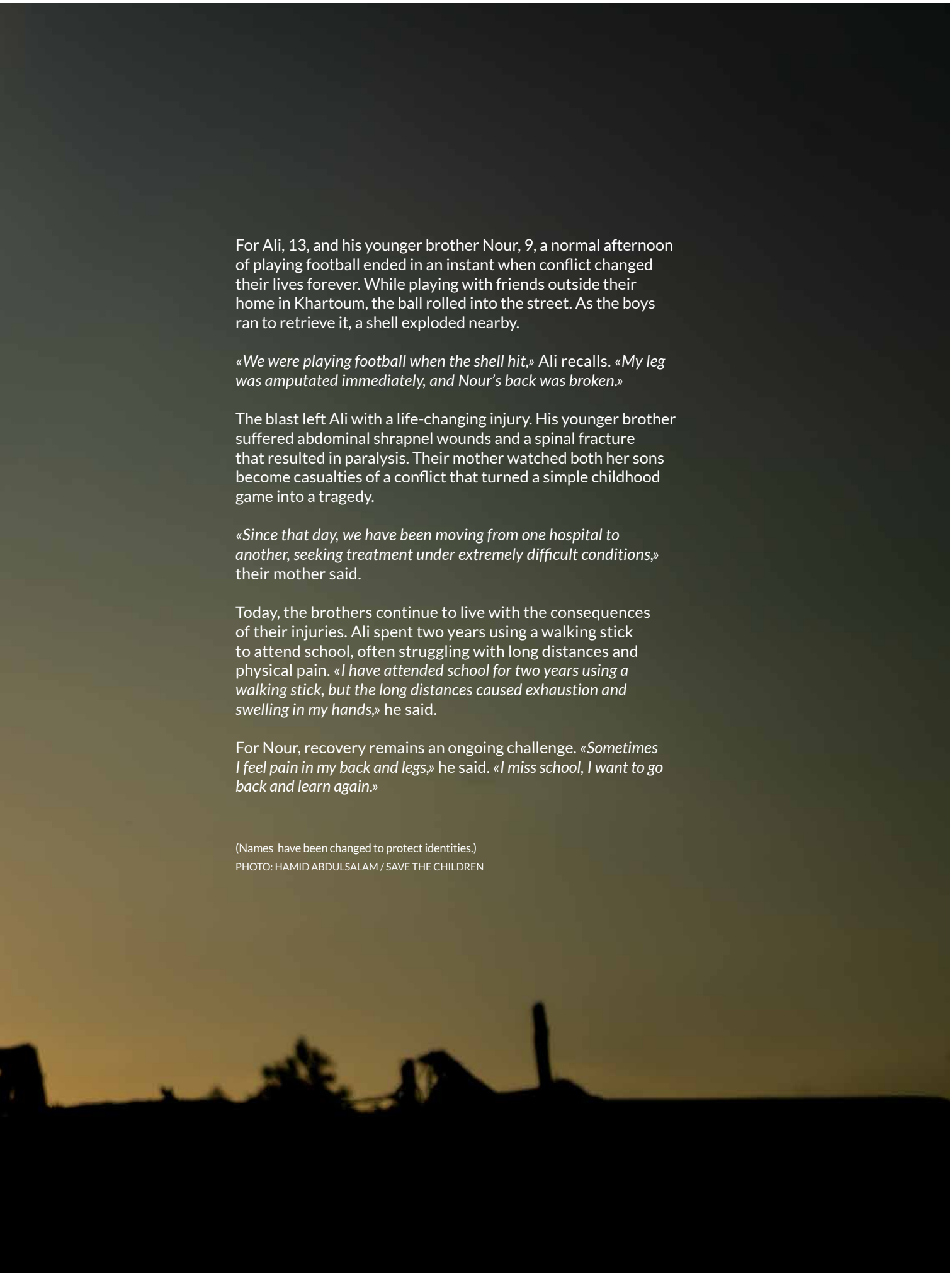
Children are clear about what they want. We must make their protection central to our decisions and work towards the peace they deserve.

Inger Ashing
Chief Executive Officer, Save the Children International



Adel, a young boy from Taiz, Yemen, faced severe hardships due to war, leading his family to flee to Al Musaymir. Displaced and struggling, they lost access to basic necessities and Adel had to stop attending school to collect firewood for survival. Fortunately, Save the Children provided critical support, including cash aid, allowing his father to invest in a motorcycle for reliable income. This enabled Adel to return to school and receive emotional support, ultimately bringing stability to their lives.
(Names have been changed to protect identities.) PHOTO: AL-BARAA MANSOOR





For Ali, 13, and his younger brother Nour, 9, a normal afternoon of playing football ended in an instant when conflict changed their lives forever. While playing with friends outside their home in Khartoum, the ball rolled into the street. As the boys ran to retrieve it, a shell exploded nearby.

«We were playing football when the shell hit,» Ali recalls. *«My leg was amputated immediately, and Nour's back was broken.»*

The blast left Ali with a life-changing injury. His younger brother suffered abdominal shrapnel wounds and a spinal fracture that resulted in paralysis. Their mother watched both her sons become casualties of a conflict that turned a simple childhood game into a tragedy.

«Since that day, we have been moving from one hospital to another, seeking treatment under extremely difficult conditions,» their mother said.

Today, the brothers continue to live with the consequences of their injuries. Ali spent two years using a walking stick to attend school, often struggling with long distances and physical pain. *«I have attended school for two years using a walking stick, but the long distances caused exhaustion and swelling in my hands,»* he said.

For Nour, recovery remains an ongoing challenge. *«Sometimes I feel pain in my back and legs,»* he said. *«I miss school, I want to go back and learn again.»*

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

PHOTO: HAMID ABDULSALAM / SAVE THE CHILDREN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost a quarter of the world's children now live in conflict zones, more than at any time since records began in 1990. The suffering of children affected by armed conflict is one of the most pressing political and humanitarian concerns today. Yet it remains one of the most neglected.

Children suffer disproportionately during conflicts. Their smaller, still-developing bodies are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of explosive weapons. Their minds, still forming their sense of self, safety and understanding of the world, experience trauma differently, with potentially lasting effects on their development. These impacts can jeopardise children's entire childhoods, with consequences that persist long after hostilities end, sometimes for generations.

The risk of poverty increases, support networks are weakened and children can be separated from their families. Vital services are often disrupted and schools closed, forcing children to miss key educational milestones and impacting their futures. Eating well and accessing vital healthcare can become incredibly difficult. This can all have a devastating impact on children's mental health and that of their care givers.

Save the Children's latest report in the *Stop the War on Children* series identifies the scale of children's exposure to conflict and the harm they experience. It draws on analysis of grave violations against children documented under the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) between 2005 and 2025, as presented in the Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict. This is combined with updated estimates from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) of children living in conflict zones, defined as areas within 50 kilometres of a conflict incident in a given year.

Twenty years into UN MRM reporting, grave violations against children in conflict remain exceptionally high. Protection systems are under strain. Humanitarian funding is declining and some states are retreating from treaty commitments and accountability mechanisms at a time when the need for them is greater than ever. Children's experiences are being overlooked and when investigations into violations do occur, they often lack specialist expertise and resources.

«I don't want a life different than other children in the world, just the exact same rights and opportunities.»

- Girl in Gaza

International humanitarian law entitles children to special respect and protection. Yet the way the law is applied, and the tools used to protect civilians, remain largely designed around adults, often overlooking children's distinct vulnerabilities. Changing warfare and emerging technologies create further risks that existing protection measures have yet to adequately address.

Closing these gaps requires sustained action across prevention, response and recovery. Drawing on what Save the Children staff across the world are seeing, examples throughout this report show how clear responsibilities, trained personnel, functioning services, children's meaningful participation, sustained political commitment, humanitarian access and predictable funding can strengthen protection.

KEY FINDINGS:

More children than ever are living through conflict

- **In 2025, 589 million children, almost one out of four children worldwide, lived in conflict zones.** This is the highest number recorded since 1990 and a significant increase compared to 2021, when one in six children grew up in conflict zones.
- In both **Africa and the Middle East, approximately two in five children lived in conflict zones** in 2025.
- Children's exposure has risen steeply in Africa. The share of children living in conflict-affected areas in Africa increased more than threefold between 2010 and 2025. **Africa accounted for 44 per cent of all children living in conflict zones worldwide in 2025.**

Twenty years of reporting reveals sustained harm

- **Since reporting began in 2005, the UN has verified 442,241 grave violations against children**

in conflict. In 2025 alone, 38,967 violations were verified.

- 171,712 children have been killed or maimed since 2005. More than 70 per cent of cases were committed against children in five countries: the occupied Palestinian territory, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.
- **Denial of humanitarian access** rose from 509 verified incidents in 2015 to 8,322 in 2025, a sixteenfold increase in ten years.
- In the past five years, cases of abductions increased by 50 per cent, from 3,460 cases in 2021 to a record 5,128 in 2025.
- Verified attacks on schools and hospitals have risen every year since 2019, reaching 2,930 in 2025.

Commitments to protect children are under pressure

- In 2025, five European states initiated withdrawal from the Mine Ban Convention, and Lithuania's withdrawal from the Convention on Cluster Munitions took effect, and three African states and Venezuela announced their intention to withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Chad formally notified the UN of their intention to withdraw from the ICC in 2026.

Save the Children calls for action across three pillars:

1. Uphold international standards of conduct in armed conflict.
2. Hold perpetrators of violations to account.
3. Take practical action to protect children and support their recovery.

Children have the right to live free from violence. Changing the odds requires political choices that put children's safety first, and a sustained commitment to stop the war on children.

Stop the War on Children: Changing the Odds is the eleventh report in the *Stop the War on Children* series from Save the Children.

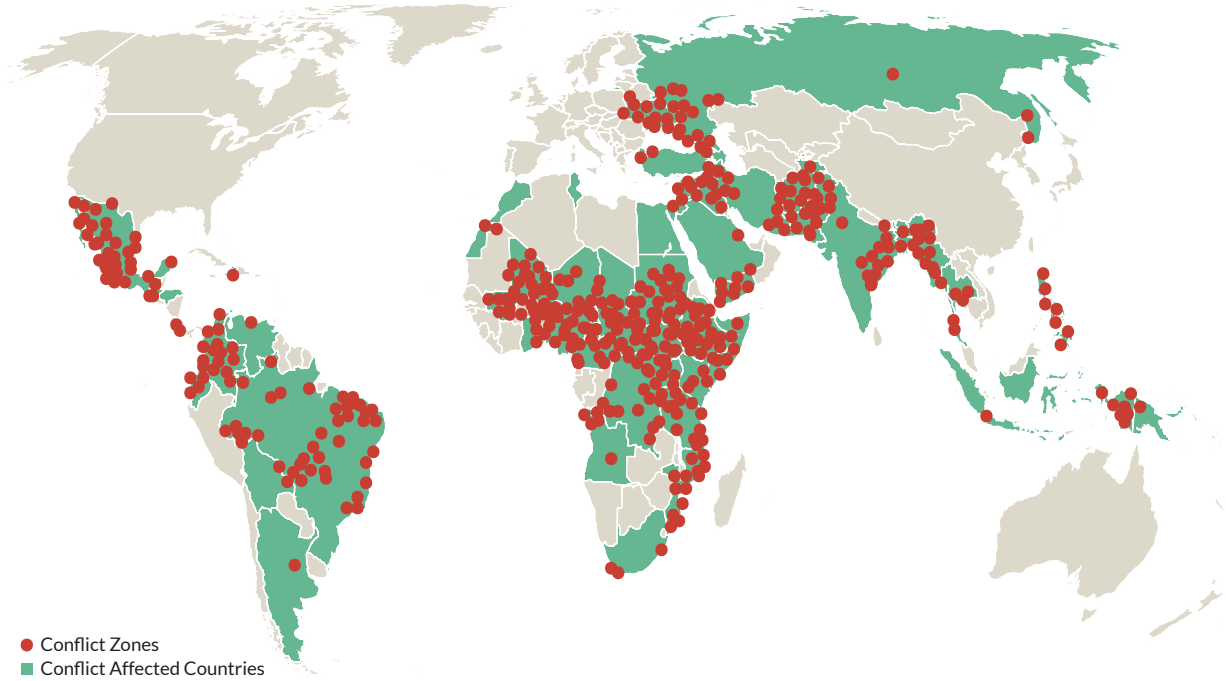
The full report can be found on stopwaronchildren.org.



Saleem, 14, lost his father, beloved sister, nephews, home, school and his favourite teacher when the war started in Gaza in October 2023. According to his is mother Raghda (35), Saleem was especially close to his sister and her children. As soon as he heard the news of their deaths, he withdrew and stopped talking to people. (Names have been changed to protect identities.) PHOTO: SACHA MYERS / SAVE THE CHILDREN

1: MORE CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES

FIGURE 1: CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AND CONFLICT ZONES, 2025.



CREATED BY PRIO, USING UCDP GED, DATASET V.23.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS.

The number of children's lives blighted by conflict is increasing. **An estimated 589 million children, almost one child in four,[1] lived in a conflict zone in 2025**, defined as within 50km of a conflict incident in any given year. This is the highest number and share ever recorded in PRIO's data series, which extends back to 1990, and represents a 7 per cent increase from the revised estimate for 2024.

PRIO's update, commissioned by Save the Children, allows us to examine how children's exposure to conflict has changed over time and across regions and to measure the different levels of conflict intensity. The findings show both the growing geographical reach of organised lethal violence and the scale of the challenge to protect children.[2]

THE NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF CHILDREN EXPOSED TO CONFLICT IS GROWING

Approximately 1.5 billion children, or 60 per cent of the world's children, lived in a conflict-affected country in 2025.[3] This number has remained relatively stable over the past four years. However, conflict is often concentrated in particular areas within

countries, making proximity to recorded violence a more specific measure of exposure.

Using this measure of proximity to recorded violence, an estimated **589 million children lived in conflict zones in 2025.** Both the number and the proportion of children exposed to conflict have increased substantially over time. **The global share of children living in conflict zones more than doubled from approximately 10 per cent in the mid-1990s to 23.4 per cent in 2025.** The increase reflects more than growth in the world's child population as a larger proportion of children now live near lethal conflict events.[4]

DEFINITIONS:

Battle-related deaths: The use of armed force between organised actors in a conflict, be it state-based or non-state, resulting in deaths. We use the term to include both combatant and civilian deaths, and adults and children.

Conflict incidents/events: A conflict event is defined as a lethal incident, either a violent clash between armed actors, state-based or non-state based, or an attack on civilians by armed actors, at a given time and place.

