



Save the Children

**STOP THE
WAR ON
CHILDREN**

SECURITY FOR WHOM?

MILITARIES FUNDED, CHILDHOODS FORGOTTEN

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 Thea Charlotte Andersen and Alvild Strømme, with support from Gunvor Knag Fylkesnes, Oliver Fiala, Jesper Roos and Abigail Adams-Gopsill, as well as other colleagues across the Save the Children movement who provided 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 Ida Haugen-Poljac and Konrad Jervell from Analyse & Tall, for their contributions to the report.

© Save the Children 2025

Cover page design: Afarin Alsharif

Graphic design: Eva Amdam and Afarin Alsharif

Copy-editor: Ravi Wickremasinghe

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:

data.stopwaronchildren.org/



Save the Children

PREVIOUS REPORTS ON THE WAR ON CHILDREN



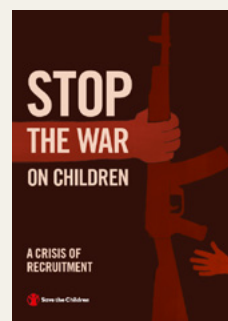
Stop the war on children – pathways to peace, 2024



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:

Lujain*, 11, at a displacement camp in Syria.

Photo: Kahlil Alachawi / Save the Children, 2025

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	8
1 CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES	12
The number of children living in conflict zones is at a record high	12
The highest number and proportion of children in conflict zones are in Africa	14
2 GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT	16
The gender dimension of grave violations against children	18
Children with disabilities	18
Breakdown of grave violations: the UN report on children and armed conflict	19
Killing and maiming of children	19
Recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups	19
Abduction of children	20
Sexual violence against children in conflict	20
Attacks on schools and hospitals	20
Denial of humanitarian access	21
3 BEYOND EXPOSURE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITIONS THAT ENDANGER CHILDREN	24
Monitoring matters	24
The security environment	25
Conflict intensity	25
The broader security landscape	26
The erosion of interconnected norms	27
Inhibitors and mitigators of grave violations	27
Engagement with the parties to conflict	27
Diplomatic engagement	28
Aid	29
Conclusion	29
4 GLOBAL COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT ..	32
Legal and political commitments to protecting children in armed conflict	33
Arms sales to conflict parties that commit grave violations against children	35
Country spotlights	36
5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES	40
METHODOLOGY ANNEX	42

FOREWORD

This report sheds light on one of the most devastating consequences of war: its impact on children. In today's conflicts, children are not just caught in the crossfire. They are on the frontlines of suffering. Children – and the services and infrastructure essential to them – are under attack. They are enduring lasting harm from the violence they played no part in creating.

Earlier this year, 17-year-old Sila from Syria addressed the United Nations Security Council, sharing the reality of what war has done to the children of her country. Speaking on behalf of every child who was promised a normal life but never got to live it, she delivered a message the world must hear:

«The war must end, not only on maps, but in our streets, in our memories, and in our children's toys. God willing, we will be the last generation to live this pain. The last generation to fall asleep to the sound of missiles and wake up to fear.»

Her words reflect a reality that too many children live every day. In 2024 alone, 41,763 grave violations against children were verified, representing a 30% increase from the previous year. This corresponds to an average of 78 children individually enduring grave violations every day, such as being killed or maimed, abducted, recruited, or sexually abused.

In 2024, we saw the highest level of conflict since the Second World War. Globally, 1 in 5 children are now growing up in conflict zones. Children growing up in militarised environments face immediate and lasting consequences: from lost education, to forced displacement, to physical and mental trauma.

Since 2010, the number of children living in conflict zones has increased by roughly 60%, while the verified grave violations committed against them have surged by approximately 373%. This disproportionate rise in grave violations reveals that beyond exposure

to conflict, there is also a deep erosion of the international norms and protections designed to shield children from harm.

This report also reveals another troubling reality: the current unilateral focus on combatting violence through military, state and private security solutions is failing to adequately protect children from the gravest forms of harm. In 2024, less than 2% of global security funds went towards peacebuilding and peacekeeping, mirroring the long-term trend in declining peace spending. True security must be reflected in the safety, well-being and future of the world's children.

That's why this report documents the impact that war is having on children around the world, but it is also a call to action. It aims to inform, engage and ensure accountability. Protecting children in war is not an option: it is a necessity, an obligation and a measure of our shared humanity.

Sila's words challenge us to reimagine security – as something that safeguards not just territory, but the lives and dreams of children. Let her words be more than testimony. Let them be a turning point.

Inger Ashing
CEO, *Save the Children International*

«MY FINAL MESSAGE: I AM FROM A GENERATION THAT SURVIVED PHYSICALLY, BUT OUR HEARTS STILL LIVE IN FEAR. HELP US REPLACE THE WORD ‘DISPLACEMENT’ WITH ‘RETURN’, THE WORD ‘RUBBLE’ WITH ‘HOME’, AND THE WORD ‘WAR’ WITH ‘LIFE’.»

Sila*, 17, from Syria



Scan to see her full intervention
before the United Nations Security
Council from June 2025.

The house of Manal* and her family in Yemen.

PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war on children is intensifying. 2024 saw record highs in both children's exposure to conflict and grave violations committed against them. This report documents how children are being targeted, harmed and denied protection. It analyses drivers of harm, and exposes the global security paradigm that continues to prioritise militarisation over protection.

Security for whom? Amid record highs in global military expenditure in 2024, children are less safe now than at any point in the past two decades. In the countries listed for grave violations against children in armed conflict, militarisation is also among the highest globally. At the same time, humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable people is being defunded, the Children and Armed Conflict mandate is under threat in the current UN80 process, and commitment to fundamental humanitarian norms is eroding. This paradox highlights a critical gap: security strategies often prioritise state and military security, but this does not automatically ensure safety for children. The key findings of this report include:

- **A record-high 520 million children – one in five children globally – were living in active conflict zones in 2024**, marking the highest figure ever recorded for the third consecutive year.
- **Africa now has both the highest number and share of children living in conflict zones**, with 218 million children affected – 32.6% of children in the region – the share surpassing the Middle East for the first time since 2007.
- **41,763 grave violations against children were verified by the UN**, a 30% increase from the year before.
- **78 individual children experienced grave violations on average every single day – that is more than 7 soccer teams of children**, in addition to children living in settings where schools are being attacked, hospitals targeted, and armed forces and groups are blocking access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance.
- **In 2024, more than half of the violations against children occurred in only four countries**, namely the occupied Palestinian territory, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Somalia.
- **The highest number of grave violations are verified in the occupied Palestinian territory.** This is also where the numbers of children killed or maimed are, by far, the highest, with one in every three children killed or maimed in conflict last year being Palestinian.
- **The cases and incidents under every violation increased**, apart from recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, where the number went down by 4.5% from 7,751 in 2023 to 7,405 in 2024.
- **Conflict exposure alone does not explain the steep rise in grave violations.** Since 2010, the number of children living in conflict zones has increased by roughly 60%, but the verified grave violations committed against them have surged by approximately 373%. This vast discrepancy reveals a deep erosion of the international norms meant to protect children.
- **The shaping of the broader security landscape is strongly linked with the children's exposure to grave violations.** Countries with high numbers of verified grave violations against children see higher conflict intensity, a stronger militarisation tendency, and a higher level of overall breakdown of compliance with international humanitarian law.
- **Engagement with the parties to conflict decrease the exposure to grave violations over time** but requires strong and consistent investment by the international community.
- **Many countries lack legal and political commitment to protecting children in armed conflict and a roll-back of commitment is looming.** As many as 33 UN member states have committed to less than half of the key international legal and political instruments that protect children in conflict and among signatories, some states have signalled an intention to withdraw or are slow to implement.
- **Negative trend for problematic weapon exports:** At least 9 states, despite being parties to key legal instruments and duty-bearers under customary international law, undermine child protection efforts by continuing to sell arms to parties that are listed for grave violations. More weapon capability was exported to these countries in 2024 than 2023, including to Russia, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Israel.

- **Reason for optimism:** 74 of the 193 UN member states have signed on to all, or nearly all, the legal and political instruments protecting children in war. Several new commitments have been made over the last year. But there is still a long way to go before these commitments are fully implemented and make a real difference for children living in war.

States must ask ‘Security for whom?’ and act urgently to end the war on children, putting children’s safety at the heart of international peace and security efforts. Our recommendations to governments include:

1. **Protect children in conflict.** Uphold international humanitarian law, ensure safe humanitarian access, and scale up targeted funding for children in emergencies and endorse and implement key treaties and declarations that safeguard children and education in war zones.
2. **Ensure accountability for violations against children.** Strengthen national and international accountability mechanisms, support the UN’s Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, and advocate for impartial listing of perpetrators of grave violations.
3. **Invest in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding.** Develop national strategies for peace, integrate conflict-sensitive education, and address root causes of conflict – such as poverty, inequality and climate vulnerability – through inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches.
4. **Listen to children and involve them.** Children must be meaningfully and safely included in peace processes, policy development and forums addressing conflict and climate change, so that their voices shape the decisions that affect their futures.



Damaged buildings after a horrific night of attacks on Kyiv, Ukraine (August 2025). At least 4 children aged 2 to 17 were killed, and dozens of people injured – including 10 children. Just days before the school year begins, children should be preparing for books and classrooms, not facing bombs and fear. Their lives must be protected.

PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN

DIEU MERCI*, 13, FROM DRC:

- AT TIMES I AM OVERCOME BY FEAR

«For me, security means protecting people. The attackers often come at night, which is why I wish there were night patrols. We, the children, cannot defend ourselves alone. Those men mainly target children.»

Dieu Merci is 13 years old and goes to fifth grade school. He likes playing cards and checkers and enjoys drawing. He lives with his mother and brother.

«What I saw and heard happened between 4 and 5 o'clock in the morning. I heard cries of distress: some were begging to be freed, saying that soldiers had surrounded them. Others replied: 'You are the ones calling the soldiers—now you will all die here'»

One of his brothers was killed, and two others were taken by attackers.

«I did not see directly what was happening, because we were locked inside the house. But the church where people were killed is just behind us, less than 20 metres away. When I heard the gunshots, I became very afraid.»

Dieu Merci's three brothers were in that church, where a prayer vigil was being held. He was at home with his mother. His father was travelling. As a child, he says, there was nothing he could do.

«I feel unsafe, I am very afraid. My friends and my two older brothers were taken. One of my brothers was killed, and this causes me immense pain. With all my heart, I wish for those who were taken to return.»

«Sometimes I feel a little better, but at times I am overcome by fear, with my heart beating very fast. To feel safe, I would like the military to increase their presence in the town, especially at night, and for my friends and brothers to return safely.»

Dieu Merci believes his brothers are still alive. Some people have managed to escape captivity and said they were not mistreated, as long as they stayed obedient and submissive.

«Many terrible things happen to children if they are not protected. For example, they cannot go alone into the forest, because many are killed there. I wish all children could be kept away from war.»

«That church feels like a cemetery to me. I saw many dead being carried out of it. My wish is to see it collapse one day, because too many lives were lost there.»

(*Name has been changed)

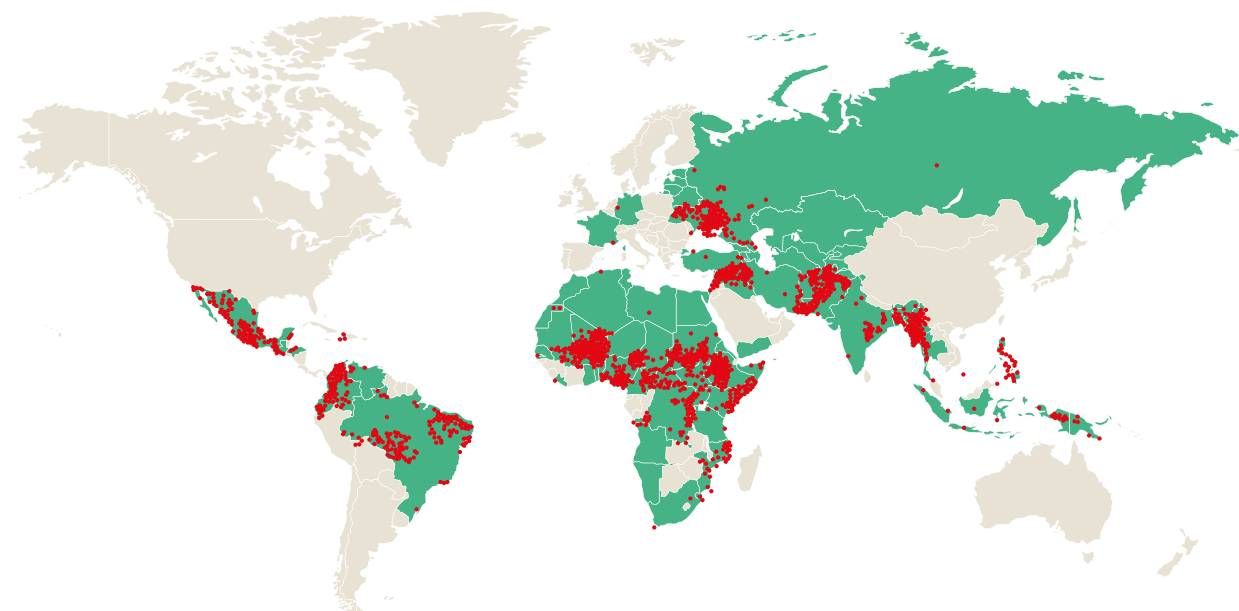
«I wish that children
could be given help,
such as clothes, shoes,
and schoolbags.»



PHOTO: PATOU DOMB / SAVE THE CHILDREN

1 CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES

FIGURE 1: CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AND CONFLICT ZONES, 2024



CREATED BY THE PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE OSLO (PRIO), USING UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM GEOREFERENCED EVENT DATASET (UCDP GED)

THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES¹ IS AT A RECORD HIGH

In 2024, there were 61 state-based conflicts² in the world – the most since 1946.³ More than 11% of the earth's land surface was affected by at least one

conflict event within 50km – the highest share ever recorded and a 30% rise from 2023. The intensity of conflict has also increased, with the number of recorded events globally rising from approximately 24,000 in 2023 to nearly 27,000 in 2024.

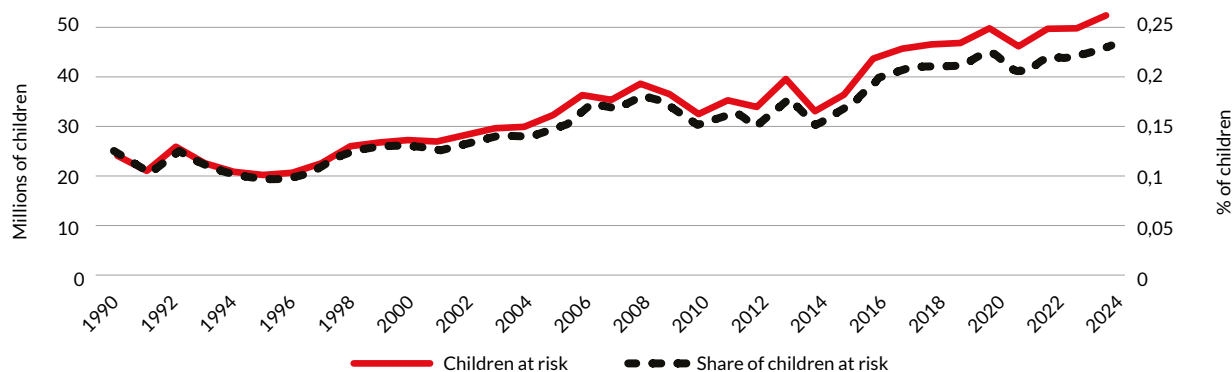
Simultaneously, the number of children living in conflict zones⁴ reached an unprecedented level. According to new estimates by the Peace Research

- 1 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,' which is a wider definition than the one used by the UN in their Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) report.
- 2 State-based conflicts refer to any conflict where at least one of the warring parties is a state government
- 3 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. [UCDP: Sharp increase in conflicts and wars](#). 2025.
- 4 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 methodology annex for more information.

Institute Oslo (PRIO)⁵, more than 520 million children – 1 in 5 children globally (20.7%) – were living within 50km of violent conflict events. This is a 5% increase from 2023 and marks the highest-ever figure recorded

in the 25 years that this data has been compiled, both in absolute numbers and as a share of the global child population.

FIGURE 2: THE NUMBER AND SHARE OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES 1990-2024

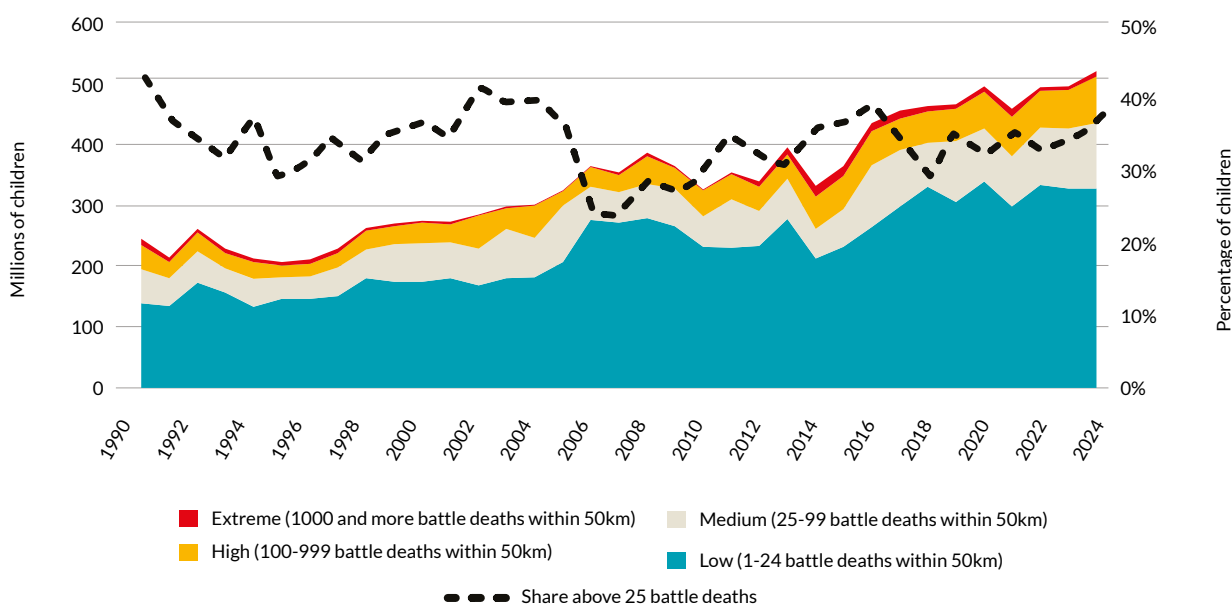


CREATED BY PRIO, USING UCDP GED, DATASET V.23.1 AND UN WORLD POPULATION PROSPECTS

This is the latest milestone in a devastating long-term trend of steady increases in children living conflict zones, as can be seen in figure 2. The *number* is more than two and a half times as high as in the mid-1990s. When we then look at the share of children living in conflict zones over time, this number has more than doubled, from some 10% in the mid-1990s to

over 20% in 2024 (see dashed line). Thus, the sharp increase is mainly due to a higher proportion of children living in conflict zones rather than population growth. This rise is in turn driven by the widening geographic footprint of armed conflict, the expansion of conflict into densely populated areas, and the growing intensity of violence.

FIGURE 3: CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES, BY CONFLICT INTENSITY, 1990-2024



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

⁵ The indicator for children living in conflict zones, developed by PRIO, is the first to provide a systematic measure of the numbers and proportion of children living in conflict on a sub-national level.

In 2024, nearly two-thirds (63%) of children exposed to conflict lived in areas experiencing low-intensity violence, defined as zones with 1–24 battle-related deaths within a 50km radius. An additional 20.5% were in medium-intensity conflict zones (25–99 deaths), while 15% lived in high-intensity zones (100–999 deaths). Notably, 8.3 million children, representing 1.6% of all conflict-exposed children, were living in areas of extreme conflict intensity, where 1,000 or more battle-related deaths occurred within the same radius over the course of the year. The overall distribution across different levels of conflict intensity is similar to 2023, with slight decreases in exposure to low-intensity and extreme conflict-intensity, and slight increases in exposure to medium and high-intensity conflict. Over time, there has been an increase in exposure of children across all conflict intensity levels, with the group of children exposed to low-intensity conflict increasing the most.

THE HIGHEST NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ZONES ARE IN AFRICA

Turning to regional breakdowns, figures 4 and 5 below show significant regional differences in exposure to conflict. In 2024, Africa had the highest number of children living in conflict zones – 218 million children or 32.6% of children living in the region.⁶ This marks the first time since 2007 that Africa surpassed the Middle East in proportional exposure. Asia followed with 169 million children affected, though the share was the second lowest at 13.6%. In the Americas, 65 million children were living in conflict zones (22.7%), while the Middle East had 50 million children in conflict zones, which is the second-highest proportion with 30.8% of children in conflict zones. Europe saw a near doubling from 2023, with 15 million children affected.

FIGURE 4: NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ZONES (2024)

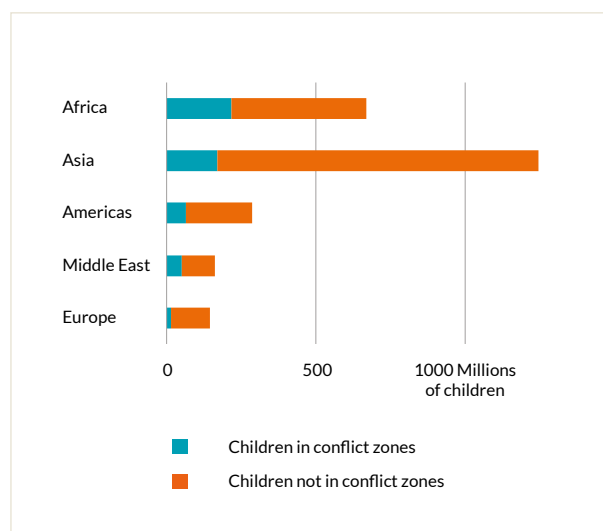
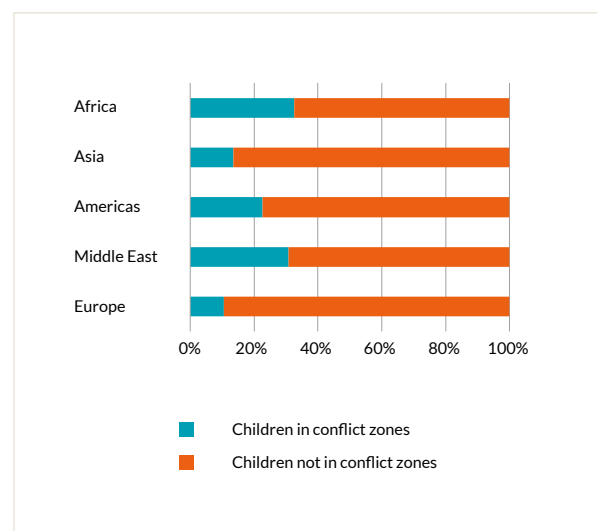


FIGURE 5: SHARE OF CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ZONES (2024)



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

⁶ PRIO estimates this by using data from UCDP GED. They draw circular buffer zones with a 50km radius around each recorded lethal event of organised violence and combine these with local population estimates from CIES and the UN to calculate how many children live within affected areas.

2 year old Omar* looks out at destroyed street in the occupied Palestinian territory.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN



2 GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

In 1999 the Security Council adopted resolution 1261, the first UN resolution to specifically address the issue of children in armed conflict. This was followed up in 2005 with resolution 1612 when six grave violations against children in conflict were set out and have since been systematically reported in conflict situations across the world.

The six grave violations against children are⁷:

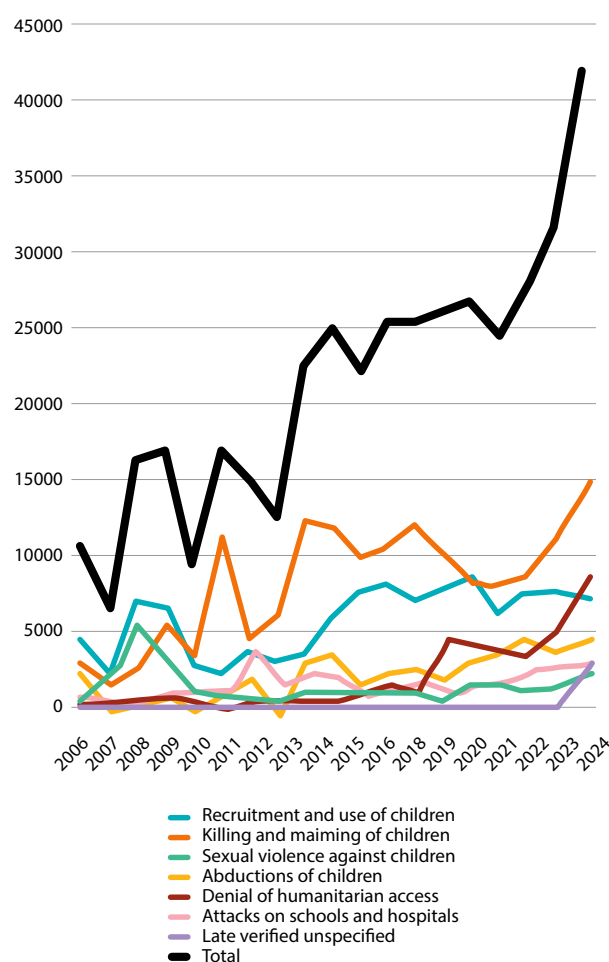
1. killing and maiming of children
2. recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups
3. abduction of children
4. attacks on schools and hospitals
5. sexual violence against children
6. denial of humanitarian access.