Number of conflict affected children: The number of children living in conflict zones

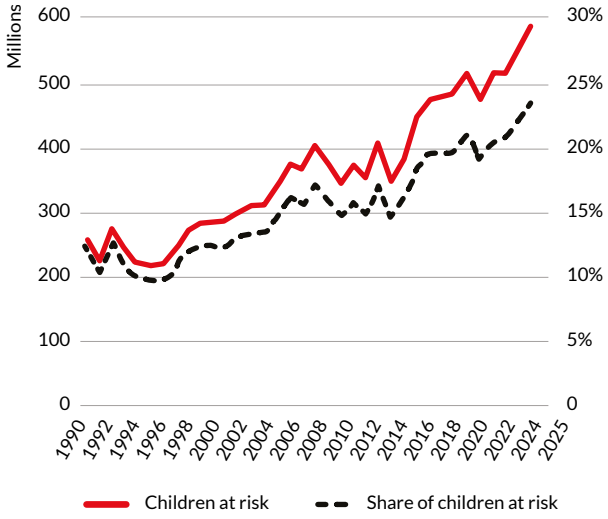
Share of children who are conflict affected: The proportion of children within a country or a region living in conflict zones, relative to the overall child population.

Conflict zone: An area within the borders of a country and within 50km from where one or more lethal conflict events took place in a given year.

Intensity in a conflict zone is defined by the number of battle-related deaths within 50km from where one or more lethal conflict events took place in a given year.

- 1-24 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (low-intensity conflict zone)
- 25-99 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (medium-intensity conflict zone)
- 100-999 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (high-intensity conflict zone)
- 1,000 or more battle-related deaths in one calendar year (extreme-intensity conflict zone)

FIGURE 2: THE NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES 1990-2025.



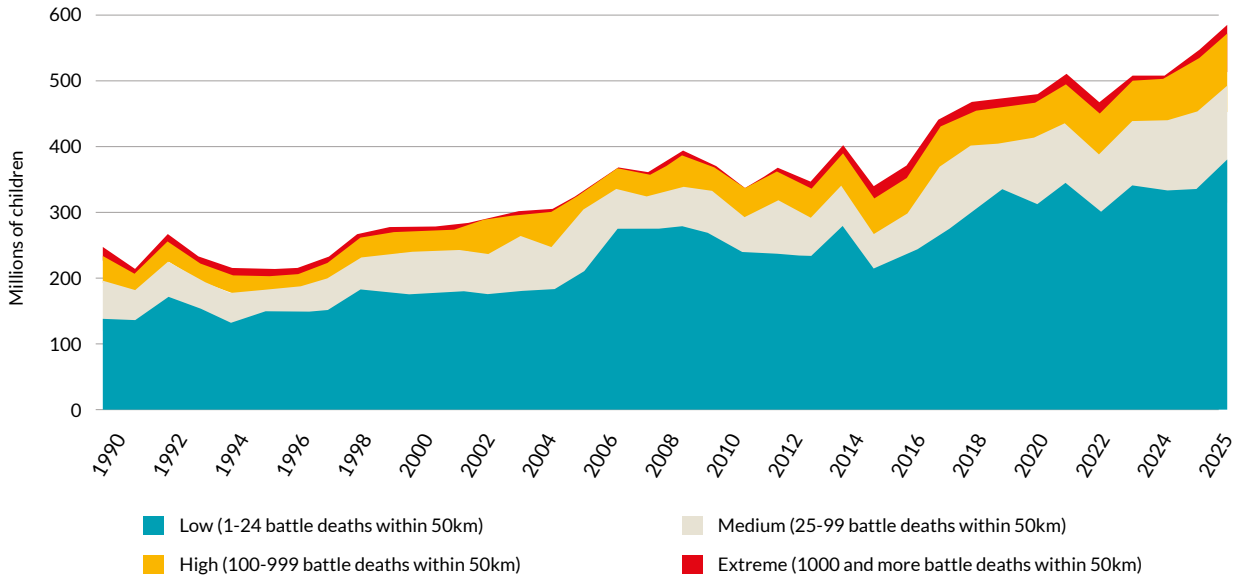
SOURCE: UCDP GED DATASET V.26.1, CIESIN (2018) GRIDDED POPULATION OF THE WORLD AND UN (2024) WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS.

THE INTENSITY OF CONFLICT IMPACTING CHILDREN

Children's exposure to conflict varies considerably according to the intensity and location of violence. In 2025, approximately 355 million children, 60.4 per cent of all children in conflict zones, lived in countries where at least 1000 people were killed in conflict that year. A further 30.1 per cent of the conflict-affected children lived in *countries* where between 25-999 were killed, while 9.5 per cent lived in countries where between 1-24 people were killed in conflict.

Measuring intensity locally produces a different picture. Approximately 66 per cent of children living in conflict areas lived in low-intensity zones, another 18.5 per cent lived in medium intensity conflict zones, while 14 per cent lived in high-intensity conflict zones. Around 1.5 per cent, or approximately 9 million children, lived in areas of extreme conflict intensity where at least 1,000 battle-related deaths were recorded in 2025.

FIGURE 3: THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES BY CONFLICT ZONE INTENSITY, 1990 – 2025.



CREATED BY PRIO, USING UCDP GED, DATASET V.23.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS.

IN SOME REGIONS THE PROPORTION OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES HAS GROWN SIGNIFICANTLY

From a regional perspective, the proportion of children living in conflict zones presents a different picture. Africa had the largest number of children living in conflict zones in 2025, with approximately 260 million. Asia followed with 177 million, then the Americas with 69 million, the Middle East with 67 million and Europe with 15 million.

Absolute numbers show the scale of exposure, but regional proportions reveal how widespread it is for children. **In both the Middle East (40.2 per cent) and in Africa (39.2 per cent) around to in five lived in conflict zones in 2025**. This is the highest share recorded for Africa since 1990. The corresponding proportions were 24.2 per cent in the Americas, 14.3 per cent in Asia and 10.6 per cent in Europe.

The Middle East recorded a particularly sharp increase, from approximately 52 million children living in conflict zones in 2024 to 67 million in 2025 - an increase of almost 29 per cent.

FIGURE 4: THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES IN 2025, BY REGION.

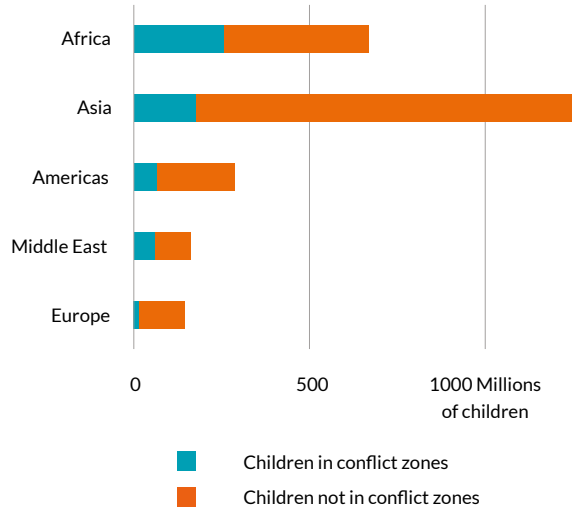
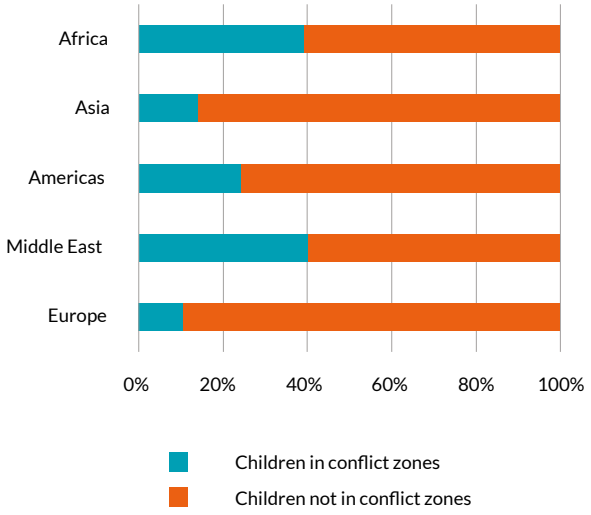
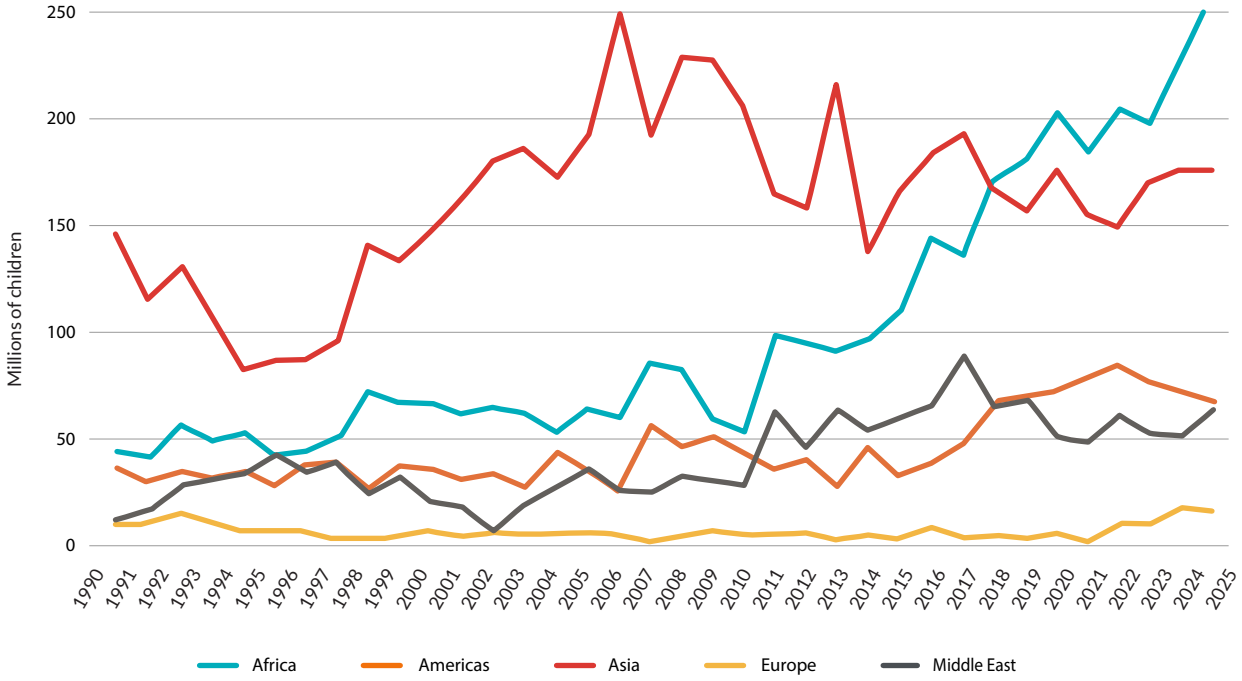


FIGURE 5: THE PROPORTION OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES IN 2025, BY REGION.



CREATED BY PRIO, USING UCDP GED, DATASET V.23.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS.

FIGURE 6: THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT 1990-2025, BY REGION.



CREATED BY PRIO, USING UCDP GED, DATASET V.23.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS.

CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO CONFLICT IS RISING SHARPLY ACROSS AFRICA

There has been a sharp increase in children's exposure to conflict in Africa over the past 15 years. **The proportion of children living in conflict zones rose from 12 per cent in 2010 to 39 per cent in 2025**, more than tripling. In 2025, Africa accounted for 44 per cent of all children living in conflict zones globally, an increase of 6 percentage points from 2024.

This pattern reflects both the growing number of conflicts on the continent, and demographic factors. Many African countries have particularly large child populations, meaning that children make up a substantial share of those exposed to conflict. By comparison, Africa accounted for 34% of the global population of all ages living in conflict zones. The difference illustrates how children's exposure to conflict is disproportionately concentrated in Africa.



Lana (10) had to flee her home in Idlib, Syria in the middle of the night when conflict escalated: *«We woke up frightened. Didn't expect the bombardment. We were scared. My father carried my two sisters, and we left the village. We spent a few days then came back. We didn't know how to live, sleep, eat or drink.»*

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

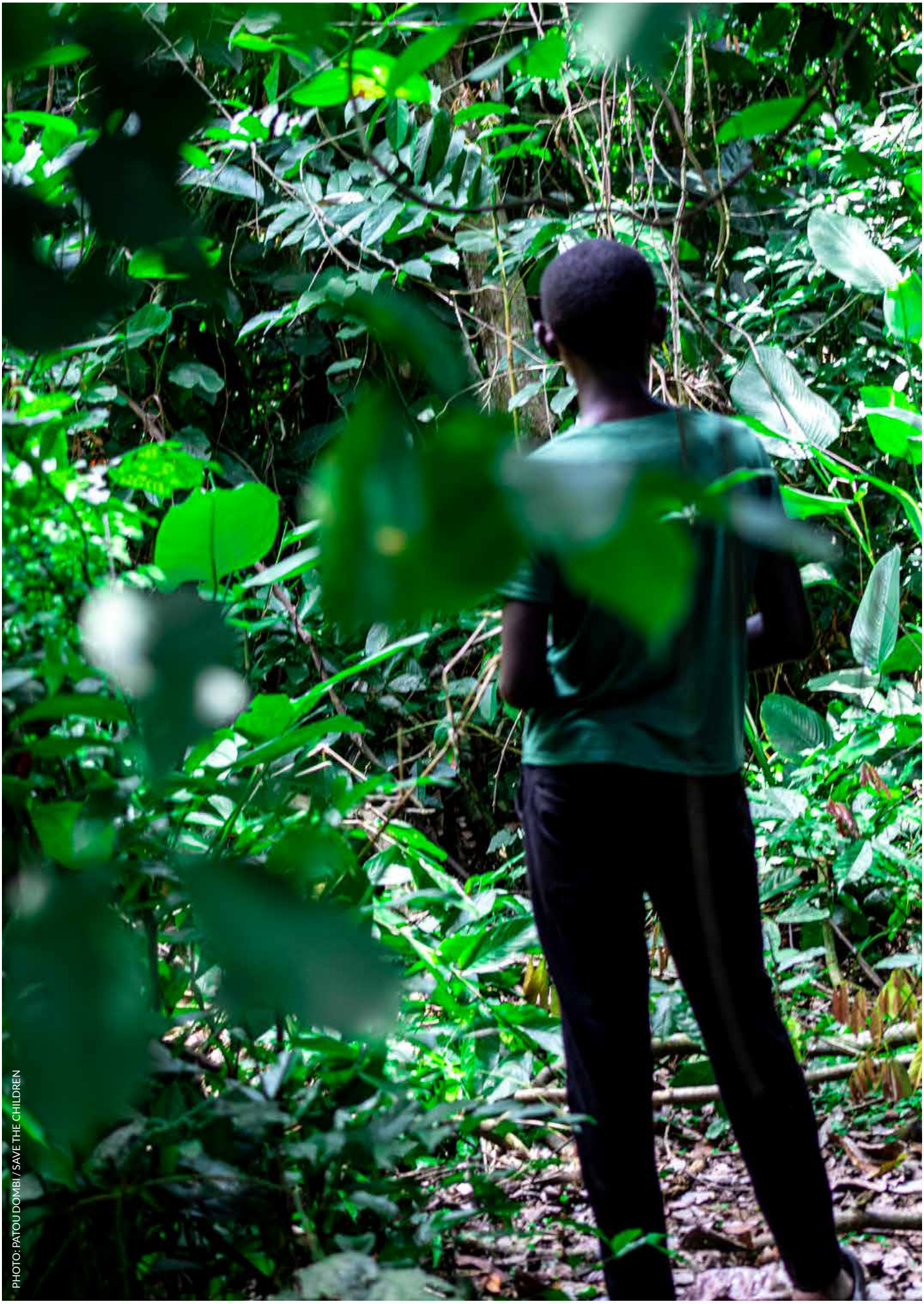


PHOTO: PATOU DOMBI / SAVE THE CHILDREN

GEORGES, 17, FROM ITURI, DRC:

- I PARTICIPATED IN SEVERAL MISSIONS. I WITNESSED HORRIFIC SCENES.