The violations are presented in the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict (CAAC)⁸, which documents grave violations and presents an annex listing perpetrators.⁹

Two decades of verifying grave violations against children

Since reporting started, more than 400,000 grave violations against children in conflict in 33 countries around the world have been verified. The highest rates are found under killing and maiming, and recruitment. Since 2005 almost 160,000 children have been killed or maimed, while more than 100,000 children have been recruited and used by armed forces and groups.

FIGURE 6: THERE HAS BEEN A DEVASTATING RISE IN GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT (2006–24)



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

⁷ Note that in the 2025 Children and Armed Conflict report, a number of violations are reported as having taken place in previous year(s) but are just now being presented in the report. In most situations these violations are not specified in terms of which violation it refers to, gender, or other specifics. We have included them here as 'late verified, unspecified'. In situations where they are specified, as in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, we have included them under the relevant violation.

⁸ The Children and Armed Conflict report tracks 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 a grave violation. Verified incidents of use are therefore added to the 'attacks on schools and hospitals' category as grave violations.

⁹ One out of the six grave violations, namely denial of humanitarian access, is currently not triggering a listing in the annex of the report.

Our analysis of the annual reports on children and armed conflict shows that, since reporting began, the number of verified grave violations against children has never been higher than in 2024. The data confirms that **41,763 violations against children were verified in 2024**, a 30% increase from the year before. If we narrow it down to cases against individual children, such as killing and maiming, abductions, recruitment or sexual violence, an average of **78 individual children experienced grave violations every single day – more than 7 soccer teams of children every day** – in addition to living in settings where schools are being attacked, hospitals targeted, and armed forces and groups are blocking access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance¹⁰. Despite these high numbers, we know that these cases and incidents only represent the tip of the iceberg, with many violations going under the radar.¹¹

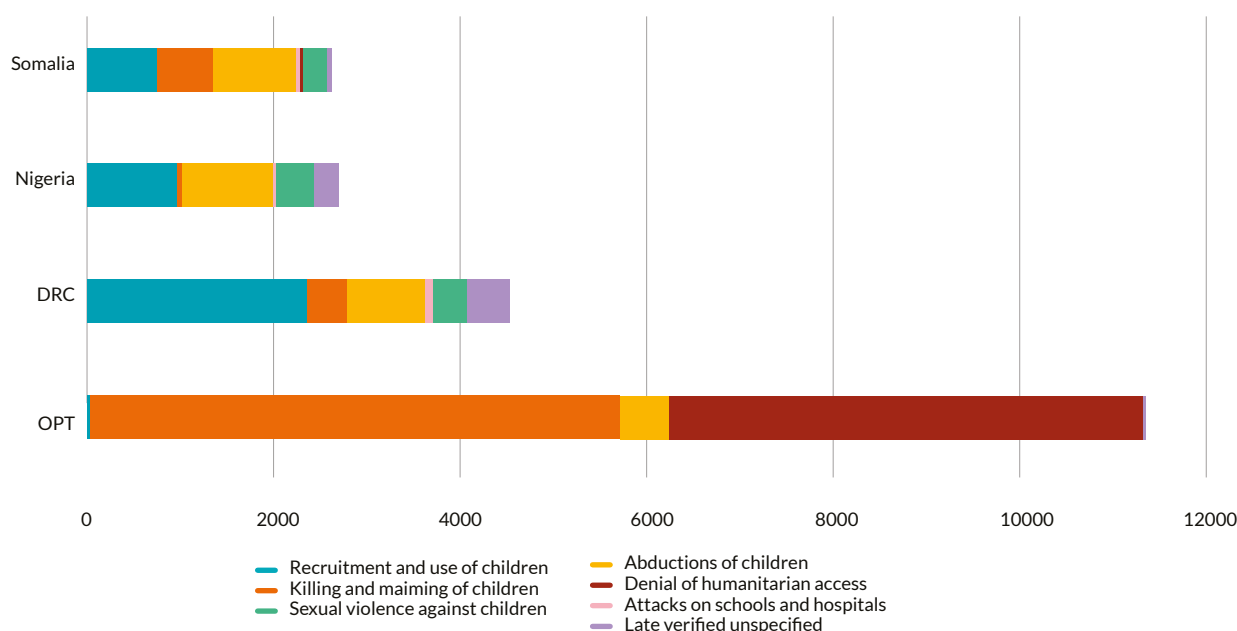
Reporting grave violations against children takes time and resources, and working in a conflict setting adds constraints related to safety, access, stigma, funding and politics. Once reported, a thorough process of verification is carried out. Again, the process faces the same constraints. Sometimes months and years pass between¹² when the incident took place and the crime was committed to when it is reported, verified and finally presented in the annual Children and Armed Conflict report.

Some violations are reported more frequently than others. This is explained partly by the fact that some violations are more widespread in general, or in specific contexts, but is also affected by the nature of the violation, awareness of it, reporting capacity, prioritisation, and access. For example, documenting deaths is often more feasible than documenting how many children have been maimed or recruited. Cases of sexual violence in particular are known to be under-reported, due to a range of constraints.¹³

In 2024, more than half of the violations occurred in only four countries, namely the occupied Palestinian territory, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Somalia.

The highest number of verified grave violations are in the occupied Palestinian territory. This is also where the number of children killed or maimed are higher by far than in any other country. At the continental level, in line with the findings in the previous chapter, Africa has the highest number of violations overall: a total of 18,132 violations were committed against African children.

FIGURE 7: THE 4 COUNTRIES WITH MORE THAN HALF OF ALL GRAVE VIOLATIONS (2024)



SOURCE: THE 2025 UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

¹⁰ UN. [CAAC Report](#). 2025.

¹¹ UN. [CAAC Report](#). 2025.

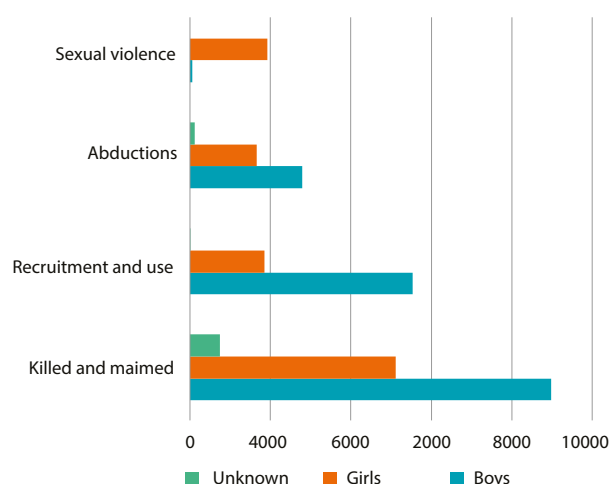
¹² In the 2025 Children and Armed Conflict report a number of violations are reported as having taken place in previous year(s), but are just now being presented in the report. In most situations these violations are not specified in terms of which violation it refers to, gender, or other specifics. We have included them here as 'late verified, unspecified'. In situations where they are specified, as in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, we have included them under relevant violation. While some violations are being verified late, others are reported but are still in the process of being verified and will be included in next year's report.

¹³ For more in-depth analysis of sexual violence against children in conflict, see: [Save the Children. Weapon of War: Sexual violence against children in conflict](#). 2021.

THE GENDER DIMENSION OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

Children's experience of armed conflict is heavily affected by their gender. In 2024, 60% of all verified cases of killing and maiming, recruitment, abductions, and sexual violence were committed against boys, 37% against girls, and in 3% of cases the gender was not specified. While boys made up the majority of overall cases, girls were disproportionately affected by sexual violence. Since the UN annual report on Children and Armed Conflict started specifying boys and girls in its reporting on grave violations, this has been a consistent trend.¹⁴

FIGURE 8: GIRLS IN CONFLICT ZONES FACE DIFFERENT RISKS FROM BOYS (2024)



SOURCE: THE 2025 UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Sexual and gender-based violations remain significantly under-reported, largely due to the pervasive perceived stigma associated with such experiences. For boys and men who have been subjected to sexual violence, this pattern of under-reporting is understood to be proportionally even greater.¹⁵ Accounts that do surface consistently highlight that sexual violence as a manifestation of power, humiliation, and an intent to inflict harm and destruction.

The heightened risks of being killed, maimed, recruited or abducted among boys, particularly adolescent boys, is closely linked to cultural gender norms that shape where and how children spend their time. Boys are often expected and allowed to spend more time outside in the community, whereas girls are more

likely to remain at home. As a result, boys face greater exposure to crossfire, unexploded ordnance, and other explosive remnants of war, as well as recruitment and abduction. However, we see that the distribution between boys and girls varies in different contexts. For example, the data reflecting violations verified in 2024 shows that 80% of the children killed or maimed in Yemen were boys, while in other countries the distribution of children killed or maimed was more equal between boys and girls: in Ukraine 56% of children killed or maimed were boys and 44% girls, and in the occupied Palestinian territory 59% were boys and 41% girls.¹⁶ This indicates a shift in the nature of conflict towards both more urbanised warfare and indiscriminate targeting of civilians. Given the significant under-reporting on sexual and gender-based violence, programming in a humanitarian response should assume that this is a significant risk rather than waiting for data to act.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Overall, globally, there are 240 million children living with disabilities, meaning that one in every ten children has a disability.¹⁷ In all, more than a 1 billion people have a disability, and a staggering 16% of these disabilities are directly linked to armed conflict.¹⁸ In conflict, injuries caused by mines and explosives are among the key factors leading to disability. Children with disabilities living in conflict are especially vulnerable to violence and exclusion, often losing access to education and other basic services first and being the last to regain them.

In 2024, as in the previous year, the highest number of verified cases of killing and maiming of children was in the occupied Palestinian territory. If we take a closer look at Gaza, we find that 40,500 children have suffered conflict-related injuries since the war started in October 2023.¹⁹ Many of these children will live with disability for the rest of their lives. The military operations and siege of Gaza have inflicted severe trauma and suffering on all Palestinian children, especially those with disabilities.²⁰ These children face immense barriers in accessing essential medical care, assistive devices, food, clean water and education that are critical for their long-term development. According to the Global Protection Cluster, more than 83% of people with disabilities in Gaza have lost their assistive devices, which many rely on for their dignity and inclusion.²¹

¹⁴ UN. CAAC Reports. 2020-25.

¹⁵ For a further elaboration on the gender dimensions of violations, see: Save the Children. *Stop the War on Children 2020: Gender Matters*. 2020.

¹⁶ UN. *CAAC Report*. 2025.

¹⁷ UNICEF. *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*. 2021.

¹⁸ OCHA. *Persons with Disabilities in Armed Conflict: Inclusive Protection*. 2020.

¹⁹ Global Protection Cluster. *oPt (Gaza) Protection Analysis Update*. 2025.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch. *Gaza: Israeli attacks devastate lives of children with disabilities*. 2024.

²¹ Global Protection Cluster. *oPt (Gaza) Protection Analysis Update*. 2025.

BREAKDOWN OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS: THE UN REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

The neglected conflict in Sudan

In 2024, the conflict in Sudan became one of the world's deadliest for children. At least 752 children were killed and 987 maimed, the highest numbers recorded in the country since monitoring began. Attacks on schools and hospitals escalated, while humanitarian access was systematically blocked. Millions of children have been displaced, often multiple times, with little or no access to education or healthcare.

Despite the scale of harm, Sudan remains a neglected crisis, receiving only a fraction of the diplomatic attention and funding given to other emergencies. The crisis highlights the urgent need to address aid disparities and ensure that children in less visible conflicts receive equal protection.²²

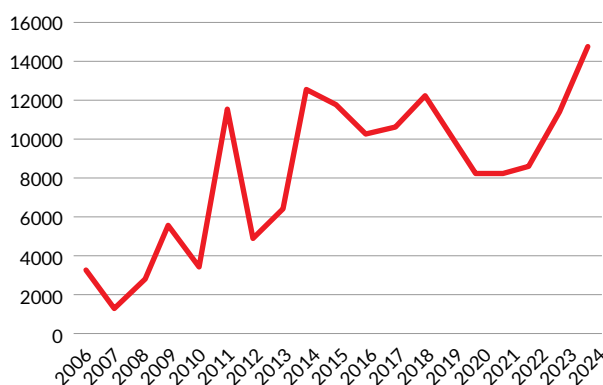
Looking at the six grave violations compared with the previous year, the cases and incidents increased for every violation apart from the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, where the number decreased by 4.5% from 7,751 in 2023 to 7,405 in 2024. Despite this slight annual decrease, the long-term trend for this violation is also rising.

KILLING AND MAIMING OF CHILDREN

Since reporting on children and armed conflict started in 2005, more than 160,000 children have been killed or maimed in conflict situations across the world. In that period the annual total has more than tripled, reaching a grim record in 2024 with 6,359 children killed and 8,480 children maimed in conflict.

Nowhere else were more children killed and maimed in 2024 than in the occupied Palestinian territory: one in every three children killed or maimed in conflict last year was Palestinian. The numbers of children killed and maimed in Sudan and Myanmar are also high. In Sudan, which has been on the agenda since reporting started, 752 children were killed and 987 maimed in 2024, the highest annual total ever recorded in the country for this violation. In Myanmar 262 children were killed and 999 were maimed, also the highest number of children recorded here since reporting started in 2005.

FIGURE 9: THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN KILLED AND MAIMED IN CONFLICT IS RISING (2005–24)

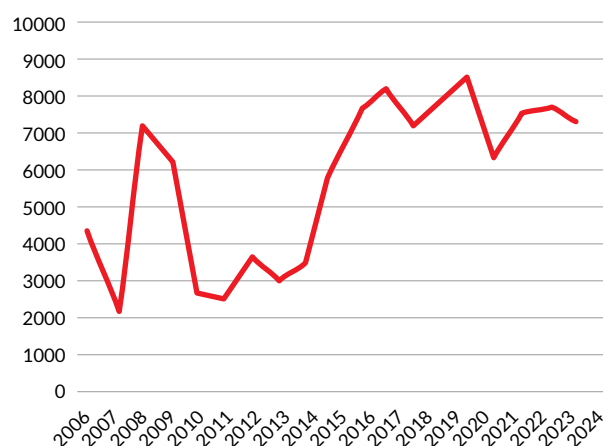


SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN BY ARMED FORCES OR ARMED GROUPS

Although the number of verified cases of recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups went down 4.5% from 7,751 in 2023, the overall trend over the last decades is increasing. In 2024, there were 7,405 verified cases of children recruited and used by armed forces, with the highest number in DRC with 2,365 verified cases. Since 2005, almost 20,000 cases have been verified in DRC, which has been on the agenda since reporting started. More than half of the total cases verified worldwide in 2024 occurred in three African countries. Alongside DRC, there were 974 verified cases of children recruited and used by armed forces and groups in Nigeria and 768 cases in Somalia. More than 70% of verified cases of children having been recruited into armed groups and forces were in countries in Africa.

FIGURE 10: RECRUITMENT AND USE BY ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS IN 2024



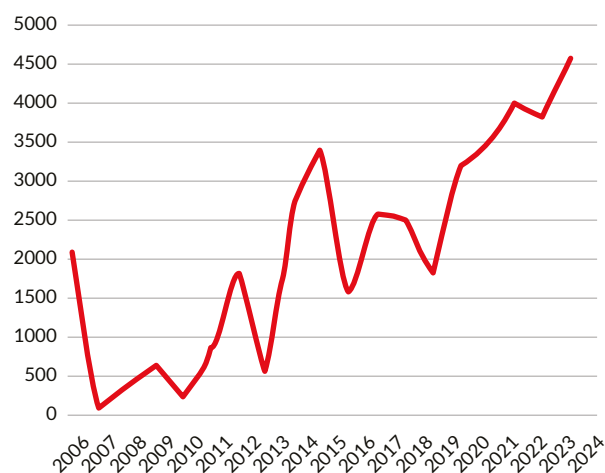
SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

²² In 2025, the humanitarian funding received by Sudan totaled about half of that received by the highest funded response. [OCHA. Financial Tracking Service](#). 2025 (accessed Sep.15, 2025)

ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN

4,572 children were abducted by armed forces and groups in 2024. As is the case with most other violations, the number of verified cases is increasing; the number of abductions has never been higher.

FIGURE 11: THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN ABDUCTED HAS NEVER BEEN HIGHER (2005–24)



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

As with recruitment, children from countries in Africa are over-represented when it comes to abductions, comprising more than 86% of verified cases in 2024. In Nigeria 991 children were abducted, with 887 cases in Somalia and 815 cases in the Democratic Republic of Congo. High numbers of abductions of children have consistently been verified in these three countries over the last five years, with two out of three abductions of children globally taking place in one of these countries.

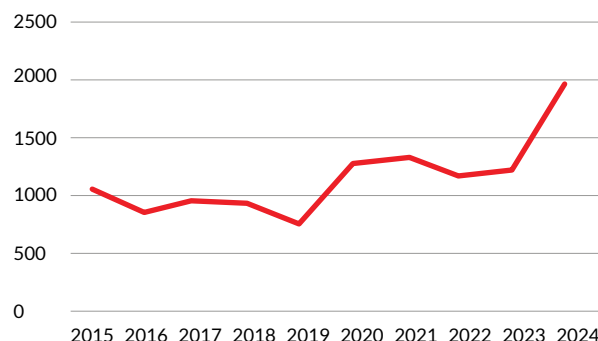
SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

A similar, alarming trend is evident regarding sexual violence against children in conflict. In 2024, a total of 1,982 cases of sexual violence against children in conflict were verified; 87% occurred in just five conflict situations. Haiti, a crisis that has only been included in the UN Children and Armed Conflict report since 2023, had the highest number of verified cases of sexual violence in 2024 with 566 cases, an acute rise from 41 cases the year before. Nigeria had 419 verified cases of sexual violence in 2024 and in the Democratic Republic of Congo there were 358 cases. While the total numbers of cases are lower than for other violations, over the last decade the numbers have been increasing.

As mentioned, this specific violation is under-reported due to a range of perceived stigmas, with sexual

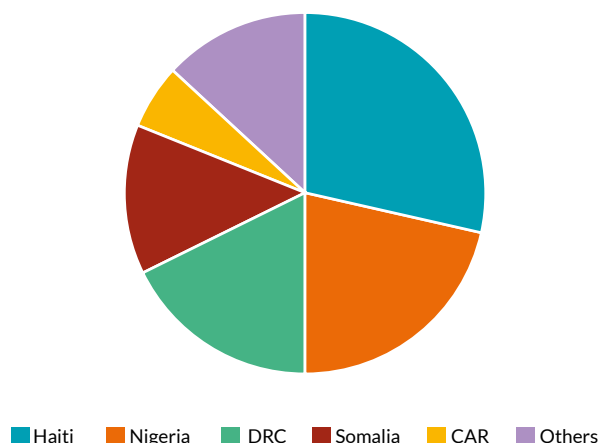
violence against boys particularly under-reported. In ten conflict situations no cases of sexual violence against children are verified at all.

FIGURE 12: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT IS INCREASING (2015–24)



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

FIGURE 13: 87% OF VERIFIED CASES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ARE FROM JUST 5 COUNTRIES (2024)



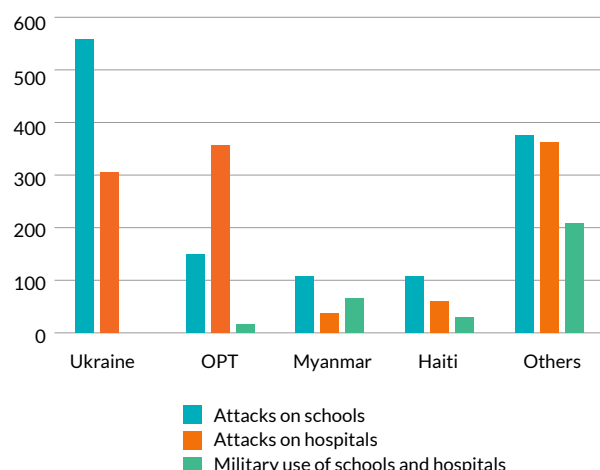
SOURCE: THE 2025 UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

For the fourth consecutive year, the number of attacks on schools and hospitals has increased and reached 2,694 incidents in 2024. This includes 1,278 attacks on schools, 1,108 attacks on hospitals, and 308 incidents where schools and hospitals have been used for military purposes.²³ One third of these incidents took place in Ukraine, with 559 attacks on schools and 303 attacks on hospitals. Since 2022, there have been 1,981 verified attacks on schools in Ukraine. We also see an alarming number of attacks in the occupied Palestinian territory, Myanmar and Haiti.

²³ In the UN Children and Armed Conflict report, military use of schools and hospitals are not counted when summing up the grave violations. However, we choose to include them in this report.

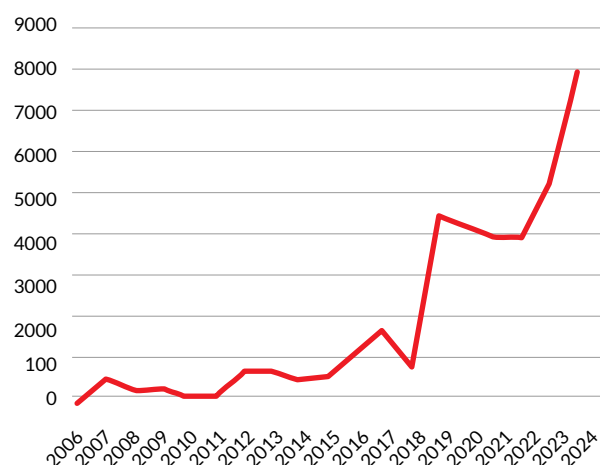
FIGURE 14: ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS IN 2024



SOURCE: THE 2025 UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

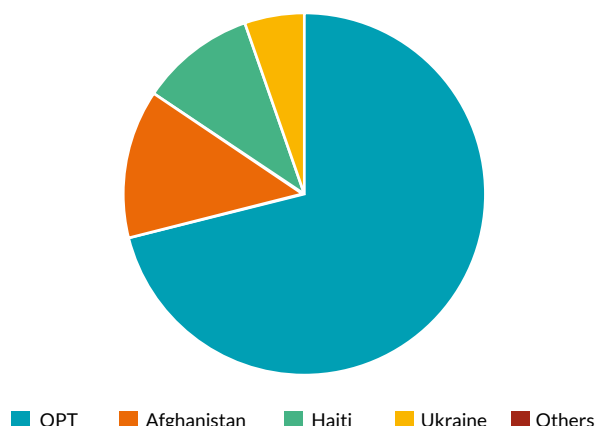
FIGURE 15: THE ALARMING INCREASE IN HUMANITARIAN ACCESS BEING DENIED (2005–24)



SOURCE: UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Incidents where armed forces or armed groups deny access to lifesaving assistance to children is becoming a growing concern across conflict situations. Again, we see a 53% increase in humanitarian access being denied in 2024, with 7,906 cases globally. The steep increase is mostly explained by the high number of incidents verified in the occupied Palestinian territory, with 5,091 incidents in 2024 – more than 60% of all such incidents globally. Since 2020, there has been a 90% increase worldwide in incidents of armed forces and groups denying people access to humanitarian aid.

FIGURE 16: MORE THAN 60% OF INCIDENTS OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS BEING DENIED IN 2024 WERE IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY



SOURCE: THE 2025 UN ANNUAL REPORT ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Denial of humanitarian access, which includes the intentional blocking or impeding of the free passage or timely delivery of humanitarian aid to children in need, also includes deliberate attacks on humanitarian workers. Being a humanitarian worker is becoming more and more dangerous. According to Aid Worker Security Database, 2024 was the most lethal year for aid workers by far since 1997. They report 601 incidents in 2024, affecting 818 workers, 385 of whom were killed.²⁴ Attacks on humanitarian workers lead to the denial of lifesaving assistance and impede access to report and verify grave violations against children.

Beyond statistics: the loss of childhood

Grave violations are not just numbers: they represent children robbed of their futures. A classroom seat left empty signifies a child who has been killed. A maimed child may live with lifelong disability without adequate care. A child abducted or recruited faces trauma that can last decades.

The 41,763 verified violations in 2024 translate into tens of thousands of children denied education, healthcare, play and safety – the basics of childhood. The war on children is not only a protection crisis but a developmental catastrophe.

24 Aid Worker Security Database. [Figures at a glance](#). 2024

«I made this drawing because it is what I lived through. These images haunt me. I saw a man killed right in front of me, and that memory will never leave.»