«Men, women, and children being killed. It was unbearable, especially at first. To make us numb to the violence, they gave us herbal potions. These potions put us in a state of total obedience.», says Georges, 17.

Georges, 17, was ambushed by four unknown men one afternoon after returning from a local water source. His head was covered with a hood and he was forcibly abducted.

After two days of walking, he was held at a camp and forced to work. *«They taught me how to handle weapons and shoot,»* he said. He also carried looted goods and ammunition. Every morning, Georges and the other boys underwent intense physical training. To survive, they ate only what had been pillaged. Georges took part in several missions and witnessed extreme violence.

A year after their abduction, taking advantage of a rainy night and their turn on guard duty, Georges and two of his friends fled. They escaped across treacherous terrain, relying solely on courage to survive. After three days of walking, they reached a main road. Each of them took a different direction to return home.

When Georges arrived at his village in Ituri, he found his family's house burned down and overgrown with vegetation. While wandering nearby, he encountered a friend of his mother's who told him where his grandmother, aged 83, now lived. When she saw him, she collapsed in tears. *«I thought he was dead,»* she said. Georges' return brought her immense joy. He now helps her every day with housework, chopping wood, and farming.

Despite being home, Georges has struggled with trauma. *«I couldn't sleep. I was constantly anxious,»* he said.

With support from Save the Children, Georges was re-enrolled in school for two years. Thanks to counselling sessions and educational guidance, Georges' emotional state has begun to improve.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

2: TWENTY YEARS OF GRAVE VOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

In 2005, the United Nations (UN) Security Council established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) through Resolution 1612. Its purpose was to systematically document and verify six grave violations against children in armed conflict.[5] These are:

1. **Killing and maiming of children.**
2. **Recruitment or use of children by armed forces or armed groups.**
3. **Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children.**
4. **Abduction of children.**
5. **Attacks on schools or hospitals.**
6. **Denial of humanitarian access for children.**

Its findings inform the Secretary-General's Annual Reports on Children and Armed Conflict. This mechanism provide a valuable insight into the grave violations committed against children in 2025 and the longer-term patterns documented since reporting began.[6]

The MRM has strengthened the international architecture for protecting children in conflict. The credible evidence it provides informs prevention, early warning, advocacy, accountability efforts and protection responses. Its findings inform humanitarian programming and political action, enable engagement with parties responsible for violations, and help secure commitments from them to change their conduct.

Since its establishment, more than 40 action plans have been signed with parties to conflict, and more than 220,000 children have been released from the custody of armed forces and groups.[7]

The MRM's impact nevertheless remains uneven, difficult to quantify and dependent on access, resources, political will and sustained implementation.[8] In insecure contexts, access constraints and fear of retaliation can make monitoring, reporting and verification more difficult precisely when risks to children are increasing.

GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT IN 2025

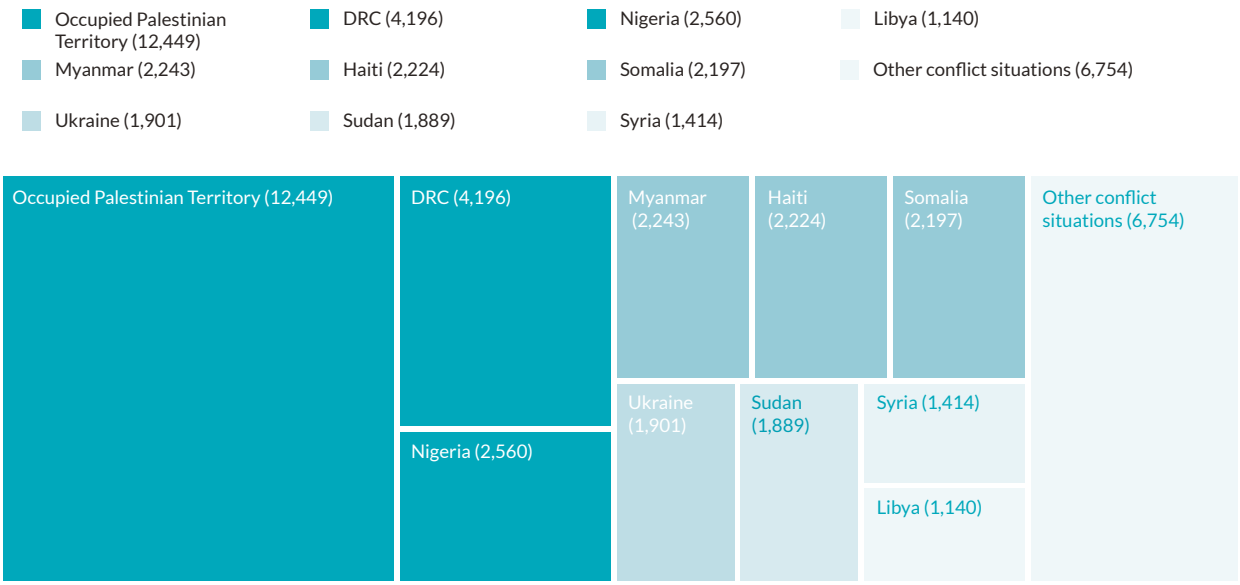
In 2025, 38,967[9] grave violations against children in armed conflict were included in our analysis of the MRM reporting.[10] This is the second-highest annual figure since the MRM was established in 2005, surpassed only by the record 41,763 violations in 2024.[11]

- **Almost half of all grave violations verified in 2025 occurred in only three conflict settings:** the occupied Palestinian territory, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Nigeria. Together, they accounted for 49 per cent of the global total.

- **The killing and maiming of children remained the most frequently verified grave violation against children,** with 14,224 children tragically killed or maimed in 2025.

- **Three violations against children continued to increase in numbers**. The abduction of children reached a record 5,128 cases, the denial of humanitarian access reached a record 8,322 incidents, and attacks on schools and hospitals increased for the fifth consecutive year to 2,930 incidents.

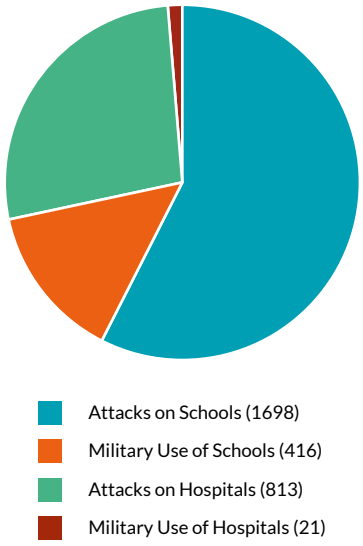
FIGURE 7: VERIFIED GRAVE VIOLATIONS BY CONFLICT SETTING, 2025.



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, 2026.

- **Killing and maiming of children:** In 2025, the UN verified the killing of 6,266 children and the maiming of 7,958 children. Out of these, 63 per cent were boys, 34 per cent were girls (Gender is not specified in 3 per cent of the cases).
- **Recruitment or use of children by armed forces or armed groups:** 6,576 cases of recruitment and use were verified in 2025. DRC recorded the highest number, with 1,397 cases, down from 2,365 in 2024. Nigeria followed with 927, Haiti with 892 and Somalia with 701. Haiti recorded the largest absolute increase from 2024 to 2025, with cases almost tripling from 302 to 892.
- **Abduction of children:** 5,128 cases were verified in 2025. Around 86 per cent of these cases were verified in conflicts in Africa.
- **Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children:** 1,787 cases were verified in 2025. The largest increases occurred in DRC, which grew from 358 cases in 2024 to 592 in 2025, and in Sudan, which grew from 74 cases in 2024 to 193 in 2025. Around 86 per cent of cases were verified in conflicts in Africa
- **Attacks on schools or hospitals:** 2,930 in 2025. The occupied Palestinian territory recorded the highest number of attacks in 2025, with 837 incidents, followed by Ukraine with 643. Together, they accounted for more than half of the global total.

FIGURE 8: ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS AND THEIR USE BY ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS, 2025.



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, 2026.

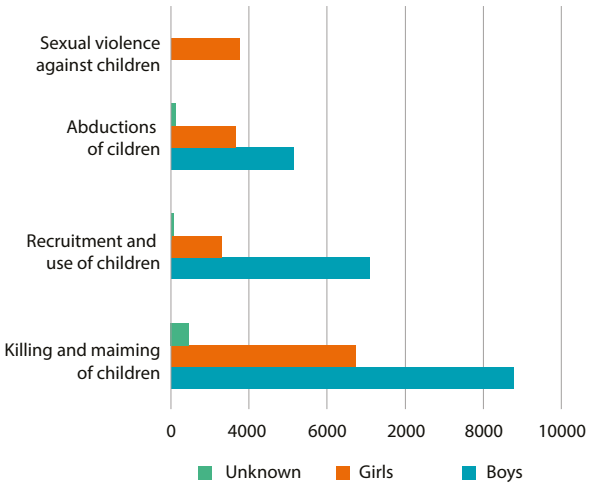
- **Denial of humanitarian access for children:** 8,322 incidents were verified in 2025, an increase of 5.3 per cent from 2024. The increase highly concentrated in a small number of conflict settings, notably in the occupied Palestinian territory with 5,946 incidents, more than 70 per cent of the global total. Libya recorded the largest increase, from 36 in 2024 to 1,084 incidents in 2025.

THE GENDERED NATURE OF VIOLATIONS

Harmful gender norms and structural inequalities can often dictate children's exposure to grave violations. **In 2025, boys accounted for around 63 per cent of children who were abducted, killed or maimed, and 80 per cent of those who were recruited or used by armed forces and groups.** These patterns reflect gender norms that cast adolescent boys as threats and associate masculinity with violence and combat. On the other hand, **girls consistently account for around 98 per cent of the victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence.**

Gender also shapes the prevalence of reporting. Violations in public spaces, more often experienced by boys, are easier to identify and verify. Harm in homes and shelters, where girls may be more confined, often remain hidden. Stigma further suppresses reporting of sexual violence, leaving many children's experiences invisible.[12]

FIGURE 9: GRAVE VIOLATIONS COMMITTED AGAINST BOYS AND GIRLS, 2025.



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, 2026.

Iraq, Pakistan and the Philippines were removed from the Secretary-General's annual reporting on children and armed conflict in 2026. The Special Representative attributed this decision to positive developments achieved through engagement, including measures to prevent violations against children.[13] No conflict situations were added to be included in the 2026 report.

Interconnected Grave Violations in Sudan

The MRM data paints a confused picture for Sudan, demonstrating how challenging data collection and verification becomes as a conflict intensifies. Overall figures for 2005 show a decline from 2004, masking increases across several violations.

- **Recorded violations rose from** 317 in 2022 to 1,759 in 2023 and 2,173 in 2024, before falling by 13% **to 1,889 in 2025.** However, this was still almost **six times the number recorded in 2022.**
- **The killing and maiming of children accounted for** 1,331 of the recorded grave violations in 2025, around **70 per cent of the total verified violations** in the country. Although this was a 23 per cent decrease from 2024, 64 per cent of all the instances of the killing and maiming of children recorded for Sudan since 2005 occurred between 2023 and 2025 alone.
- **Sexual violence against children increased by 161%**, from 74 cases in 2024 to 193 in 2025, the highest annual figure recorded for Sudan.
- **Abductions of children rose by 140%**, from 57 in 2024 to 137 in 2025, while the recruitment and use of children by armed groups increased from 25 to 63.
- In 2025, attacks on schools and hospitals remained high, at 115, while incidents of the denial of humanitarian access rose from 38 to 50.

This apparent decline in verified violations in 2025 should not automatically be interpreted as improved protection. Reporting and verifying grave violations require financial resources and capacity. In addition, in contexts of insecurity, access constraints and fear of retaliation, verification often becomes more difficult precisely as risks to children increase.

The six grave violations frequently reinforce one another, creating layers of risk and vulnerability for children. Understanding these violations as interconnected rather than discrete incidents provides a more accurate picture of the cumulative impact of conflict on children's lives.



PHOTO: SIMON EDMUNDS / SAVE THE CHILDREN

BILAL, 19, FROM SUDAN:

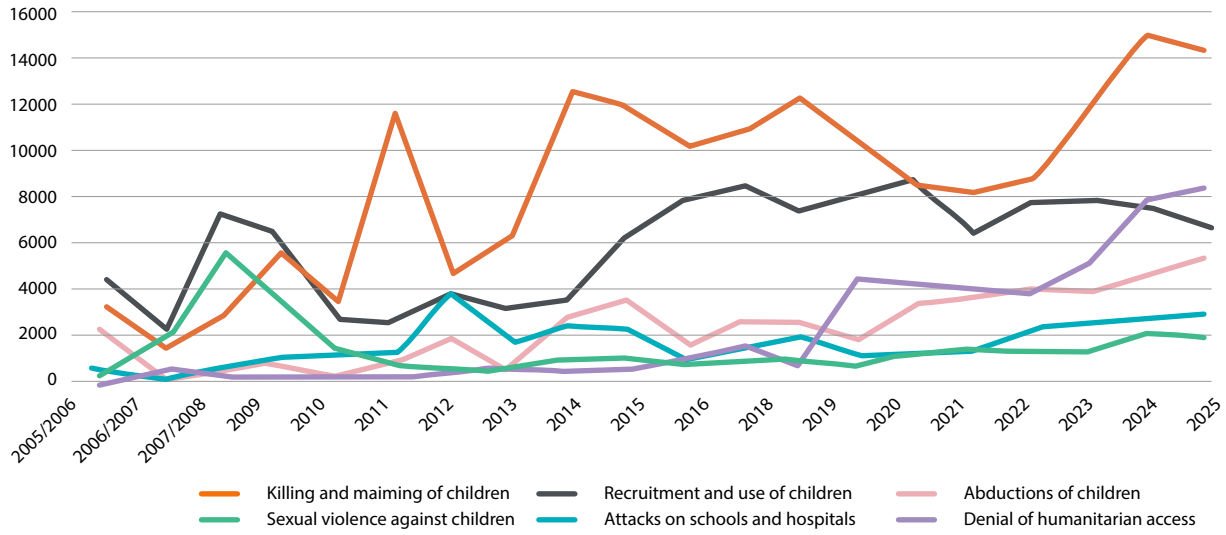
THE LAST IMPACT OF THE EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR

16-year-old Bilal was injured alongside his cousin Karim, 19, in Khartoum when he picked up an unexploded munition, not realising what it was. He lost his right forearm and his right eye while Karim suffered serious injuries to his face and neck and lost his hearing in one ear. Save the Children is supporting both boys by covering the financial costs of their medical treatment and providing psychosocial care during their recovery.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

TWENTY YEARS OF VERIFIED GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

FIGURE 10: VIOLATIONS OVER TIME.



SOURCE: SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, 2006-2026.

KILLING AND MAIMING OF CHILDREN

Of the six grave violations, **the killing and maiming of children accounts for the largest share of verified violations over the past two decades.** The figures reflect both periods of intense escalation and the cumulative impact of conflicts.

- **A total of 171,712 cases has been verified since reporting began.** More than 70 per cent were recorded in five conflict settings: the occupied Palestinian territory, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.
- In 2014, the global number almost doubled, from 6,246 to 12,393, driven largely by increases in the occupied Palestinian territory, Syria and Afghanistan.
- **The Occupied Palestinian Territory recorded the highest cumulative number** since 2005, with 39,349 cases.

RECRUITMENT OR USE OF CHILDREN BY ARMED FORCES OR ARMED GROUPS

The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups **have remained persistent features of several long-running conflicts.**

- **A total of 116,767 cases has been verified since reporting began.** Almost two thirds of them were in just five countries - Somalia, DRC, Syria, Nigeria and South Sudan.
- Somalia has the highest cumulative total, with 25,892 verified cases of the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups since 2005. Annual cases in the country have now fallen to around one quarter of the number in 2009.
- Global cases rose sharply between 2015 and 2016, from 6,071 to 7,734, driven largely by conflicts in Nigeria and Somalia. Annual figures remained above 7,000 in most subsequent years, peaking at 8,595 in 2020.

ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN

Over the last 20 years, the verified abductions of children have been heavily concentrated in a small number of protracted African conflicts.

- Of the 45,362 cases documented since 2005, Somalia accounts for 13,212, DRC for 8,228 and Nigeria for 4,767. Together, these three countries represent almost 58 per cent of the cumulative total.
- **Individual conflicts have driven sudden surges in child abductions**. In Somalia, cases rose from 127 in 2011 to 1,533 in 2012; and in South Sudan, cases rose from 147 in 2014 to 1,596 in 2015.
- **Global child abductions increased by 50 per cent between 2021 and 2025**, from 3,460 in 2021 to a record 5,128 in 2025, a 12.2 per cent increase compared with 2024.

RAPE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The fear of stigma and reprisals, unsafe conditions created by conflict, limited sexual health and protection services and reporting and verification barriers

mean sexual violence against children remains significantly underreported.

- 28,909 cases of sexual violence against children have been verified since 2005.
- **The DRC alone accounts for 12,698 cases, or almost 44 per cent of the cumulative total**, followed by Somalia with 4,534 cases and Chad with 2,979. Together, these three countries represent around 70 per cent of all verified cases since 2005.
- **Verified cases of sexual violence have increased by 71 per cent over the past decade,** from 1,045 cases in 2015 to 1,787 in 2025, and by 35 per cent over the past five reporting years.

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS OR HOSPITALS

Schools and hospitals have repeatedly come under attack or been used for military purposes over the last 20 years, depriving children of education, healthcare and the protection these institutions should provide.

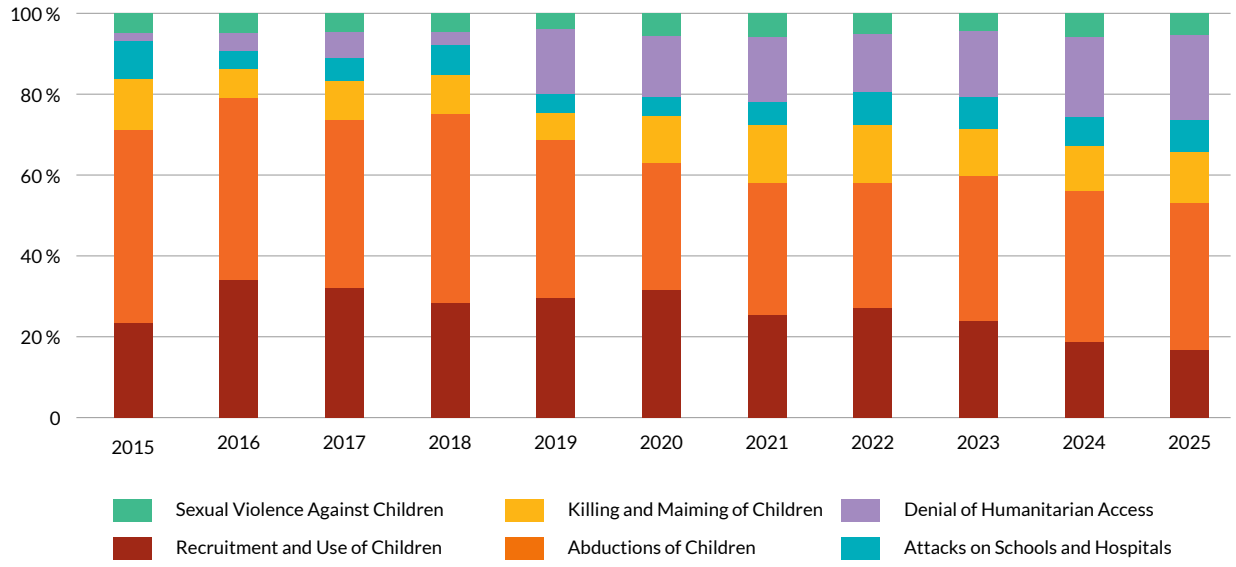
- Across the reporting period, 32,767 such incidents have been verified. The highest cumulative numbers were recorded in Syria, with 6,022 incidents, the occupied Palestinian territory with 5,096 and Afghanistan with 4,041.
- In Ukraine, a further 2,624 incidents were recorded in only four reporting years, illustrating how quickly education and healthcare infrastructure can be affected when conflict escalates.
- The annual total attacks on schools and hospitals and use of them by armed forces and groups, **increased for five consecutive years between 2021 and 2025,** more than doubling from 1,323 incidents in 2021 to 2,930 in 2025.

DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS FOR CHILDREN

No grave violation has increased as dramatically or changed the overall pattern of verified violations as much as the denial of humanitarian access.

- Of the 44,359 incidents documented since reporting began, **almost half were recorded in the Occupied Palestinian Territory**, which has a cumulative total of 21,395, followed by Yemen with 8,676 and Afghanistan with 3,767.
- The geographical centre of this violation has shifted over time. The conflict in Yemen drove much of the sharp global increase in 2019 and accounted for the most verified incidents in 2020, while the conflict in the occupied Palestinian territory has increasingly driven the rise in recent years.
- The proportional increase in verified incidents is unmatched by any of the other grave violations. The denial of humanitarian access was among the least frequently documented violations in the early reporting years, only eight incidents were reported in 2005/2006. **The increase is striking even over the past decade. A growth from 509 incidents in 2015 to a record 8,322 in 2025, is a sixteenfold rise.**
- The number has more than doubled in the past five reporting years alone, from 3,945 in 2021. Consequently, the **denial of humanitarian access grew from around 2 per cent of all verified grave violations in 2015 to more than 21 per cent in 2025**, making it the second most frequently verified violation after the killing and maiming of children.

FIGURE 11: THE CHANGING DISTRIBUTION OF VERIFIED GRAVE VIOLATIONS, 2015-2025.



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, 2016-2026.

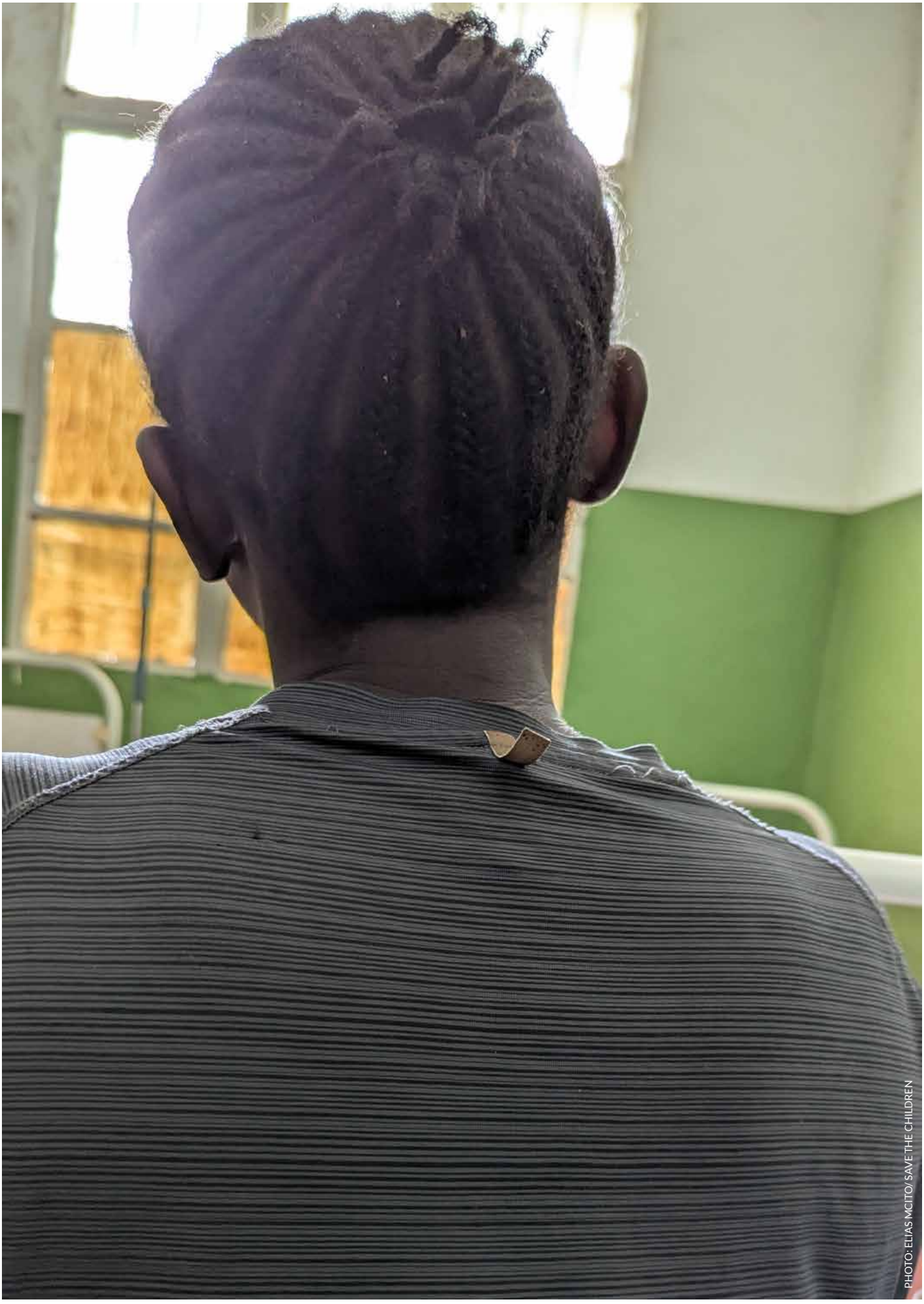


PHOTO: ELIAS MCITO/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

ANA, 17, FROM DRC:

- I SCREAMED. I BEGGED FOR MERCY... BUT NO ONE LISTENED.

Before conflict tore through her community in eastern DRC, 17-year-old Ana lived a simple life with her family. The sixth of seven children, she had left school because her parents could no longer afford the costs, but the family managed to get by through farming.

Everything changed when violence forced them to flee their village.

Like many families displaced by conflict, they faced hunger, uncertainty and poor living conditions. *«Finding food was a real headache. A place to sleep? Don't even ask,»* she recalls.

After months of displacement, the family returned home hoping life would begin to improve. Instead, tragedy struck.

«We had fled the war, but it came knocking at our door again,» Ana says.

One night, armed men broke into their house. Ana's brother answered the door and was shot dead on the spot. The attackers entered Ana's room, dragged her into the living room and raped her while other members of her family were assaulted elsewhere in the house.

«I screamed. I begged for mercy... but no one listened,» she says. *«My brother was killed before my eyes. I was raped.»*

The next morning, neighbours helped Ana reach a local health centre supported by Save the Children. There, she received emergency medical care, including treatment to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, as well as ongoing psychosocial support.

Yet the violence did not end when she left the health centre.

«The hardest part wasn't the pain. It was people's mockery,» Ana says. *«They pointed fingers at me, as if I were to blame for what had been done to me.»*

The stigma left her feeling isolated and ashamed. But through counselling sessions, health workers helped her understand that she was not responsible for what had happened.

«What gave me relief was when someone said, 'You are not responsible,'» she said.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

Children's Lives and Futures Under Attack in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

The scale of harm to children in the occupied Palestinian territory is devastating. Exceptionally high numbers of children have been killed and maimed, there have been frequent attacks on schools and hospitals and widespread denial of humanitarian access. The recorded violations for the occupied Palestinian territory are overwhelmingly concentrated in these three categories, giving it a distinctive profile compared with countries such as Somalia and DRC.