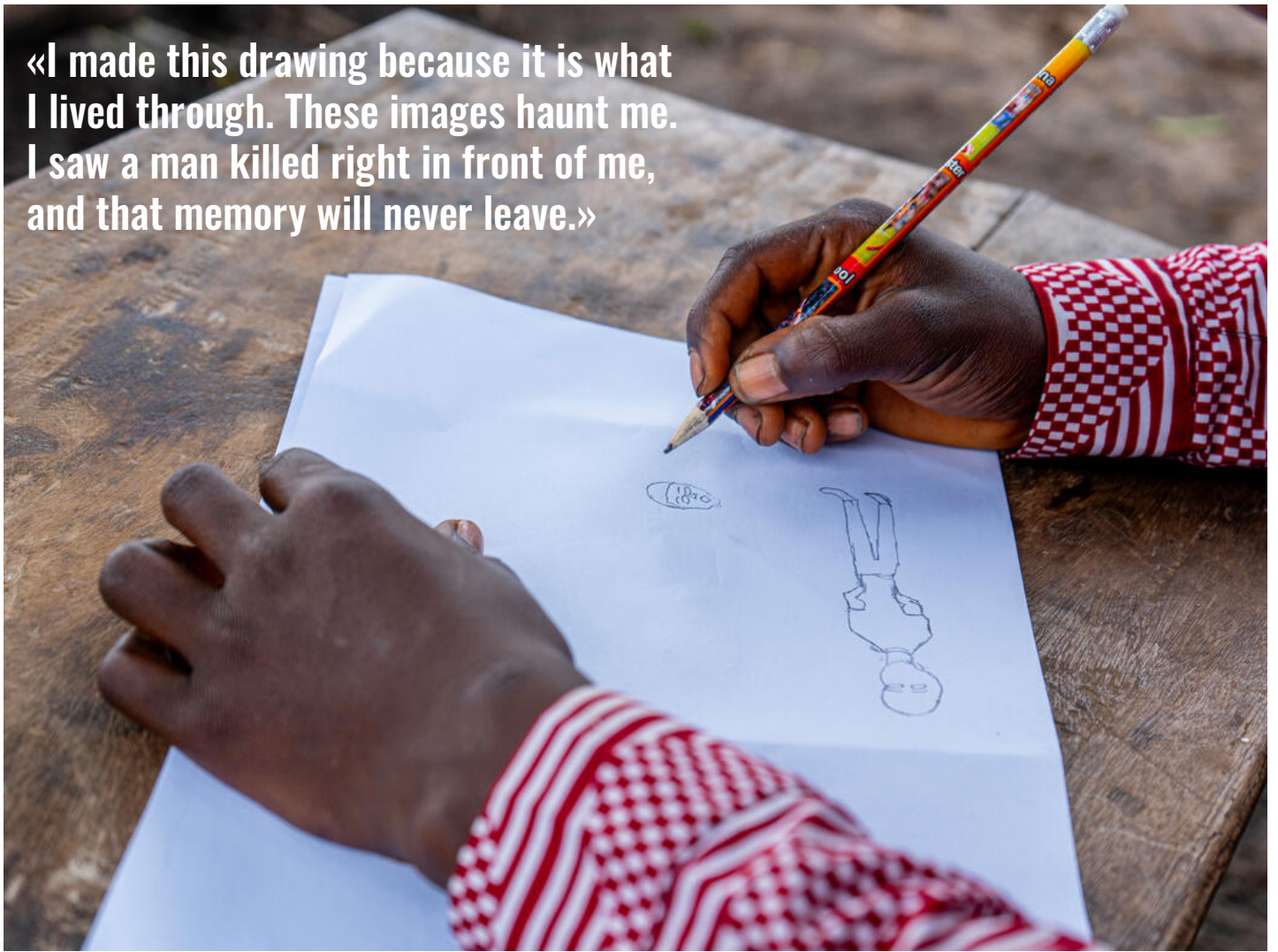


PHOTO: PATOU DOMBI / SAVE THE CHILDREN

FABRICE*, FROM DRC:

- WHAT I EXPERIENCED SCARRED ME DEEPLY

«I was in the church that night, during the prayer vigil. At one point, two young men arrived and began forcibly snatching people's phones. Shortly after, a larger group of older men appeared. They threatened the congregation and ordered everyone to lie on the ground. They fired shots into the air and began sorting people into groups: the youth, the mothers, the fathers, and the elderly.»

Fabrice is a fifth grader and loves reading, analysis, science and drawing, which he considers a natural gift. Since the event at the church, he has lived in constant fear.

«What I experienced scarred me deeply. We ask for protection; at school, on the way to school, and here in our town. I often feel like I am not free. Every time I think back to that night, I am afraid, and sometimes I have nightmares.»

He says the attackers started killing the elderly. The rest were tied together with a rope around their waists, one behind the other, and taken into the forest. Their attackers men were heavily armed—with machetes, hoes, guns and sturdy wooden planks.

As they left the church, the attackers set fire to some houses and vehicles parked outside. On the way, they stopped to communicate by phone and with radio devices, speaking in a language the locals didn't understand. Then they continued walking.

«At one point, the rope was untied. I took advantage of the moment, along with three other people, to escape. Since that event, I have lived in constant fear.»

«I wish for peace to return to my town. I am even afraid to fetch water from the well, because it is along the same path the attackers took that night. I fear meeting them again and being taken. It is urgent to strengthen security in the town so that such events never happen again.»

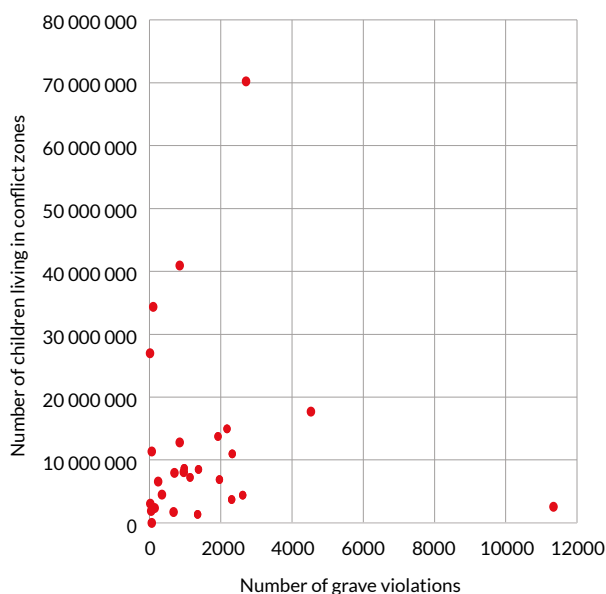
«In the future, I want to become a tailor, like my mother. I love watching her work, and it inspires me.»

(*Name has been changed)

3 BEYOND EXPOSURE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITIONS THAT ENDANGER CHILDREN

Since 2010, the number of children living in conflict zones has increased by roughly 60%, but the verified grave violations committed against them have surged by approximately 373%. While exposure to conflict is a key risk factor, it does not fully explain why some countries see far higher levels of grave violations than others.

FIGURE 17: NUMBER CHILDREN AT RISK AND GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN



SOURCE: PRIO; THE 2024 UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT.

Comparing the number of children living in conflict zones with the number of children being subjected to grave violations, in all countries monitored by the UN report on children and armed conflict, reveals a

nuanced picture. While figure 17 shows an overall tendency for a higher number of verified grave violations to take place in countries with a higher number of children living in conflict zones, there are also significant outliers. This tendency is backed up by a statistical analysis which shows a positive but very weak link – a mere 6% of the variation in grave violations could be explained through exposure to conflict alone.²⁵ This finding underscores the need to look beyond exposure to understand what drives or mitigates violations.

The following sub-sections explore three key dimensions that shape both the visibility and likelihood of grave violations against children in conflict: monitoring capacity, the broader security environment and child protection actions. Where monitoring is weak or access is denied, violations may go undocumented because they remain hidden. The security environment, including conflict intensity, militarisation and erosion of international norms, significantly influences both the scale and type of harm children face. Finally, child protection actions taken by parties to conflict, humanitarian actors and the international community reflect the political will and capacity to safeguard children. Together, these dimensions help illuminate the deeper dynamics behind the war on children and offer critical insights for prevention, accountability and protection.

MONITORING MATTERS

Part of this discrepancy is undoubtedly due to differences in visibility across contexts. While the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) has become a cornerstone of efforts to document grave violations against children in conflict, its reach and capacity is consistently reported to merely scratch the

²⁵ See methodology annex for a further explanation of the analysis.

surface of the violations committed.²⁶ Further, no open data exists to assess whether reach is uneven across contexts. This limits our ability to fully assess how monitoring capacity influences the visibility of violations.²⁷

The absence of data does not diminish the importance of monitoring; rather, it highlights a critical blind spot. In contexts where the MRM is well-established, violations are more likely to be reported, verified and addressed. Conversely, in areas with limited access, high insecurity or weak child protection infrastructure, violations may go undocumented – not because they don't occur, but because they remain hidden.²⁸ This has profound implications for both accountability and protection. Strengthening the MRM is therefore essential. Improved access, resourcing and political support would not only enhance documentation but also enable earlier intervention and more effective prevention.

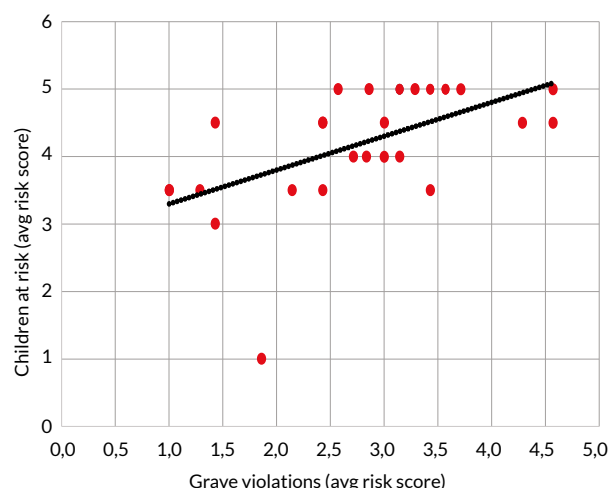
THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The security environment in which children in conflict-affected countries live is shaped not only by the fact that conflict is taking place, but by its intensity, character, and the overall safety and security in a society. This section explores how these factors and the erosion of international norms contribute to the scale and severity of grave violations against children. Understanding these dynamics is essential to reframing security in a way that places children's protection at its core.

CONFLICT INTENSITY

The intensity of the fighting, as measured by battle-related deaths, significantly increases the risk of grave violations being committed against children. Above, we saw that exposure to conflict alone accounted for only 6% of the variations in grave violations, but when conflict intensity is added, a stronger positive link can be found (see figure 18). Together, we find that **exposure and intensity together explain approximately 31% of the variation in grave violations for 2024.**²⁹ These findings underscore that it is not merely the presence of conflict, but its intensity and nature, that significantly shape the scale of harm children face.

FIGURE 18: THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT INTENSITY ON GRAVE VIOLATIONS IN 2024



SOURCE: PRIO; THE 2024 UN ANNUAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT.

Conflict dynamics over time provide further insight into the structural risks children face in armed conflict. Countries with sustained and intense conflict exposure over time are far more likely to experience high levels of grave violations against children.³⁰ Driving this correlation were attacks on schools and hospitals,³¹ killing and maiming,³² and denial of humanitarian access.³³ Recruitment and abduction also show significant, though weaker, correlations, while sexual violence had a low and non-significant correlation, likely reflecting persistent under-reporting and data limitations.³⁴

Importantly, the long-term average grave violations score shows a stronger correlation with conflict exposure and intensity risk than any single violation alone – including killing and maiming. While one might expect killing and maiming to dominate, given its more direct link to conflict intensity, the average score captures a broader spectrum of harm. Violations such as attacks on schools and denial of humanitarian access may scale with conflict in ways not fully captured by casualty data, reflecting the systemic and structural impact of protracted violence. The strength of the correlation between conflict risk and the average score suggests that a multi-dimensional view of harm provides a more accurate reflection of how conflict affects children over time – and reinforces the need for integrated protection strategies that go beyond casualty counts.

²⁶ UN. CAAC Reports. 2023-25.

²⁷ Future analysis should prioritise the inclusion of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism's capacity and access indicators, such as funding levels, reporting and verification support, to better understand how visibility shapes our understanding of harm. Without this, we risk underestimating the scale of violations and overlooking the children most in need of protection.

²⁸ UN OSRSG. *Study on the evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate 1996-2021*. 2022.

²⁹ Here we cross the 2024 average risk score for children living in conflict with the 2024 average risk score for grave violations for each country. See methodology annex for further explanation.

³⁰ By comparing the composite average risk score for exposure and intensity with the average and individual risk scores for grave violations for the period from 2005 to 2021, the analysis reveals a strong and statistically significant correlation between long-term conflict risk and the average grave violations score ($r = 0.83$, $p < 0.05$). See full table in methodology annex.

³¹ ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.05$).

³² ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$).

³³ ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$).

³⁴ See methodology annex for the full table.

THE BROADER SECURITY LANDSCAPE

In today's conflict-affected contexts, the dominant security paradigm is most often shaped by militarisation³⁵ and securitisation – often justified as necessary for national or regional stability. Yet, for children, these approaches frequently do the opposite: as demonstrated below they increase exposure to harm and erode the protective environment they depend on.

Conflict-affected states consistently spend more on defence than on social protection – but this investment is not translating into safety for children.³⁶ According to the Global Militarization Index, which measures the relative weight of a country's military apparatus compared to its societal needs, **55% of the countries listed in the UN Secretary-General's children and armed conflict report (and tracked by the index) rank among the top 50 globally in terms of average military expenditure score from 2021–23.**³⁷ This score reflects not only the share of gross domestic product allocated to military spending, but also how that spending compares with investments in public health – a critical proxy for societal well-being.³⁸

Not surprisingly, the Global Militarization Index finds that a big proportion of the most militarised states are those that are either currently at war or recently recovered from conflict.³⁹ However, a deeper analysis shows a worrying gap. In 2024, 61 conflicts were recorded in 36 conflict-affected countries.⁴⁰ Of the

31 countries tracked by the index, only 42% are in the top 50 in terms of military expenditure. This means that **among the top 50 countries for average military spending there is a higher concentration of countries where parties are listed for grave violations (55%) than countries affected by conflict in general.**

In other words, it is more common for CAAC-listed countries to be highly militarised than for countries affected by conflict overall. This remains true, even when controlling for intensity, as only 43% of high-intensity conflict countries, 47% of medium intensity conflict countries and 0% low-intensity conflict countries are among the top 50 in terms of military expenditure.⁴¹ While this does not establish a causal relationship, it suggests that militarisation may be more closely associated with patterns of grave violations than with conflict alone. Highly militarised environments may reflect not only the scale of warfare but also a specific mindset and the prioritisation of military solutions over civilian protection, accountability and diplomacy. It can take the shape of opting out of weapons conventions that protect civilians to maintain military flexibility, categorising and detaining children based on their alleged affiliation to a party to the conflict rather than recognising them as victims or normalising excessive use of force as a part of law enforcement. This underscores the need to further examine how militarisation shapes the conduct of armed actors and the risks faced by children in conflict.

FIGURE 19: CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AMONG THE TOP 50 MILITARY SPENDERS

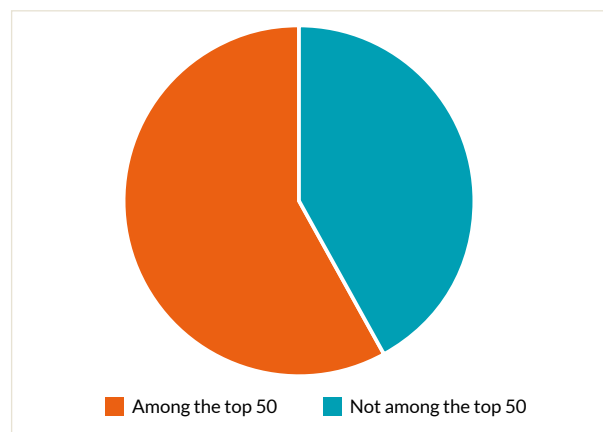
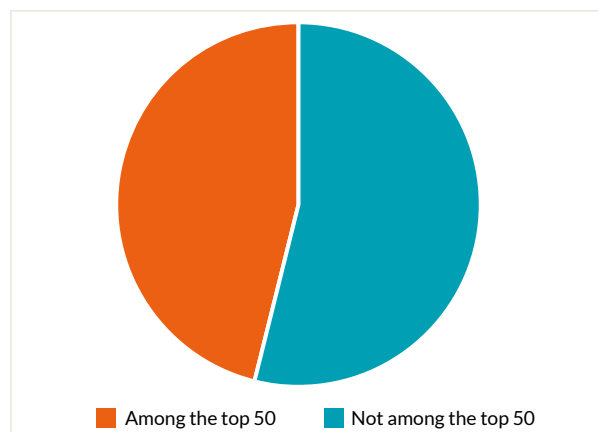


FIGURE 20: CAAC-LISTED COUNTRIES AMONG THE TOP 50 MILITARY SPENDERS



35 In this report, militarisation should be understood as “the relative weight and importance of a country's military apparatus in relation to its society as a whole.” See: [Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Global Militarisation Index 2024](#). 2025

36 UN Women. [Comparing military and human security spending: key findings and methodological notes](#). 2022.

37 Based on a calculation of average scores from the Global Militarization Index database for the years 2021, 2022 and 2023. See [Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Global Militarisation Index](#). Five of the 27 countries listed by the UNCAAC report are not covered by the index, but 12 of remaining 22 countries are among the top 50 of 152 countries. Some countries are monitored as a region in the CAAC report but evaluated separately here.

38 [Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Global Militarisation Index 2024](#). 2025

39 [Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Global Militarisation Index 2024](#). 2025

40 [PRIO. Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024](#). 2025

41 Conflict intensity in this context is based on the number of battle deaths. High-intensity conflict countries have more than 1,000 fatalities, medium-intensity conflict countries have between 25 and 999 battle deaths, and low-intensity conflict countries have between 1 and 25 battle deaths.

THE EROSION OF INTERCONNECTED NORMS

The protection of children in armed conflict is grounded in international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), which set clear obligations for parties to conflict. Yet these norms are eroding across today's conflicts, with violations once seen as exceptional now widespread and increasingly tolerated. The Geneva Academy's 2025 *IHL in Focus* report, which is one if not the most, comprehensive context-specific IHL compliance report, covering 71 armed conflicts, highlights a troubling shift: as respect for IHL declines, violence against civilians – including kidnapping, displacement, torture and attacks on humanitarian personnel – has become routine.⁴²

Among the 22 conflict contexts listed in the UN report on children and armed conflict and assessed in the IHL in Focus report,⁴³ violations of international humanitarian law are widespread and systemic.

In nearly all contexts (95%) there were compliance concerns related to the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, while in 86% of the contexts likely violations were found that related to deprivation of liberty and 77% that related to the treatment of people. More than half also exhibited compliance concerns over the use of the means of warfare (64%) and over the protection of vulnerable populations (68%). These findings suggest that grave violations against children are occurring in environments where broader IHL compliance is weak, pointing to a structural failure to uphold the norms meant to protect civilians in conflict. This pattern is more pronounced as the risk of grave violations increases, indicating that a general breakdown in IHL compliance may be a key driver of grave violations against children.

INHIBITORS AND MITIGATORS OF GRAVE VIOLATIONS

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PARTIES TO CONFLICT

Since the establishment of the children and armed conflict mandate, concerted efforts have been made by the UN, civil society and other key partners on the ground to improve the protection of children through a pragmatic and cooperative approach based on dialogue with parties to armed conflict.⁴⁴ While monitoring and reporting is ongoing, listed parties concerned are incentivised to engage in action plans to end violations

against children and aspire to a removal from the list; or to put in place prevention measures to protect children and avoid a listing. In total, 38 action plans have been signed since the beginning of the CAAC mandate.⁴⁵ Of those, 12 parties have fully complied with their commitment and were delisted, 4 have had their action plans replaced by consolidated plans, and 2 parties have ceased to exist. This means that **a third of parties that have signed action plans were successful in translating commitments into full compliance, delisting and tangible improvements for children.**

According to a field survey, "engagement with armed groups and the development of actions plans have contributed to the direct and systematic release of hundreds of children associated and the provision of holistic assistance while contributing to holding perpetrators accountable."⁴⁶ Several case studies also show significant reductions in violations in the years preceding delisting.⁴⁷ In some cases, the action plans have also laid some of the groundwork for a peace process to follow.⁴⁸ The impact of action plans should therefore not be underestimated, even before full compliance is achieved, action plans can be an important pathway to accountability and improved protection outcomes for children.

According to the 2025 CAAC report, only 30% of listed parties have signed action plans⁴⁹ – a figure that reflects both the potential and the limitations of current engagement efforts. This highlights a critical gap: the majority of parties responsible for grave violations remain outside formal frameworks for reform. Strengthening incentives for engagement and ensuring that action plans are not only signed but meaningfully implemented will be essential to advancing child protection in conflict.

However, the process of delisting through action plans takes time and requires sustained, context-specific engagement.⁵⁰ Historically, it has taken up to eight years from the signing of an action plan to a party being delisted.⁵¹ Currently, active action plans have been in place for an average of just over eight years, with the longest-running plan remaining active for 18 years. These timelines reflect the complexity of securing meaningful change in conflict settings – where building trust, tailoring commitments and monitoring progress demand consistent effort from the UN and its partners.

42 Geneva Academy. *IHL in Focus: Annual Report – July 2023 – June 2024*. 2025.

43 See methodology annex for information on how country contexts for the IHL in Focus report were selected and the IHL categories used.

44 UN OSRSG. *Study on the evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate 1996-2021*. 2022.

45 UN OSRSG. *Action plans*. It should be noted that three of the action plans listed in the 2025 CAAC report is not listed on this site.

46 UN OSRSG. *Study on the evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate 1996-2021*. 2022.

47 UNICEF. *25 Years of Children And Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*. 2022.

48 UN OSRSG. *Study on the evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict mandate 1996-2021*. 2022.

49 Excluding the four parties that were just listed in the 2025 report.

50 UNICEF. *Global Good Practices Study - Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed*. 2013.

UNICEF. *25 Years of Children And Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*. 2022.

51 UN OSRSG. *Action plans*. It should be noted that three of the action plans listed in the 2025 CAAC report is not listed on this site.

CASE STUDY: ENGAGING WITH PARTIES IN THE PHILIPPINES⁵²

Shortly after its creation in March 2007, the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting in the Philippines started to engage with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which had been listed for the recruitment and use of children since 2003.

2009: Within two years, the MILF had signed an Action Plan to end child recruitment and use and to identify and release those within its ranks. The number of cases of recruitment and use of children immediately dropped the following year and remained significantly lower in all years following the signing.

2014: Renewed engagement with the MILF took place in the wake of the peace agreement between the MILF and the government in March 2014, significantly supported by diplomatic efforts spearheaded by a then recently established Group of Friends of children and armed conflict (see next section). This culminated in the signing of a roadmap that delineated specific activities to expedite the completion of the Action Plan.

2017: The MILF was delisted by the UN Special Rapporteur. Over almost three years from the signing of a roadmap, a total of 1,869 children were identified, released and provided with reintegration services. No new cases of child recruitment and use had been documented.

2025: Due to the low level of grave violations in the country and the preventive measures adopted as agreed by the Government in June 2025 in cooperation with the UN to protect children, the situation of the Philippines was removed from monitoring in UN Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.

Beyond formal action plans, continuous engagement by the UN's Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMRs) has led to a range of meaningful outcomes that strengthen child protection and accountability. This includes legislative reforms, such as the criminalisation of child recruitment in several countries, and increased ratification or endorsement of key international treaties, like the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and of political commitments, like the Paris Principles and the Safe Schools Declaration.⁵³

Crucially, this engagement cannot succeed without support. It requires coordinated and long-term investment from the broader international community, including donors, regional actors, and humanitarian partners, to ensure that parties are not only incentivised to sign action plans and increase protections, but are also equipped to implement them in ways that genuinely protect children.

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

Diplomatic engagement can play a vital role in amplifying the efforts of UN and civil society actors on the ground – whether through direct dialogue with parties to conflict or through multilateral platforms such as the

UN Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. Direct engagement may occur bilaterally or through country-based Groups of Friends on children and armed conflict, which serve as informal coalitions to promote child protection. Currently, there are 12 such groups active, covering approximately 44% of the countries listed in the CAAC report.⁵⁴ These groups offer a valuable mechanism for sustained diplomatic pressure, particularly in contexts where formal UN processes face political or operational constraints.

The UN Security Council's Working Group on CAAC has also been pivotal in advancing child protection through its work to integrate the thematic issue in the Security Council's broader work and adoption of country-specific conclusions. These conclusions are widely used by field actors to secure concrete commitments from parties to conflict, such as ending violations, granting access for child release, and improving accountability.⁵⁵ It is therefore concerning that recent trends suggest growing delays in the adoption of conclusions (see Figure 21). Between 2019 and 2020, the average time from report presentation to conclusion adoption was approximately five months. In contrast, during 2021–22, the Working Group adopted conclusions for only one of four reports, with the remaining three left pending for up to 23

52 UNICEF. *25 Years of Children And Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*. 2022.

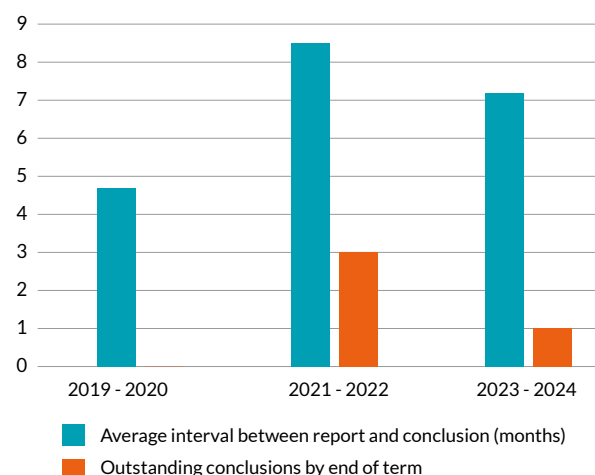
53 UNICEF. *25 Years of Children And Armed Conflict: Taking Action to Protect Children in War*. 2022.

54 Security Council Report. *Children and Armed Conflict: Progression, regression or maintenance of the agenda?* 2025.

55 Security Council Report. *Children and Armed Conflict: Progression, regression or maintenance of the agenda?* 2025.

months and ultimately handed over to the next chair. While 2023–24 saw a modest recovery, with an average adoption time of seven months, one conclusion still remained outstanding by the end of the term, raising concerns about the timeliness and effectiveness of this critical tool for engagement.

FIGURE 21: DELAYS IN UN ADOPTION OF COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONCLUSIONS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT (2019–2024)



SOURCE: SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT

Diplomatic engagement remains a vital pillar of the children and armed conflict agenda, bridging the gap between field-level protection efforts and high-level political influence. Whether through direct dialogue, country-based Groups of Friends, or the Security Council's Working Group, sustained and strategic diplomacy has proven essential to securing commitments, shaping mandates, and elevating child protection in peace and security discussions. Yet, as delays in conclusion adoption and uneven engagement persist, renewed commitment is necessary.

AID

In contexts where violations are widespread, the ability to prevent, respond to and recover from harm depends on the scale, predictability and targeting of aid. We have examined the relationship between humanitarian funding levels and the prevalence of grave violations against children.