Looking exclusively at **2025, more than 30 per cent of the total violations against children globally were committed against children in the Occupied Palestinian Territory**, with the killing and maiming of children in the Occupied Palestinian Territory amounting to almost 40 per cent of the global total, and incidents of the **denial of humanitarian access representing more than 70 per cent of the total global incidents.** The killing and maiming of children, the denial of humanitarian access, and attacks on schools and hospitals together account for 99.9% of the occupied Palestinian territory's cumulative recorded violations. Grave violations are also being committed against Palestinian children in Syria and Lebanon.

The recent escalation builds on a long history of harm. Earlier increases in the killing and maiming of children occurred in 2014 (4,806 children) and 2018 (2,815 children). 39,349 children have been killed or maimed in the occupied Palestinian territory over the last 20 years. This is higher than in any other conflict in the same period and represents more than one fifth of the children killed and maimed globally since 2005. The incidents of denial of humanitarian access have also been alarmingly high and now constitute almost half of all the incidents verified globally since 2005. Over the same period, the occupied Palestinian territory recorded the second-highest number of attacks on schools and hospitals, with more than 5,000, exceeded only by Syria.

The loss of loved ones, repeated displacement, hunger and the loss of access to healthcare and education compound one another, undermining children's physical health, psychological wellbeing and development. Our research found significant harm to the mental health of children in Gaza, as bombardment and deprivation erode their sense of safety and the family and community support on which they depend.[14] For children, the loss of school means losing friendships, educational prospects, routines and opportunities to imagine a future beyond the conflict. As Amjad, a 13-year-old student from Gaza, told Save the Children: *«For me, school is not just maths and Arabic. **School is life.**»*

MONITORING, VISIBILITY AND HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

As verified incidents of the denial of humanitarian access increase, scrutiny of the conduct behind them remains uneven. A Save the Children review of more than 80 reports and documents relating to the conflicts in Yemen, Mali and the occupied Palestinian territory found that international accountability mechanisms often address the denial of humanitarian access as background to humanitarian crises rather than an issue to be investigated in its own right. Evidence is dispersed across separate analyses of hostilities, movement restrictions, starvation and other violations, leaving the cumulative harm to children insufficiently examined.[15]

Behind these incidents are restrictions on both humanitarian organisations' ability to reach children and children's ability to access assistance and services. Barriers to humanitarian access extend beyond blocked aid and deliveries. Bureaucratic barriers, movement restrictions, attacks on humanitarian workers and facilities, and insecurity along routes to services can prevent children from receiving essential support. These impediments often overlap, compounding the effects of disrupted healthcare, nutrition, education and protection.[16]

Children's development, dependence on caregivers and need for specialist care mean that interruptions can harm them far more quickly and severely. Delayed medical supplies, unavailable nutrition treatment or an unsafe journey to a functioning clinic can have lasting consequences. Assessing access restrictions therefore requires a focus on their impact on children's survival, wellbeing and development, alongside their duration. Protecting access means enabling assistance to reach children and ensuring children can safely reach the services they need.[17]

Reduced operational presence can also affect the identification and documentation of grave violations against children. The UN MRM is mandated by the Security Council and operates separately from humanitarian cluster coordination. Nevertheless, **a contraction in the wider protection presence can reduce opportunities to identify violations, support safe reporting and**

connect affected children with services.[18] Monitoring and verification require access, trained personnel and sustained presence. Where these are constrained, fewer verified violations may reflect reduced capacity to document harm rather than a decline in its occurrence.

Insecurity, administrative restrictions, attacks on humanitarian personnel and deliberate obstruction further limit organisations' ability to reach children and children's ability to reach services. Changes to coordination structures alone cannot resolve these barriers. Together, funding cuts, reduced presence and restricted access risk leaving children less visible in assessments and reporting, and harder to reach with the support they need.

«I ASK YOU TO STAND WITH US, SHOW SOLIDARITY, AND PROVIDE US WITH THE ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES WE NEED, LIKE BOOKS, SCHOOLS AND THINGS THAT HELP US GROW, GIVING US THE CHANCE TO LIVE THE LIVES WE DREAMED OF.»

- GIRL IN GAZA

The Long-term Needs of Children Returning Home to Iraq

For children returning to Iraq from Al-Hol camp in Syria, leaving the camp is only the beginning of returning home. Some reach their communities without the civil documentation needed to access school and services, and families often face psychological distress and barriers to seeking support.

In Ninewa, Save the Children and government social workers maintained contact with vulnerable children after their passage through Jadaa Al-Amal. During the first six months of 2026, the wider programme in Ninewa registered 59 child protection cases, including among Al-Hol returnees. Thirteen cases were referred to services, and 28 received support to obtain civil documentation and to re-enrol in school. Home-based psychosocial support reached 28 returnee families.[19]

This work illustrates why reintegration requires continued protection and practical support in the communities where children will grow up. Return must be followed by efforts to restore access to education and services, support children and caregivers, and address protection needs over time.

Reaching Children Soon After a Crisis in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

When conflict forces children from their homes, the first days of a response are critical for their safety, well-being and learning. Save the Children's Rapid Integrated Response for Children (RIRE) combines play-based learning, community child protection and mobile psychosocial support in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.[20]

The approach usually enables a response within three to seven days of a crisis occurring. Community teams help identify protection needs, while mobile teams provide psychological first aid and referrals.[21] Bringing these services together allows children's protection and learning needs to be addressed from the outset of an emergency.

RIRE integrates child protection into the initial humanitarian response. By increasing our capacity to identify needs and mobilise support, this approach helps us to coordinate preparedness and delivery to reach displaced children quickly.

Preventing Recruitment: Lessons from Somalia and South Sudan

Save the Children's work on community-responsive peacekeeping in Somalia and South Sudan offers valuable insights into how protection commitments can be translated into practical action to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups.

Prevention must begin before children encounter armed actors. Research in both countries identified interconnected pressures, including insecurity, displacement, poverty, family separation and disrupted education. Children emphasised the importance of access to education, psychosocial support, safe spaces and family acceptance. Prevention therefore requires coordinated action across the education, social welfare, justice and security sectors.

Community knowledge needs a reliable route to action. Consultations revealed that communities could recognise emerging risks but did not always have safe channels to reach actors with the ability to respond. Effective early warning requires trusted reporting arrangements, clearly assigned responsibilities and feedback explaining the action that followed. Communities need systemic support to act on their knowledge.

Training must become institutional practice. Engagement with military, police and peace-support personnel underlined the importance of embedding child protection in professional training programmes, command responsibilities, age-verification procedures and civilian handover arrangements. Training can build knowledge, but sustained implementation requires procedures, supervision and accountability to reinforce its application.

Release must be followed by sustained reintegration support. The stigma of recruitment, interrupted education and difficulties returning to family and community life can persist after a child's association with armed actors ends. Reintegration must support children's recovery, sense of belonging and future prospects over time, while addressing the risks of renewed recruitment.[22]

Since 2019, when Somalia signed the roadmap to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict and accelerate the implementation of action plans to address the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, the country has made significant progress in reversing the trend and reducing the number of verified incidents of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, particularly by the national forces. The conditional delisting of the Somali National Army and the Somali Police Force for the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is an important milestone that demonstrates the effectiveness of the measures taken over time to prevent child recruitment.

Similarly, since the signing of 2020 comprehensive action plan regarding children associated with armed conflict in South Sudan, key milestones were achieved. These include the establishment and strengthening of national and state level coordination. Joint Verification Committees were granted access to military facilities across the country, resulting in release of children from military training centers and armed groups. With the extension of the Comprehensive Action Plan to 2027, this provides opportunity to continue reducing violations and improve protection for children countrywide.

Transferring children from security settings into care in Burkina Faso

A child encountered during a security operation may have been recruited or used by an armed group, may have escaped one, or may only be suspected of association. Ensuring that the child is transferred to civilian care is a critical step towards protection and recovery.

In Burkina Faso, a protocol between the state and the UN provides for the transfer of these children to social services. Through its Resistance to Recruitment (R2R) project, Save the Children supports social workers' case management and trains defence and security personnel on child protection and transfer procedures. The project had reintegrated 21 children in the Kuilsé and Yaadga regions by the end of 2024, including 12 girls.[23]

The experience highlights the need for two connected requirements - clear procedures to move children from security settings into care, and sustained support to those children after their transfer. Long-term family mediation, education or vocational opportunities, and case follow-up can take longer than a project funding cycle.[24] Funding must therefore support a continued reintegration process.



PHOTO: DAPHNEE COOK/ SAVE THE CHILDREN

OMAR, 14, FROM SOMALIA:

- BECAUSE OF THE INJURY, I MISSED SCHOOL A WHOLE YEAR

14-year-old Omar was a bright student in Baidoa, Somalia, with ambitions of one day attending university. Independent and hardworking, he was excelling in his studies. Then, one evening, everything changed.

A grenade exploded as Omar stepped outside his home to speak with a friend, leaving him with severe injuries to his legs. He was rushed to hospital and began a long recovery.

«I used to walk to school by myself; I didn't need anyone's help,» Omar recalls. *«But now I have to be taken there by a Bajaj (tuk-tuk) and brought back home the same way.»*

Omar has undergone extensive treatment and rehabilitation, first using a wheelchair and later learning to move with walking aids and crutches. At one point, his family feared he might never walk again.

The injury not only affected Omar physically but also disrupted his education. *«Because of the injury, I missed a whole year of school,»* he says.

(Names have been changed to protect identities)

SURVIVORS OF CHILD RECRUITMENT IN COLOMBIA SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

- THEY TAKE US AWAY AT NIGHT

As Colombia grapples with turning its peace agreement into tangible progress on the ground, the recruitment of children to armed forces and groups remains a painful reality and a critical gap in the protection of children in the country. Luz de Esperanza, 47, who was recruited in 1994, and Franco,18, who was recruited in 2020, share their experiences as survivors of child recruitment.

What was that first encounter with the armed groups like?

Franco: Armed groups do not just turn up one day. They live within our communities. People often imagine that they approach us and ask us questions as though they were not part of the rural areas where we live, where they are present all the time. They are the people in control, so we are subject to certain rules.

It all happened when my father died. I was 12. He was the person looking after us, and he tried to keep them well away from us. But after he died, there was no one to pick us up from school or anything like that, so they took advantage of it. With no one there to stop us from talking to them, or to stop them from asking us questions, that was their opportunity.

They never keep young people from the area in that same place. They take us away at night, straight to distant places. After hours and hours of travelling, you arrive somewhere without knowing where you are.

Luz de Esperanza: It can look as though the community accepts recruitment, but people are defenceless and have no means of searching. There are no alternatives for finding their children, and this turns into silence. That silence is a way of surviving.

In my case, my mother and other women went to search for us, but finding us was impossible. There were many camps. For a mother travelling through remote wilderness, by canoe, along trails, on buses and motorbikes, finding her children is very difficult, on top of the hardships she already faces.

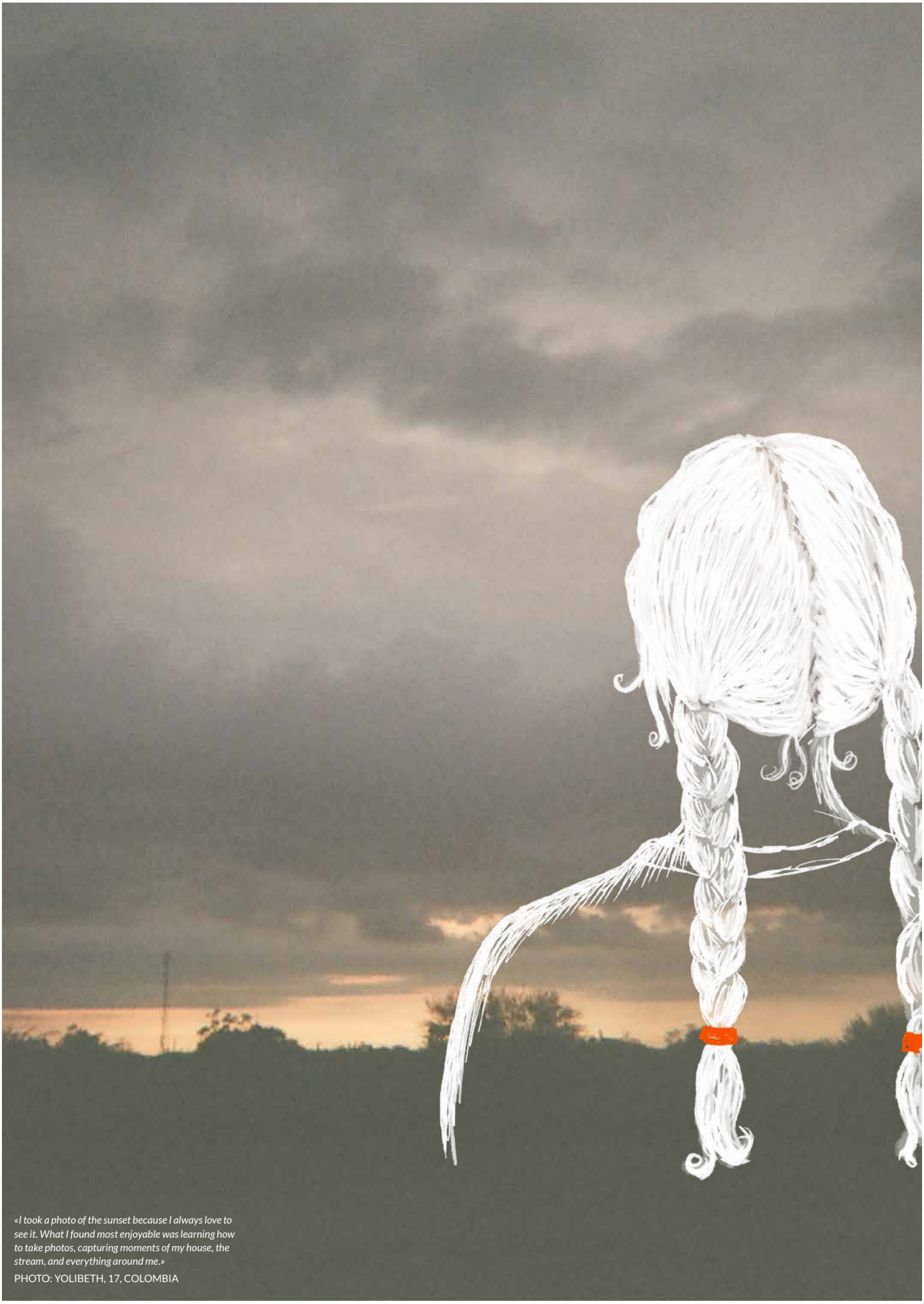
In towns where these groups control the institutions, a child does not join of their own free will. The conditions in that territory make the child vulnerable, and that vulnerability allows persuasion and coercion to take hold, until children end up losing their lives.

How is recruitment connected to other forms of violence?

Franco: One thing that terrified me was the rape of children, of underage girls, often by commanders. Girls in rural areas can look physically mature because they do demanding work, so when they join, their superiors take advantage of having them under their command. They always say that girls have to go through them first before they can be with a fellow member. It is as though the girls were being handed over as a reward.

Luz de Esperanza: Life within the ranks brings ill-treatment, torture, killings, sexual violence, prejudice-based violence and forced abortions. Recruitment also separates children from their families, their surroundings, their schools and their communities. It strips them of their identity and their good name. My name is Luz de Esperanza, but when I arrive there I have to take a pseudonym. When I return to freedom, Luz is no longer Luz: she is «a guerrilla fighter».

You lose your freedom, your ability to decide, to build a future and to dream. On top of that, I have to live as a girl, but a girl hidden within the war. I came to understand it as a kind of kidnapping, a cruelty within the ranks. I wish I could find a word that encompassed recruitment in all its dimensions. It is such a profound accumulation of human rights violations that I cannot find the words.



«I took a photo of the sunset because I always love to see it. What I found most enjoyable was learning how to take photos, capturing moments of my house, the stream, and everything around me.»

PHOTO: YOLIBETH, 17, COLOMBIA

What was most challenging when you left the group?

Franco: I would say the hardest things are going back to school, relating to other people again, and rebuilding trust with your family and community. You need safety and psychological support. For example, not being able to return, as in my case, to the place where you grew up and spent your childhood makes you ask yourself, «Did I really have a childhood?»

When these groups find out that you escaped or that you are alive, they put pressure on your family or force them to leave, because they realise you may be providing information that could affect them. Mothers or siblings often prefer to sacrifice everything to see you safe and able to fulfil your potential, hoping that perhaps later, under different circumstances, you can meet again, when everything is different.

What would you have needed to feel safe, accepted and able to build a future when you returned from that experience of recruitment?

Luz de Esperanza: It is such a complex question, and it affects me deeply. When a child leaves any armed actor, the first place they go is a shelter or an institution that begins supporting the process. Sometimes it is like leaving one prison and entering another.

Then you reach the community carrying a label and a history. People no longer see you as a child, but as a male or female guerrilla fighter, without recognising that you were recruited. A mother or family may not have been prepared to accept that the child returning is not the same one who left home. A different child comes back. And I do not know how to behave either, how to come home, or how to return to my family environment.

Twenty years have passed, and I still have not been able to sit down with my mother and ask, «Mum, what was it like for you when I disappeared?» That subject has stayed locked away because we have not been able to face it. It is very difficult to talk about.

Leaving the group does not mean the harm has ended. There is a succession of harms. Sometimes there is violence in the city. Reintegration can be accompanied by other, very deep forms of violence.

If you could say something to governments, leaders and organisations working to prevent recruitment and support people like you who have been victims of it, what would you say?

Franco: One thing they should do is truly listen to communities: recognise the needs of children, adolescents and each of their families.



«I took a photo of some trupillos. I was happy with the camera taking pictures with my family. My dad, when he was shepherding. He was shepherding the goat, and he let me do it. I thought it was spectacular.»
PHOTO: EDGARDO, 13, COLOMBIA



«I appreciate the opportunity to learn about photography and express gratitude for the valuable lessons. I love participating in all the meetings with Save the Children, I have learned and I want to continue learning to take photos.»
PHOTO: MANUELA, 13, COLOMBIA

I would call for preventive measures that guarantee dignified living conditions for everyone: better schools and training that allows us to find work without neglecting rural areas; safe spaces to develop our talents, play sport and take part in cultural activities.

Luz de Esperanza: I would ask community leaders to begin working from the grassroots, with children in schools. They have the capacity to transform this country. But we become so adult-centred that we speak for children, as though they had no abilities, instead of speaking with them so they can put their needs forward, be recognised as rights-holders and have their voices heard rather than diminished. These experiences can change things.

We must also promote channels of dialogue with the groups to reduce and eliminate the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. But it must be dialogue with verifiable commitments, making it clear that they have an obligation not to recruit or use children under any circumstances. We must press them to make a firm decision: «I will not recruit children.»

Children are such useful labour to them because the cost to them, in lives and in political terms, is so low.

I also want to highlight how positive the decision to use restorative justice has been in these processes. It has helped empower victims and restore their dignity.

We are working with adults in these restorative processes, but children are being left behind. Children have had to carry the armed conflict on their shoulders, yet nowhere do they appear as a central focus of these restorative justice or comprehensive transitional justice processes.

The photographs used in this interview are taken by Wayuu youth who spent a week with Sony Award winning photographer Angela Ponce. She spent a week teaching the group the fundamentals of photography and providing them with their own film cameras to capture their environment, cultural traditions, and daily life. Each child also kept a diary to document why they have taken their images, to make this a truly unique participatory project.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

3: INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS: PROGRESS UNDER PRESSURE

The international commitments intended to limit damage caused by war[25] have grown in scope and number over decades. The four Geneva Conventions have universal ratification. 175 out of 197 states and entities have ratified the Additional Protocol I and 170 have joined Additional Protocol II. 196 are parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Political commitments also have substantial support. 123 states and entities have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, and 91 have endorsed the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas. These figures demonstrate the breadth of the framework that has been built.

The framework continues to attract support. Andorra acceded to both 1977 Additional Protocols in 2025.[26] The Marshall Islands and Tonga have joined the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention[27], and Vanuatu and Ecuador have joined the Arms Trade Treaty.[28] Tonga's accession to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entered into force on 5 October 2026[29], and Lebanon's accession to the Mine Ban Convention entered into force on 1 November 2026[30]. These steps show that states can, and do, still take formal steps to strengthen collective protection in a period of growing insecurity.

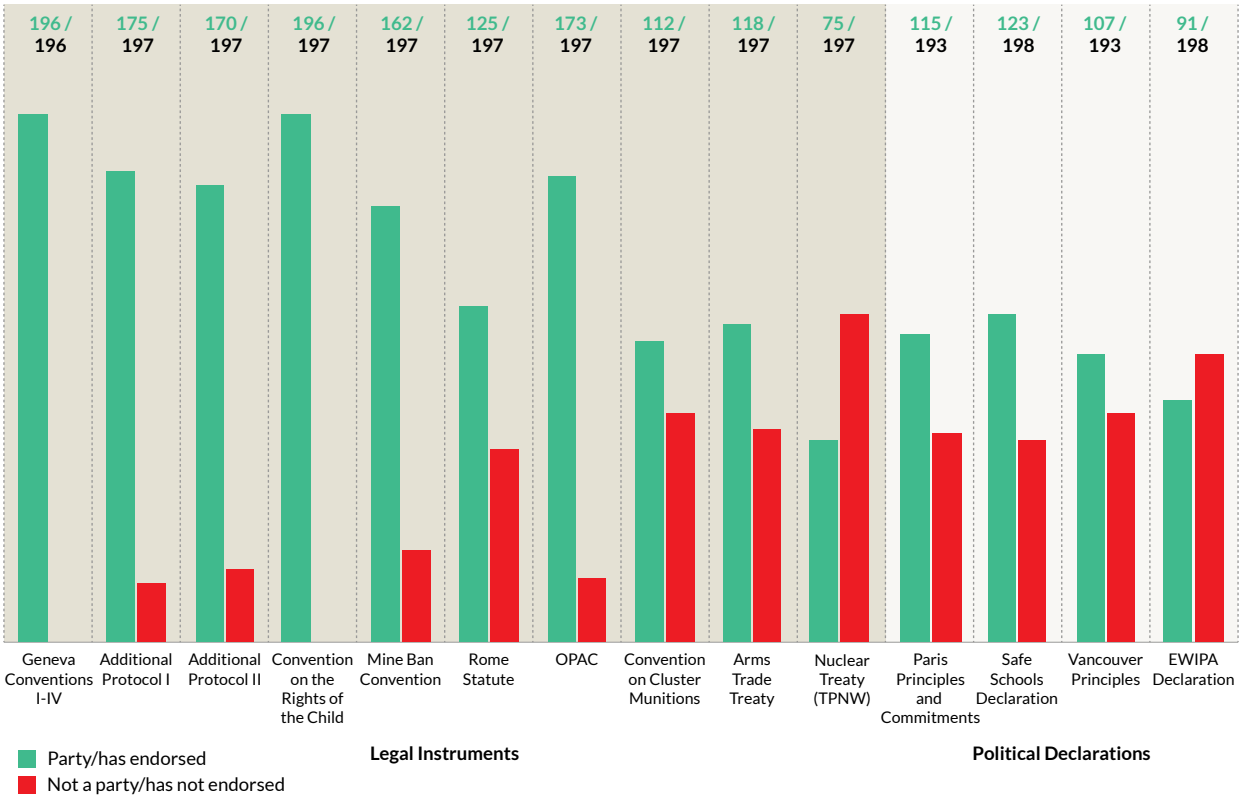
Yet some governments are moving in the opposite direction. Lithuania left the Convention on Cluster Munitions in March 2025.[31] Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania left the Mine Ban Convention[32] in December 2025, followed by Finland in January 2026 and Poland in February 2026. The five governments cited security concerns arising from Russia's war against Ukraine.[33] The Presidency of the Convention on Cluster Munitions[34] warned that Lithuania's unprecedented withdrawal could weaken international opposition to these weapons. And the UN Secretary-General expressed grave concern about the moves to leave the Mine Ban Convention.[35]

Ukraine also challenged the Mine Ban Convention in 2025. Amid Russia's continuing invasion, it informed the UN Secretary-General in July that it had decided to suspend the Convention's operation.[36] At their December 2025 meeting, States Parties affirmed that the Convention does not permit suspension of its operation or obligations and called on Ukraine, as a State Party, to continue engaging within its framework.[37]

States that have lived with mine contamination have challenged these withdrawals. Speaking for the Africa Group in June 2025[38], South Africa noted that more than 92 per cent of African Union member States had joined the Mine Ban Convention. The group acknowledged a more volatile security environment but warned that withdrawals could undo hard-won gains and weaken confidence in the Convention. It called on states that consider withdrawal to seek solutions through cooperation within the treaty. In its own national statement,[39] South Africa argued that security pressures should not become a justification for undermining humanitarian norms.

The military case for returning to these weapons is contested. An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)-commissioned study of anti-personnel mines found that they have limited military utility. Minefields can be breached, require significant resources to establish and maintain, and can impede friendly forces as well as an adversary.[40] The ICRC also questioned claims that cluster munitions are indispensable, pointing to an assessment that found their effects against military targets can often be achieved through other weapons.[41] These findings raise the question of whether the military advantage sought outweighs the foreseeable and long-lasting harm to civilians, particularly children.

FIGURE 12: LEGAL & POLITICAL COMMITMENTS: AS OF 1 NOVEMBER 2026, 53 OUT OF THE 193 UN MEMBER STATES HAVE ADOPTED AT LEAST 13 OF THE 14 LEGAL AND POLITICAL COMMITMENTS TO PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT.



SOURCE: stopwaronchildren.org.

For children, the danger persists long after the decision to use a weapon has been made. Mines and unexploded ordnance can remain in fields, homes and routes to school, threatening children as families return or rebuild. The Landmine Monitor 2025[42] recorded at least 1,701 children killed or injured by mines and explosive remnants of war in 2024. Children represented 46 per cent of civilian casualties where age was known. Explosive remnants of war, a broader category that includes unexploded cluster submunitions, caused more than half of the recorded child casualties. Save the Children's *Children and Landmines report*[43] describes how old contamination continues to harm children while new contamination accumulates in current conflicts.

Cluster munitions create danger both during an attack and afterwards when submunitions fail to explode. The Cluster Munition Monitor 2026[44] recorded 1,063 people killed or injured by cluster munition attacks and remnants in 2025, of which 87 per cent were civilians. This total includes both adults and children. The Monitor recorded at least 34 child casualties and found that unexploded submunitions can be encountered near homes, schools and places where children play or spend time with their families. Survivors may need long-term medical care, rehabilitation, psychological support and assistance to take part in education and community life. The Convention on Cluster Munitions includes specific obligations on victim assistance, including age-sensitive support.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN.

The obligation of states to uphold the rights of children and ensure their protection is being further impacted beyond the withdrawals from these weapons treaties. Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Venezuela and Chad have all notified the International Criminal Court of their withdrawal from the Rome Statute. Their withdrawals are scheduled to take effect in 2027. All five remain States Parties at present. Hungary withdrew its notification before it took effect. These developments point to mounting political pressure and weaken effective accountability.

Preserving states' participation in the Rome Statute is a key part of securing accountability for crimes against children. Justice also depends on whether institutions can recognise the harm children experience and enable them to participate safely and meaningfully in proceedings. Save the Children has identified barriers at both levels. Children's views and testimonies may be discounted, and differences in their experiences, capacities and the impact of harm at different ages may

be overlooked. Gaps in child-sensitive procedures and investigative methods, limited funding, institutional constraints and a shortage of specialist support further restrict children's access to justice.[45]

Because children are harmed more severely and more quickly than adults, an act that would not constitute a violation if committed against an adult may cross the legal threshold when a child is the victim, or may do so at an earlier stage. This argument has already been made successfully before the International Court of Justice. In two recent cases, multiple states, including Ireland, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany, argued that harm to children must be assessed differently, referencing their specific vulnerabilities and developmental situations. The cases arose under different legal frameworks, but the underlying logic is the same. The same act causes greater harm to a child than to an adult, and efforts to secure justice must reflect that reality. A November 2025 expert meeting co-hosted by Save the Children likewise recognised progress in identifying a wider range of harms, while highlighting persistent gaps in child rights expertise, investigative capacity, domestic law and reparations.[46]

Accountability for violations depends on the capacity to document them, investigate crimes and act on the evidence. Political pressure, declining cooperation and resource constraints risk weakening each stage of this process. For children, reduced monitoring capacity and field presence can mean that violations go undocumented and opportunities for timely protective action are missed. **Sustained protection requires political backing and adequate resources for independent monitoring, child-sensitive investigations and effective accountability.**

PUTTING PROTECTION COMMITMENTS INTO PRACTICE

Protecting international legal standards depends on how they are reflected and enforced in domestic law. National legal systems provide a principal route to accountability for violations against children, but ratification of international treaties does not always translate into comprehensive national legislation. Laws governing child recruitment in Africa illustrate this gap.