Across all countries monitored in the CAAC report, humanitarian funding levels vary widely, reflecting both the scale of need and the prioritisation of international response. From 2022–24, the average funding through plans⁵⁶ have substantial shortfalls, 47% of required funding remained unmet by the end of 2024. These coverage gaps highlight a critical disconnect between the severity of violations and the resources allocated to protect children and meet their needs.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that while conflict exposure is a key risk factor, it does not fully explain the scale of harm children face. Factors such as monitoring capacity, conflict intensity, militarisation and erosion of international norms significantly shape the likelihood and severity of violations.⁵⁷ At the same time, engagement with parties to conflict, diplomatic efforts and humanitarian aid – particularly child protection funding – offer critical pathways to mitigate harm and strengthen accountability. Together, these findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive and preventive approach to child protection in armed conflict – one that goes beyond documenting violations to addressing the structural conditions that enable them.

⁵⁶ Includes Humanitarian Response Plans, Regional Plans, Emergency and Flash Appeals as tracked by the OCHA Financial Tracking Service (retrieved 10 September 2025).

⁵⁷ While the findings of this chapter are based on robust cross-contextual data, they also point to the need for more granular, context-specific analysis to fully capture the political, cultural and operational dynamics at play.



PHOTO: DAPHNEE COOK / SAVE THE CHILDREN

SILA*, 17, FROM SYRIA:

- THE WAR DOESN'T END JUST BECAUSE THE SHELLING STOPS

«My name is Sila, I'm 17 years old, from Idlib, Syria. I am one of thousands who have lived through the war in all its details — a generation that never knew what safety meant, only smoke, shelling, displacement and fear.»

Sila is an activist from northwest Syria who works with Action for Humanity, a partner of Save the Children, to raise awareness about landmines and unexploded ordnances.

«The war doesn't end just because the shelling stops. The danger continues after the war — landmines, unexploded shells and lives turned into death traps. A child might see something shiny and run toward it, not knowing it is a landmine. People walking through their land, unaware that death lies beneath their feet. Many lost limbs, or even lives, without ever being part of any battle.»

Sila says she wishes to deliver the message to as many people as possible. Earlier this year, she gave a speech to the UN Security Council as part of the Annual Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict. These words are based on that speech.

«Without removing these remnants of war, there will be no real hope, no real return, no future for Syrians.»

She is actively working in her home community to raise awareness.

«In the past period, I took training courses with a humanitarian organisation, and I am currently volunteering as part of an awareness team. We work on awareness campaigns about the risks of war remnants — especially for children.»

«I'm standing in front of you today to deliver just one message: The war must end — not only on maps, but in our streets, in our memories and in our children's toys. Now is our time to speak up, to raise our voices and to educate others. I did not come today as a victim. I came as a witness. I came to deliver a message. To speak on behalf of every child who was promised a normal life but couldn't live it. On behalf of every mother who buried her son and every home that lost its warmth. God willing, we will be the last generation to live this pain. The last generation to fall asleep to the sound of missiles and wake up to fear.»

«Thankfully, today, there is a little more safety. Now we can dream, work on ourselves. I can continue my education, achieve my ambitions and support my community and my family. But to make those dreams possible, we need many things — and most importantly, we need opportunity ... and we need decisions. We still need your support.»

«My final message: I am from a generation that survived physically, but our hearts still live in fear. Help us replace the word 'displacement' with 'return', the word 'rubble' with 'home', and the word 'war' with 'life'.»

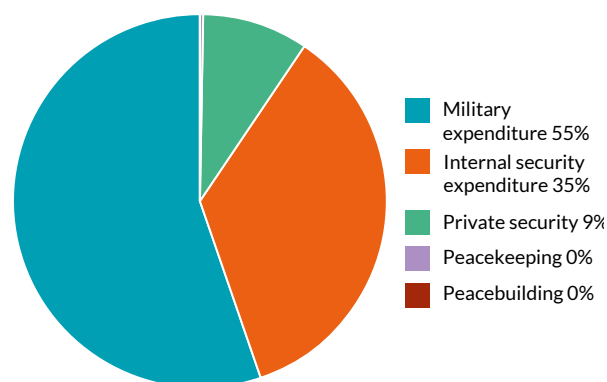
*Name has been changed.

4 GLOBAL COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

The preceding chapters of this report have laid bare the scale and severity of the war on children. Chapters 1 and 2 revealed that the numbers of children living in conflict zones and of grave violations against children in armed conflict are at an all-time high since recording began in 1990 and 2005, respectively. Chapter 3 explored drivers and mitigating factors behind these violations. Together, these chapters paint a stark picture: children are caught in the crossfire, harmed and failed by the systems meant to protect them.

This chapter turns the lens toward the global response. It asks a fundamental question: **whose security are we protecting?** While military budgets surge and arms transfers to parties listed for grave violations continue unabated, respect for the legal frameworks designed to shield children are eroding and contributions to the UN and humanitarian aid – especially for child protection and education – are falling short. The prevailing security paradigm, rooted in militarisation and deterrence, is not only failing to protect children – in many places it is actively contributing to their harm.⁵⁸ Figures 22–24 show this disparity.

FIGURE 22: COMPOSITION OF VIOLENCE CONTAINMENT (2024)



SOURCE: IEP⁵⁹

The first chart illustrates the stark imbalance in global security spending: 55% goes to military expenditure, 35% to internal security, and 9% to private security, while peacebuilding and peacekeeping accounts for less than 1% each. This under-prioritisation mirrors the broader trend on peace investments covered by the Save the Children's 2024 Stop the War on Children. In 2021, OECD Development Assistance Committee members' spending on peace fell to a 15-year low of 9.6% – or \$15.3 billion – of total official development assistance (ODA). In fragile contexts, where such spending is most needed, the decline was even sharper, falling to a record low of 10.8% (\$5.27 billion).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ UN Secretary-General. *The Security We Need Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future*. 2025

⁵⁹ Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Peace Index 2025*. 2025

⁶⁰ For more insight into the disparity between military spending and peace investment, see: Save the Children. *Stop the War on Children 2024: Pathways to peace*. 2024

FIGURE 23: GLOBAL SPENDING PRIORITIES: VIOLENCE, MILITARY, AID, AND UN CONTRIBUTIONS (2020–24) (NOMINAL VALUES)

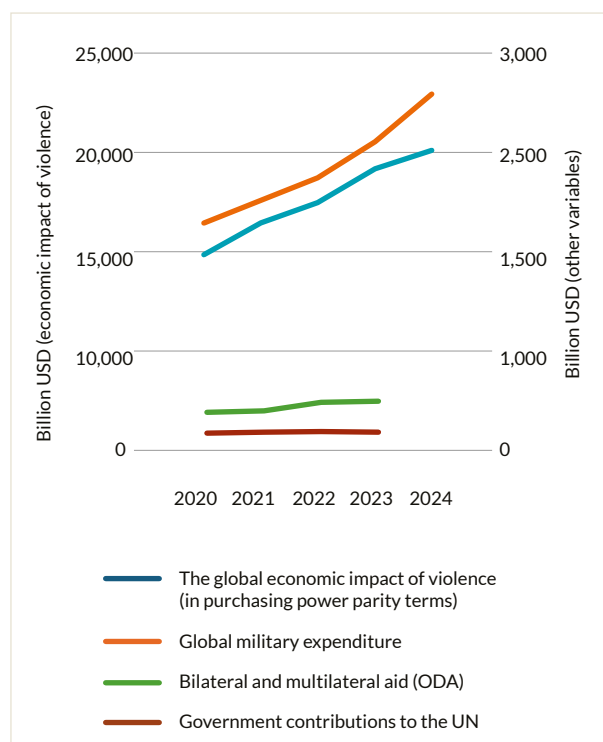
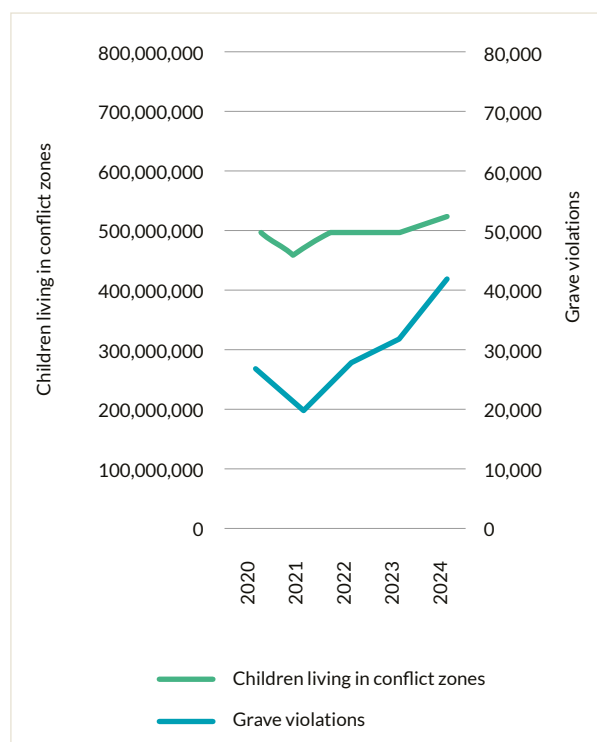


FIGURE 24 CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT ZONES AND GRAVE VIOLATIONS (2020–24)



SOURCES: IEP⁶¹; SIPRI⁶²; PRIO⁶³; UN OSRSG⁶⁴

The pair of graphs above (Figures 23 and 24) show all lines pointing in the wrong direction with exposure of children to conflict and grave violations increase alongside the cost of violence and military expenditure, while aid and contributions to the UN have flattened. Against this backdrop, the humanitarian sector and the UN's peace and protection architecture are undergoing a period of significant reform and financial pressure, further endangering the protection gains secured by the CAAC agenda.⁶⁵

This chapter assesses the global commitment to placing children at the heart of security. It does so by mapping legal and political commitments to the protection of children in armed conflict and analysing trends in arms exports to parties listed for grave violations. Together, these elements offer a snapshot of whether the international community is upholding its obligations – or contributing to the risks children face.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL COMMITMENTS TO PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

Protecting children in armed conflict requires concrete commitments. These commitments are often expressed through legal obligations and political pledges that states make at the international level. Together, they form a normative framework that sets clear standards for how children should be protected during war, and that hold states and armed actors accountable when those standards are violated. The extent to which states endorse and implement these instruments is a key measure of their commitment to protecting children in conflict. The legal commitments reviewed include:

61 Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Peace Index 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025*. Institute for Economics & Peace. *Official Development Assistance*. 2025

62 SIPRI. *Trends in world military Expenditure 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024*.

63 See Chapter 1

64 See Chapter 2

65 The alliance for child protection in humanitarian action. *Briefing Note: The Impact of UN80, the Humanitarian Reset, and Funding Cuts on the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) Agenda*. 2025

- the Geneva Conventions (1949) and their additional protocols I and II (1977)
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) and its additional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000)
- the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998)
- the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Mine Ban Convention) (1997)
- the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008)
- the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) (2013)
- the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Nuclear Treaty) (2017)

The political commitments tracked are:

- the Paris Commitments (2007)
- the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) (2015)
- the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA) (2022)
- The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (2017)

These international instruments all play an important role in enhancing the protection of children in armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions, with additional protocols, and the Rome Statute provide both for the general protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as particular protections for children. The CRC broadly stipulates the rights of children in and out of armed conflict, while its additional protocol, along with the Paris Commitments and Vancouver Principles, seeks to protect children from recruitment and use by armed forces or groups. The Mine Ban Convention, ATT, Nuclear Treaty, Convention on Cluster Munitions and EWIPA all seek to restrict the transfer and use of weapons that represent a particular risk of harm to children. Finally, the Safe Schools Declaration commits parties to avoid the military use of schools and strengthen the protection of children and education in conflict.⁶⁶

Commitment is uneven across the international community. Only a small group of states – 13 in total – have endorsed the full set of legal and political instruments designed to safeguard children from the impacts of war. These countries are: Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, Peru, San Marino, Uruguay and Sierra Leone. A further 39 states have signed on to all but one of these commitments,

and 22 are two endorsements away from full alignment. In total, 74 out of 193 UN member states have adopted nearly all of the relevant instruments. While this means that many states still fall short of a comprehensive commitment, the existing base of support offers a strong platform for further progress and reason for optimism.

As two commitments have been added from last year, the Cluster Munitions Convention and the Vancouver Principles, the results in 2024 and 2025 are not fully comparable. However, several countries have climbed into the top ranges of commitments due to recent endorsements. Andorra, Colombia, Gambia, Malawi and Sierra Leone have all become parties to at least one additional legal instrument that protects children in armed conflict in 2025 or the latter part of 2024. When it comes to political commitments, Honduras, Rwanda, Thailand, among others, have endorsed either EWIPA or the Safe Schools Declaration.

At the other end of the spectrum are the 33 UN Member States who have signed on to six or fewer of the legal and political instruments that protect children in armed conflict. This means that more than 15% of UN member states, many of which are currently involved in armed conflict, have signed on to less than half of these commitments. While there have been several new endorsements of the instruments that protect children in armed conflict over the last year, there are also threats looming. Several countries are on track to withdraw from the Mine Ban Convention, an instrument crucial in protecting children from harm from anti-personnel mines during and after conflict.⁶⁷

In addition, “[t]he world stands on the brink of a profound crisis with respect to [compliance with] international humanitarian law. Violations – once seen as aberrations – are now persistent, widespread, and, perhaps most alarmingly, increasingly met with indifference or tacit acceptance by states.”⁶⁸ Some of these compliance issues related to parties to conflict are explored in chapter 3 above, but another piece to this puzzle is the role of states that continue to supply arms to those very parties. Despite being listed for committing grave violations against children, many armed actors continue to receive weapons and military support. The next section examines these arms transfers and the extent to which they undermine global efforts to uphold international norms and safeguard children.