FROM COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY: NATIONAL LAWS ON CHILD RECRUITMENT IN AFRICA

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child defines a child as anyone under 18 and requires States Parties to refrain from recruiting children. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has clarified that states must establish this minimum age in legislation and criminalise recruitment and use by armed forces and groups.[47] As of 1 October 2026, 52 of the African Union's 55 member states had ratified the Charter. Yet a mapping of national legislation reveals considerable differences in how these obligations are reflected in domestic law.[48] The mapping identifies 38 states that prohibit all recruitment of under-18s into their armed forces, 12 that permit recruitment below 18 or set no minimum age, and four where the position is unverified or inconsistent. Mauritius has no army. Only six constitutions expressly protect children affected by armed conflict, and Chad was the only country identified with dedicated legislation principally addressing the prohibition and repression of children's enlistment and use in armed conflict.[49]

Criminal prohibitions are also uneven. Specific penal provisions concerning children in armed conflict were identified in 13 states, mostly using the Rome Statute's under-15 threshold for the war crime of child recruitment, rather than covering all children under 18. The mapping also identifies 20 states without a criminal prohibition covering recruitment of all under-18s by non-state armed groups.[50] These gaps can limit accountability: **where an armed group recruits a 16-year-old, the specific recruitment offence may cover only under-15s, military law may apply only to state forces, and child-protection legislation may provide no corresponding penalty. Labour and trafficking laws offer possible alternative routes, but their requirements do not always capture the conduct involved.**[51]

The relationship between legislation and enforcement is equally significant. Chad's dedicated law has not ended recruitment by armed groups, while Somalia's constitutional protection is not matched by a comprehensive criminal prohibition of recruitment by non-state armed groups.[52] Differences in age thresholds, the actors covered and applicable penalties across military, penal and child-protection laws can leave gaps between international obligations, domestic protection and the ability to investigate and prosecute offences.

Whether international commitments make a difference depends on political will and effective implementation. The ICRC's initiative to galvanize political commitment to international humanitarian law (IHL) seeks practical steps to strengthen respect for the law and address future challenges.[53] Its September 2026 prevention workstream outcome document identifies measures relevant to children, including incorporating their particular risks into scenario-based training and exercises, and monitoring differentiated patterns of civilian harm.[54] Turning these proposals into meaningful protection requires states to uphold humanitarian law even under security pressures, prevent violations and ensure accountability when they occur. It also requires funding for child protection, safe humanitarian access, and sustained care, education and rehabilitation for children harmed by war. These choices determine whether commitments translate to better protection for children.[55]



PHOTO: OLEKSANDR KHOMENKO / SAVE THE CHILDREN

SALEEM, 14, FROM GAZA:

SALEEM'S LOST CHILDHOOD

Before the war, 14-year-old Saleem was a top student in Gaza City. He consistently achieved outstanding grades, dreamed of winning a scholarship to study abroad, and spent his afternoons in extra classes and at the mosque memorising the Quran. Today, his mother Raghda says that boy is gone.

When the war began in October 2023, Saleem lost his father, his adopted sister, her two young children, his home, his school and a teacher he admired. He was particularly close to his sister and her children. According to Raghda, the losses changed him almost overnight.

«Saleem has changed a lot during the war,» she says. *«He's been introverted and doesn't want to talk to anyone. He's lost weight and his mood changes a lot.»*

The family has been dislaced multiple times, fleeing from Gaza City to Khan Younis, then Rafah, and later back to Khan Younis. Along the way, they struggled to find shelter, food and safe drinking water. *«It's not easy to be living in your own home one minute and the next you're living in a tent,»* Raghda says. *"We both got sick from the contaminated water, and we've been sick for weeks.»*

As a single mother, Raghda found it increasingly difficult to support her son while coping with her own grief. She had lost her husband and much of her family. *«I didn't say goodbye to my husband or family,»* she recalls. *«They were buried without me seeing them. This is a nightmare to me.»*

Saleem often withdraws into memories of the life he has lost. *«He says he wants his old life back and wants to go back to class,»* Raghda explains. *«He looks at the photo of the man who used to teach him the Quran. He was killed in the war.»*

Save the Children and a local partner provided mental health and psychosocial support to Saleem and his mother, including sessions with case worker Maha. The impact was immediate. *«The first session was the hardest one,»* Maha says. *«He was talking about things an adult would talk about. He had tears in his eyes, but he refused to cry.»*

Gradually, Saleem began to open up. He started attending activities in a Child Friendly Space, talking with his case worker and eating again. *«After receiving the sessions, he's gradually wanted to receive help,»* Maha says.

His recovery remains fragile, but there are signs of hope. During a drawing exercise, Saleem drew a heart to represent his mother and a scale showing how much better he felt. Even amid loss, displacement and uncertainty, support is helping him take the first steps toward healing.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)





PHOTO: SACHA MYERS / SAVE THE CHILDREN

4: PROTECTION IN THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WARFARE

Warfare is changing, in the technologies used to fight and in how children are drawn into conflict. Arms transfer policies and practices ultimately shape the risks faced by millions of children growing up in conflict. Conventional arms transfers continue, including to parties that commit grave violations against children. The UN Secretary-General's *2026 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict* includes annexes listing parties who have committed grave violations against children.[56] An analysis based on SIPRI data on transfers of major conventional arms found that arms were delivered to seven listed State Parties in 2025.[57] At the same time, new weapons, supply chains, technologies and alliances emerge.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES MEAN NEW RISKS FOR CHILDREN

Drones, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities and increasingly AI-enabled military technologies are changing how wars are fought. **While IHL applies regardless of the technology used, these developments create new challenges for protecting children and ensuring accountability.**

Autonomous systems can reduce the role of human judgement in decisions involving the use of force and AI-supported targeting raises concerns about errors arising from incomplete or unreliable data.[58]Assessments calibrated to adults will systematically underestimate the foreseeable harm to children. Drones combine new surveillance and targeting technologies with traditional explosive weapons, while their persistent presence over civilian areas can expose children to prolonged fear and psychological distress, disrupting school, play and access to essential services.[59]

DIGITAL RECRUITMENT

Technology is also changing how armed actors approach and use children. ICRC advisers found that social media and gaming platforms enable armed actors to reach children across geographical boundaries and give instructions remotely. Children may be tasked with gathering information or photographing military positions without undergoing conventional military training. The ICRC identified online recruitment as sustained communication and integration into online groups, involving rules, benefits and instructions, rather than the traditional indicators such as physical presence in a camp or in-person training.[60]

In Ukraine, online recruitment of children for conflict-related activities has emerged as a significant child-protection concern. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has documented cases in which children were approached through social media with offers of money to gather information on military positions or carry out sabotage, including arson. Such approaches can expose children to serious harm and potential criminal proceedings, particularly where manipulation or coercion is involved. These concerns reinforce the importance of early identification, child-centered protection and responses that recognize children's potential vulnerability to exploitation.[61]

These developments underline the need for protection systems to recognise risks beyond a child's physical departure from home and to intervene before recruitment occurs. The following example from Colombia examines how children are approached online and how prevention relies on connecting digital safety with protection in their everyday lives.

PREVENTING RECRUITMENT IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS: LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA

Save the Children worked alongside Fundación Mi Historia in Colombia with children and adolescents to identify how digital content can make armed and criminal groups appear attractive, and where prevention could intervene.[62]

We brought together stakeholders through five roundtables between September 2025 and March 2026 in Tumaco, Buenaventura and Arauca to distinguish online grooming for recruitment from subsequent recruitment and use.

We found three connected stages: exposure to content that normalises or glorifies violence, money, power and belonging; interaction through likes, follows, comments and sharing; and activation through more direct, personalised contact, often in private messages. These stages may overlap and do not necessarily follow a straight sequence. Exposure or interaction alone does not mean a child intends to join a group.[63]

If we are to combat online grooming, then we must:

- **Understand what makes recruitment messages persuasive.** We identified recurring offers of quick money, recognition and belonging as well as the glorification of toughness. These offers resembled work opportunities or promises of a substitute family, to conceal coercion and danger. Prevention therefore needs to address the aspirations and unmet needs these messages exploit, alongside the content itself.[64]

- **Connect digital safety with protection in everyday life.** Poverty, family violence, isolation, weak connections to school and limited opportunities can increase children's vulnerability. Digital platforms can amplify these risks and make children easier to approach. Responses online must therefore connect with wider support systems including education, psychosocial support, trusted adults and meaningful opportunities within communities.[65]

- **Design prevention with children and adolescents.** Young people's participation in this work helped reveal the language, symbols and cultural references through which recruitment messages gain credibility. Their involvement is just as important when developing responses. Successful approaches will strengthen critical digital literacy and support young people and local role models to communicate credible pathways to recognition, belonging and a future beyond violence.[66]

- **Turn early warning into coordinated action**. Our research in Colombia identified fragmented reporting channels, unclear responsibilities and responses that often began only after recruitment had occurred. We propose a national protocol to connect risk identification, assessment, reporting and response across protection authorities, schools, communities and digital platforms. Responses would be proportionate to the risk, combining preventive support, child protection, action by digital platforms and, where appropriate, criminal investigation. Children must be protected from criminalisation, stigma and retaliation.[67]

These are emerging lessons and promising approaches. There is still limited evidence of their effectiveness, and the proposed national protocol requires implementation and testing. Translating these proposals into sustained protection will require clear institutional responsibilities, trained teams, secure reporting systems, cooperation from digital platforms and predictable funding.[68]

CHILDREN AND BLAST INJURIES

Explosive weapons account for a growing share of child casualties in armed conflict, rising from 54 per cent in 2021 to more than 72 per cent in 2025.[69] Explosive weapons capable of causing devastating injuries continue to threaten children where they live, play and attend school. For children who survive, the consequences can last a lifetime.

Save the Children's *Children and Blast Injuries Report* highlights how children's smaller bodies and developing organs make them particularly vulnerable to explosive weapons. Survivors may experience multiple severe injuries, chronic pain, permanent disabilities and psychological trauma, requiring specialised care and sustained rehabilitation. As children grow, their needs change. Those who lose limbs may require further surgery and the repeated replacement of prosthetic devices throughout their childhood.[70] While verified figures of children maimed in conflict demonstrate the scale of serious injuries, they do not establish how many children acquired permanent disabilities.

Children with disabilities face additional barriers to accessing protection and assistance. Inaccessible information, evacuation procedures and services can increase their risk of being left behind or separated from caregivers and assistive devices.[71] Gaps in disability-disaggregated data further limit understanding of the harm they experience and whether assistance reaches them. When their needs are not identified, accessible services, rehabilitation, inclusive education and specialised support may be overlooked.



PHOTO: AHMED ALBASHA / SAVE THE CHILDREN



PHOTO: AHMED ALDASHA / SAVE THE CHILDREN

SAMI, 13, FROM YEMEN:

- I HATE THE FEELING OF PAIN; IT'S EXHAUSTING AND HAS NEVER LEFT ME.

Before he was injured, 13-year-old Sami loved football. Growing up in Taiz, Yemen, he spent hours playing with friends and dreamed of one day becoming a professional football player.

That dream was shattered when Sami was shot while playing near his home. The bullets tore through both of his legs, leaving him critically injured and close to death from blood loss.

«When I was shot, I remembered my mother, father, and siblings, and I was terrified that I would lose them, that I'd never see them again,» he says.

"My worst days were in the hospital. I was in constant pain. I hate the feeling of pain; it's exhausting and has never left me. My mother always tried to comfort me and my siblings stayed by my side. I was unable to go out or even move around because the doctor kept telling me I must not move. That was very frustrating for me.»

Sami survived, but the road to recovery has been long and painful. He has undergone nine surgeries and continues to receive treatment. For months, he was unable to walk and watched from home as other children continued to play outside.

Children who are injured need more than emergency care. They need long-term support and protection to help them return to education and rebuild their lives.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Save the Children calls on governments, parties to conflict, donors, international institutions and other relevant actors to turn commitments into sustained protection for children through three priorities.

1. **Uphold international standards in the conduct of conflict**

- **Uphold legal obligations.** States must respect IHL and ensure that children's distinct vulnerabilities are accounted for in targeting, operational planning, and civilian harm mitigation frameworks, including when using emerging technologies and AI-enabled systems.
- Mainstream children's rights. States must embed children's rights, risks, and needs through relevant policies, military doctrine, trainings, and peace and security frameworks.
- **Prevent arms transfers that are used to commit or facilitate violations.** States must refuse or suspend transfers where there is a clear risk of serious violations of international law, supported by child-specific risk assessments, end-use controls and post-delivery monitoring.
- **Uphold weapons prohibitions and strengthen safeguards**. States should uphold mine and cluster munition bans, implement the EWIPA Political Declaration, and support binding rules on autonomous weapons that ensure meaningful human control in the use of force.

2. **Hold perpetrators of violations to account**

- **Protect monitoring capacity and independence.** States and donors must sustain the MRM, specialist personnel and field coverage, defend impartial reporting and listing, and ensure reduced verification capacity is not mistaken for declining violations.
- **Turn engagement into compliance.** Member States must support time-bound action plans, verify implementation and use diplomatic, political and legal measures when parties fail to end violations. Engagement must not shield perpetrators from accountability.
- **Close gaps in national law and enforcement.** Governments must criminalise recruitment and use by armed forces and groups of all under-18s, align national legislation, and strengthen independent investigation and prosecution of crimes against children.
- **Deliver justice that responds to children.** Justice mechanisms must provide specialist expertise, safe and voluntary participation, protection from retaliation, and access to remedies and reparations. Associated children must be treated primarily as victims.

3. **Take practical action to protect children and support their recovery**

- **Invest in peace.** Develop and implement national strategies for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. All states, whether affected by conflict or not, should outline how they will contribute to a more peaceful and just world. Support inclusive peace efforts at local, national, regional and international levels.
- **Prevent harm.** Governments and donors must fund early warning and timely protection, address recruitment, including online, and embed children's protection in conflict prevention, humanitarian response, and long-term recovery.
- **Secure access and sustain essential services.** Governments and donors must prioritise children in humanitarian diplomacy, remove access barriers, and sustain protection, education, healthcare, rehabilitation and psychosocial support as children grow.
- **Fund inclusive, locally led responses.** Donors must provide predictable, flexible, multi-year funding reaching frontline actors. Humanitarian reforms must preserve specialist capacity, while services and better disaggregated data must address barriers facing excluded children.
- **Give children influence over decisions.** Governments and humanitarian actors must enable safe, accessible and meaningful participation, including for displaced children and children with disabilities.

«THIS IS WHY MY MESSAGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE UNITED NATIONS IS CLEAR: PROTECT THE CHILDREN OF GAZA AND LISTEN TO OUR VOICES.

WE NEED SAFETY, EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE AND PEACE. WE DO NOT WANT TO BE MERE NUMBERS.

WE ARE CHILDREN WITH DREAMS, HOPES AND A FUTURE. WE DESERVE TO LIVE SAFELY, WITH DIGNITY AND WITHOUT FEAR.»

- GIRL IN GAZA

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this report are based on the following methods and sources set out below.

1. **Updated analysis on the number and share of children living in conflict zones conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).** The core dataset used to map conflict patterns in this report is the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme's Georeferenced Event Data Set (UCDP GED) until 2025. To estimate the number of children living in conflict areas, and populations more generally, PRIO integrated the UCDP conflict data with population data from the CIESIN's Gridded Population of the World (GPW) and from the UN World Population Prospects. PRIO uses UCDP's definition of armed conflict: 'armed force used by an organised actor against another organised actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year'. A conflict zone is defined as 'an area within 50km of where one or more conflict incidents take place in a given year, within the borders of a country'. See more on our data page.

2. **Analysis of the 2026 UN annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (CAAC)**, which is based on data reported and verified in 2025. The analysis also draws on previous Save the Children mapping of the number of grave violations in the 2006–25 CAAC reports. The CAAC reports track the military use of schools and hospitals, but does not record them as grave violations. In this report, military use of schools and hospitals are also considered grave violations. The verified incidents of use are therefore added to the 'attacks on schools and hospitals' category of grave violations. We chose this methodology to give a fuller picture of the harm experienced by children in each conflict situation. The data in the UN's annual CAAC reports inevitably only paints a partial picture due to access restrictions, security threats and limited resources. This means not all cases can be reported and verified and are therefore not included in the report. Although the numbers of verified violations are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg, the trends are measurable and reflect the reality we see in conflict zones today. There is also a time-lag as some violations that have taken place in a given year might only be verified and included in the report covering the following year. In 2024, the UN CAAC report added a new category of violations encompassing all violations that have been verified in the reporting cycle for 2024 but occurred earlier. As these are not broken down by individual types of violations, the report separates these out as its own category but adds them to the total count for each country. This was not the case for the data covering 2025. See more on our data page.

3. **Analysis of problematic arms transfers.** The analysis *Arms sales to CAAC-listed parties 2025* was commissioned by Save the Children Norway and conducted by Analyse & Tall in September 2026. It examines deliveries of major conventional arms between 2023 and 2025 to states whose armed forces are listed in Annex I of the UN Secretary-General's 2026 annual report on Children and Armed Conflict for committing grave violations against children. The analysis cross-references these listings with delivery data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, maintained by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, using the version updated in September 2026.

4. **Legal and political commitments.** This framework is built on two dimensions that assess states' commitments to protect children in armed conflict. The first dimension is legal, and consists of international legal instruments that provide general, or special protection to children in armed conflict. The second dimension is political and consists of political declarations that states and entities can voluntarily endorse, as a special commitment to safeguarding children and their rights during armed conflict. Indicators have been chosen on the basis of being open source and continuous, globally consistent and replicable from year to year based on objective information. The two categories are: *Party / has endorsed* or *Not a party / has not endorsed*. For treaties, conventions, protocols and other legally

binding international instruments, «Party / has endorsed» means that the participant has become a party to, or is bound by, the instrument through ratification, acceptance, approval or accession. Signature alone is not counted. A participant that has formally notified its withdrawal remains classified as a party until the withdrawal takes effect. For political declarations and commitments, it means official endorsement. The update is based on the provisional status for 1 November 2026, based on records checked on 23 September 2026.

The denominator is 197 (193 UN Member States, the Cook Islands, the Holy See, Niue and the State of Palestine) except:

- The four Geneva Conventions the denominator is 196 because Niue is covered through New Zealand but is not a separate State Party,
- Paris Principles and Vancouver Principles are assessed against the 193 UN Member States.
- The political declarations on Safe Schools and EWIPA have been endorsed by Kosovo, which is outside the denominator above, has been added, and therefore assessed against 198.

See more on our data page.

5. **The analysis of national laws on child recruitment in Africa** was conducted by Professor Robert Doya Nanima, Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) and Special Rapporteur on Children in Conflict Situations and Dr Angela Nkatha Mutema, as a contribution to this report. It maps legislation across all 55 African Union member states against Article 22(2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, as interpreted in the Committee's General Comment on Article 22 and informed by its Model Law on Children Affected by Armed Conflict. The benchmark is a prohibition on recruitment of anyone under 18 and the criminalisation of such recruitment by any actor. The mapping examines three forms of legal protection: express constitutional provisions; dedicated legislation on children affected by armed conflict; and provisions embedded in penal or military law. Child protection, labour and anti-trafficking legislation are recorded as supplementary sources. Constitutions were reviewed in full, while legislative sources included official texts, the ICRC Customary IHL Database and US Department of Labor reports. Legal provisions were also considered alongside available evidence of implementation. Treaty ratification status reflects information reported by the author as of 1 October 2026.

ENDNOTES

1 An estimated 23,4% of the world's child population.
2 Calculations based on UCDP (2026) UCDP Geo - referenced Events Dataset v 26.1, CIESIN (2018) Gridded Population of the World, v.4.11. Palisades, Columbia University and UN (2024) World Population Prospects. UN dataset. See the Methodology chapter on page 44 - 45 for more information.
3 The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) uses the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definition of armed conflict: 'Armed force used by an organized actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.' A conflict zone is defined as an area within 50km from where one or more conflict incidents take place in a given year, within the borders of a country. See the Methodology chapter on page 44 - 45 for more information.
4 Calculations based on UCDP (2026) UCDP Geo - referenced Events Dataset v 26.1, CIESIN (2018) Gridded Population of the World, v.4.11. Palisades, Columbia University and UN (2024) World Population Prospects. UN dataset. See the Methodology chapter on page 44 - 45 for more information.
5 All six grave violations have been monitored under the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism since its establishment in 2005. However, the criteria for listing parties to conflict in the Secretary-General's annual reports expanded over time: killing and maiming and sexual violence were added in 2009, attacks on schools and hospitals in 2011, and abduction in 2015. Denial of humanitarian access remains the only grave violation that does not constitute a listing trigger. These developments, alongside changes in monitoring and verification capacity, should be considered when interpreting long-term trends.
6 United Nations *Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*, 2006-2026. See more on the methodology on page 44.
7 United Nations (2026), *Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*.
8 The first three global reporting periods following the establishment of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) did not correspond to calendar years: November 2005–September 2006 (11 months; report published in 2006), October 2006–August 2007 (11 months; published in 2007), and September 2007–December 2008 (16 months; published in 2009). Subsequent reports present figures by calendar year.
9 As we include the military use of schools and hospitals as a grave violation, and the UN report does not, the number might differ slightly from the totals as presented in the *Annual Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict*. Also, we only include violations that are reported and tagged to a specific violation. For more information, please see our methodology on page 44.
10 The numbers for each year are the numbers that were verified during that calendar year. Not necessarily the number that took place during that year.
11 While the reported total fell by 6.7 per cent from the previous year, this could partly be explained by the fact that at least 5,149 of the violations included in the data covering 2024 occurred in previous years. The 2025 total may likewise include cases and incidents that occurred earlier but were verified in 2025.
12 Save the Children, *Stop the War on Children: Gender Matters*, 2020.
13 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 22,495 *Haunting Cries: Children Affected by Conflict Endured an Unconscionable Number of Grave Violations in 2024*, 19 June 2025.
14 Save the Children International (2024), *Trapped and Scarred: The compounding mental harm inflicted on Palestinian children in Gaza*.
15 Save the Children review: *Documenting Denial: A Review of Accountability for Children's Humanitarian Access*. The briefing draws on a Save the Children study examining how international accountability mechanisms - Commissions of Inquiry, Fact-Finding Missions, UN experts and international courts - analyse and report on denial of humanitarian access to children. It is based on a desk review of more than 80 reports and documents relating to Yemen, Mali and the occupied Palestinian territory, supplemented by informal consultations with investigators, legal experts and child rights practitioners.
16 Save the Children, 2026, *Access for Children, Access for All: Strengthening Humanitarian Access in Conflict—An Aide Mémoire for Policymakers*, page 6–14.
17 Save the Children, 2026, *Access for Children, Access for All: Strengthening Humanitarian Access in Conflict—An Aide Mémoire for Policymakers*, page 6–14.
18 Save the Children, *Humanitarian Reset Implementation: Reflections from Country Programs*, March 2026.
19 Save the Children Iraq, MFA Iceland narrative report, January–June 2026.
20 Save the Children, Integrated Rapid Response for Children: *A Lessons-Learned Case Study from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*.
21 Save the Children, *Annual Review 2023*.
22 Save the Children's Learning Event Report, August 2026, and its public article, *Protecting Children Before Recruitment Begins: Lessons from South Sudan and Somalia*.
23 Save the Children Burkina Faso, presentation on the reintegration of children encountered during security operations, R2R 2021–2024, slides 2–8.
24 Save the Children Burkina Faso, presentation on the reintegration of children encountered during security operations, R2R 2021–2024, slides 2–8.
25 We reviewed ten legally binding instruments and endorsement of four political commitments relevant to the protection of children in armed conflict. See the Methodology chapter page 44 for more information on methodology, and here the full overview.
26 IHFCC, Andorra has officially joined the Geneva Conventions' Additional Protocols (APs), 2025
27 AP Mine Ban Convention, Membership, accessed 23 September 2026.
28 ATT, Treaty Status, accessed 23 September 2026.
29 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, accessed on 23 September 2026.
30 UN, Lebanon's Accession to the AP Mine Ban Convention, May 2026.
31 UN, Status Convention on Cluster Munitions, accessed 23 September 2026.
32 AP Mine Ban Convention, Membership, accessed on 23 September 2026.
33 HRW, Five European States Withdraw from Mine Ban Treaty, July 2025.
34 Convention on Cluster Munitions, 13th Meeting of States Parties, 2025.
35 UN, *Statement by the Secretary-General - on the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention*, June 2025.
36 UN, Depositary Notification Ukraine: Communication, 21 July 2025.
37 AP Mine Ban Convention, Final Report of the Twenty-Second Meeting of States Parties, December 2025, para. 50.
38 AP Mine Ban Convention, *Statement on behalf of the African group, Intersessional Meeting*, June 2025.
39 AP Mine Ban Convention, *Statement by South Africa, Intersessional Meeting*, June 2025.
40 ICRC Blogs, *Anti-personnel mines: the false promise of security through exceptionalism in war*, March 2025.
41 ICRC Blogs, *The humanitarian case for universalizing the Convention on*

Cluster Munitions, September 2026.
42 Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, Landmines and Explosive Remnants of War, accessed 23 September 2026.
43 Save the Children, Children and Landmines: The Lasting Impact of Landmines and Explosive Remnants of War on Children, 2026.
44 Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, Cluster Munitions, accessed 23 September 2026.
45 Save the Children, blog by Aneta Jamecna, Accountability for Violations and Crimes against children in conflicts, February 2024.
46 Maria Immacolata Fico, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, Justice for Children Part 1: Progress Made, Gaps Remaining, December 2025.
47 *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, 1990, Articles 2 and 22(2); ACERWC, General Comment on Article 22: *Children in Situations of Conflict*, 2020, paras. 30, 85 and 109.
48 Professor Robert Doya Nanima, Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Special Rapporteur on Children in Conflict Situations and Dr Angela Nkatha Mutema , *From commitment to accountability: National laws on child recruitment in Africa*, contribution to this report and accompanying legislative mapping; ratification status as reported by the author on 1 October 2026. More in Methodology chapter page 44 - 45.
49 Nanima, legislative mapping, including constitutional provisions and Chad's 2014 Ordinance; see original contribution, notes 9–11.
50 Nanima, legislative mapping, drawing on national legislation and US Department of Labor, *2024 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, 2025;* Rome Statute, Articles 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(vii); original contribution, notes 6 and 12–15.
51 Nanima, legislative mapping, drawing on national legislation and US Department of Labor, *2024 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, 2025;* Rome Statute, Articles 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(vii); original contribution, notes 6 and 12–15.
52 National legislation and country reports cited in Nanima's original contribution, notes 11 and 14–17.
53 ICRC, Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, the initiative's overview.
54 ICRC *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law* (2026) Workstream 1: Prevention Good Practices Outcome Document, September, page 4, 7.
55 ICRC *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law* (2026) Workstream 1: Prevention Good Practices Outcome Document, September, page 4, 7.
56 United Nations (2026), Annual Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict , para. 1 and Annexes I–II.
57 The analysis Arms sales to CAAC-listed parties 2025 was commissioned by Save the Children Norway and conducted by Analyse & Tall in September 2026, using data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database. The analysis examines transfers of major conventional arms to states listed in Annex I of the UN Secretary-General's 2026 *Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, covering the year 2025. See the methodology chapter on page 44 for further details.
58 Narmina Strishenets, Save the Children UK, Children and Drones: The Expansion of Unmanned and AI-Enabled Warfare and the Threat to Children's Survival, Protection and Recovery, 2026, page 18.
59 Narmina Strishenets, Save the Children UK, Children and Drones: The Expansion of Unmanned and AI-Enabled Warfare and the Threat to Children's Survival, Protection and Recovery, 2026.
60 Vanessa Murphy, Siobhan Sparkes McNamara and Tilman Rodenhäuser, Influencer, gamer, soldier, spy: the online era of child recruitment and its implications in international law (Part I), Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog, 1 October 2026.
61 OHCHR, Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 December 2024-31 May 2025, 30 June 2025, para 31-38
62 Fundación Mi Historia and Save the Children Colombia, Informe final—Mesas multiactor 2025 - 2026, page 4 - 5.
63 Fundación Mi Historia and Save the Children Colombia, Informe final - Mesas multiactor 2025 - 2026, page 7 - 9.
64 Fundación Mi Historia and Save the Children Colombia, Informe final - Mesas multiactor 2025 - 2026, page 7 - 9.
65 Ibid., page 4 and 10–13.
66 Ibid., page 6–13 and 23–24.
67 Ibid., page 17–23.
68 Ibid., page 10–13 and 19–22.
69 Unicef Canada, Explosive weapons and child casualties in conflict: Five key facts, 2025
70 Save the Children, *Children and Blast Injuries: The Devastating Impact of Explosive Weapons on Children*, 2020–2025 (2025).
71 HRW, Submission to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on Children in Armed Conflict, February 2025.


Save the Children
stopwaronchildren.org