⁶⁶ For a further elaboration of the legal and political commitments, see methodology annex.

⁶⁷ In 2024, the number of civilians killed and injured by mines increased by 22 %. 85 % of the casualties were civilians and half of them were children. See: UN, *‘Adhering to bans on mines only in peace time will not work: UN rights chief’*. 2025.

⁶⁸ Geneva Academy, *IHL in Focus: Annual Report – July 2023 – June 2024*. 2025.

ARMS SALES TO CONFLICT PARTIES THAT COMMIT GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

Exporting arms to parties perpetrating grave violations against children is deeply problematic, potentially enabling them to continue committing such violations. Such exports contravene the third-party state responsibility under the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law (IHL). They also conflict with the Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits arms transfers where they may be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian or human rights law, including against children. Finally, these exports also violate the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandates states to protect children from violence and exploitation, including extraterritorially.

Cross-referencing the annex of the last UN annual report on children and armed conflict with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database reveals that several of the parties listed for committing grave violations against children in armed conflict received arms transfers from other countries in 2024.⁶⁹ Figure 25 shows these transactions, sorted by the largest trend-indicator value (TIV). The TIV of an item is intended to reflect that item's military capability rather than its financial value.⁷⁰

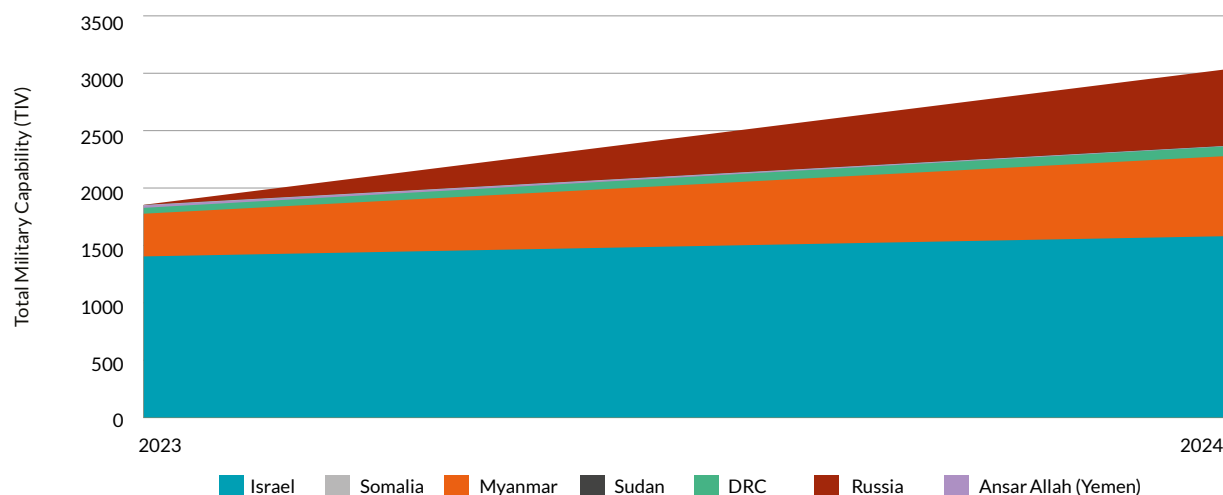
FIGURE 25: ARMS TRANSFERS TO PARTIES COMMITTING GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN, 2024

RECIPIENT	TOTAL MILITARY CAPABILITY (TIV VALUE)
Israel	1,580.00
Myanmar	697.55
Russia	665.00
DRC	84.90
Somalia	3.52
Sudan	1.80

SOURCE: SIPRI ARMS TRANSFERS DATABASE.⁷¹ RESEARCH BY ANALYSE & TALL

The SIPRI database shows that these transfers were not isolated to dealings with neighbouring countries, but rather reflect **shipments from at least 9 countries**, including in Europe, North America and Asia. While the parties involved in armed conflict bear the primary responsibility for protecting children from grave violations. **Member States also have a clear obligation to ensure that their arms exports do not contribute to such harm.** Otherwise, they risk being complicit in violations committed with their weapons. Upholding this responsibility is essential to preventing further harm and reinforcing global norms on the protection of children in conflict. Figure 26 shows the development in transactions from 2023 to 2024.

FIGURE 26: THE RISE IN ARMS TRANSFERS TO PARTIES COMMITTING GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN, 2023–24



SOURCE: SIPRI ARMS TRANSFERS DATABASE RESEARCH BY ANALYSE & TALL

⁶⁹ Note that a limitation of this database is that it only tracks major arms and does not track indirect exports. SIPRI. [Sources and methods](#).

⁷⁰ The Trend Indicator Value (TIV) is a constructed measure of the notional value of military equipment, defined by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. It aims to provide a way of assigning comparable values to any arms transfer regardless of the countries involved, the price paid (which is not always known), or the date of the transfer. Weapons systems from different countries that are judged to have similar capabilities are thus given similar TIV values. As such, the value is normalised for inflation and currency and reduced based on previous ownership and use.

⁷¹ SIPRI. [Arms Transfers Database](#), 2024.

Arms transfers to parties listed for grave violations against children have increased significantly in terms of capabilities in several cases from 2023 to 2024, including to Russia, Myanmar and DRC and Israel.⁷² These trends raise serious concerns about the coherence of global arms control efforts, particularly when transfers continue to flow to actors implicated in grave violations against children.

While global trends in arms transfers and legal commitments offer a broad view of state behaviour, they do not fully capture the depth – or limitations – of national engagement. To better understand how formal commitments translate into practice, the following section takes a closer look at two countries: Canada and Sweden. These spotlights assess not only legal and political endorsements, but also financial contributions, diplomatic leadership, and support for accountability mechanisms. By examining these dimensions, we gain insight into what deeper commitment to protecting children in armed conflict can – and should – look like.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHTS

Save the Children's mapping of legal and political commitments to protecting children in armed conflict in the 2024 Stop the War on Children report placed Canada and Sweden among the top 48 UN member states that had signed up to all or nearly all of the tracked instruments. Here we present country spotlights on Canada and Sweden to assess how far their respective commitments on paper translate to impact in practice. This analysis assesses the actions taken by the governments to enhance child protection in the ten countries where children were most affected by conflict in 2023 (as determined by Save the Children's 2024 Stop the War on Children) through:

- demonstrated political will and leadership
- donorship
- commitment to child-centered accountability

CANADA

The result of the assessment across the three dimensions is mixed. Canada generally demonstrates strong political will and leadership on protection of children in armed conflict, especially on the international stage. It has championed both the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and continues to hold leadership roles in the Groups of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, both at the global and country levels. Domestically, legislative integration of the key legal and political instruments on protection of children in armed conflict is strong, with Canada often being a first mover on both signing, ratification and enactment of domestic implementing legislation⁷³. However, some legislative gaps remain, or implementation and enforcement are lagging for treaties such as the Rome Statute and the Arms Trade Treaty and for political commitments such as the Safe Schools Declaration. Finally, in official government messaging, children are often overlooked, outside of references to children associated with armed forces and in the context of gender equality. This messaging was also disproportional, with the child perspective featuring more prominently in the contexts where the government was most vocal in their condemnation, regardless of the severity faced by children.

In its child protection donorship, Canada's commitment is meagre and declining. Canada has gone from disbursing over USD 9 million to child protection in 2023 (1.4% of overall ODA spending), to around USD 2 million in 2024 (0.4% of overall ODA spending), and from being the 14th largest donor for child protection to the 29th.⁷⁴

72 These trends are particularly concerning in light of the recent findings that there are still substantial barriers to transparency in weapons transfers, even as export increases. See: [Amsterdam Law Clinic, University of Amsterdam, Asser Institute & ECCHR. *Transparency in European Arms Exports*. 2025.](#)

73 The laws that incorporate international commitments into domestic obligations.

74 OCHA. [Financial Tracking Service – Child Protection](#). 2023 (accessed 15. Jul.2025).

Canada's commitment to child-centred accountability is uneven and context-specific. Canada has participated in accountability processes before international courts related to three of ten most affected conflict contexts and placed strong focus on the experience of children in only one of these processes. However, in two of the cases, Canada has also demonstrated a capacity for accountability beyond interventions and statements in the International Court system – for example, by leading coalitions and providing extra support to investigations. A more child-centred approach has been taken in the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, and in this UPR cycle, Canada referred to the experiences of children in all but three of the ten most affected countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Syria.

Canada's experience illustrates that strong international leadership and spearheading of international legal and political instruments can position a country as a champion for children in armed conflict. However, leadership must be matched by consistent domestic implementation, sustained financial commitment and child-centred accountability. States seeking to increase their impact should ensure that ratified treaties are fully enforced, that political commitments are operationalised, and that children are consistently prioritised in public messaging and diplomatic engagement. Increasing earmarked funding for child protection and other programming shown to safeguard children in conflict contexts and embedding child-specific considerations in accountability processes – including international court interventions and UPR submissions – are critical steps toward a more holistic and effective protection agenda.

SWEDEN

Our assessment found Sweden demonstrates a normative and financial leadership, but gaps in implementation and inconsistencies in its official messaging and engagement with international accountability mechanisms weakens their position as a principled protector of children's rights. Sweden's incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and early adoption of key commitments signal a robust normative stance on child protection. Sweden has often been among the first to move on signature, ratification and enabling legislation. Yet gaps persist: commitments tied to the Safe Schools Declaration and the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas remain opaque whereas no public reporting on domestic implementation into doctrine or training have been identified by this assessment.

Official messaging on children in conflict is split. Children are frequently subsumed under broader categories (eg, civilians, or women and girls), while explicitly child-focused language tends to appear only in high-profile legal or humanitarian contexts; outside these, references are generic or absent. Notably, Sweden's annual foreign policy declaration have consistently omitted references to children. Sweden retains roles within several of the Groups of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict, but recent participation has largely consisted of routine statements, signalling continued engagement but no sustained agenda-setting leadership.

Sweden remains a high per-capita donor of humanitarian assistance, with significant support to multilateral child-focused initiatives. Its recent development policy⁷⁵ recognises that children are disproportionately affected by armed conflict and requires that assistance accounts for children in implementation. It elevates children's rights to a thematic priority and directs multilateral cooperation accordingly. It is unclear, however, how these policy statements translate into resource allocation, and there is a lack of specific child rights targets in the foreign aid budget. This gap is compounded on the resourcing side where budgets are presented in broad terms without ring-fenced funding for children's rights. As a result, dedicated allocations cannot be verified directly from the budget, only limited assessment is possible of the alignment between stated priorities and the actual funding. Sweden's attention to child rights aspects within international accountability

75 Government of Sweden. [Development assistance for a new era – freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth](#). 2025.

mechanisms is inconsistent. In some fora it relies on broad protection language, in others it specifies child-specific violations. Consequently, despite support for international courts, active UPR participation and recourse to domestic jurisdiction, the operationalisation of child-centred accountability remains uneven across country files. In five of the ten country situations considered, Sweden issued child-centred recommendations as part of the UPR. The drivers of this variation are unclear and may be context specific. Making child-rights references systematic across contexts would strengthen coherence, salience and consistency.

Sweden's experience shows that strong normative leadership anchored in incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and early adoption of key commitments can set a high bar for protecting children in armed conflict. However, impact depends on consistent operational integration of legal and political instruments on child protection, and on systematically making child-focused references in public messaging and diplomacy. The current development policy highlights child rights to some extent but, lacking an explicit CRC reference and ring-fenced or tagged budget lines, it risks remaining a policy pledge rather than a binding and resourced obligation. To increase its impact and deliver a more coherent and effective protection agenda, Sweden should tighten budget traceability and targets for child protection, maintain leadership beyond routine statements, and embed child-specific considerations across accountability processes (eg, international court interventions, and UPR submissions) for a more coherent and effective protection agenda.

«I WISH FOR PEACE TO
RETURN TO MY TOWN.»

Fabrice*, DRC

Kseniia*, Anastasia* and Ohla* with school bags walking past damaged buildings in Ukraine.

PHOTO: ESPEN AARSVOLD / SAVE THE CHILDREN



5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES

The world is at a critical juncture. Armed conflict is surging. Grave violations against children have reached record highs. At the same time, the humanitarian system and the United Nations are undergoing reform. While the future shape of these institutions remains uncertain, one principle must guide their transformation: children must be at the centre.

Protecting children in conflict is not only a moral imperative – it is a strategic necessity for building sustainable peace. The following recommendations outline concrete actions governments must take to meet this moment.

1. Protect children in conflict

- **Commit to and fully implement legal and political instruments** that safeguard children and education and ensure strict interpretation of international standards.
- **Uphold international law and humanitarian principles:** demand compliance from all parties, ensure safe and principled humanitarian access, and prevent aid from being politicised or obstructed (mitigating the unintended impacts of sanctions or counter-terrorism measures).
- **Scale up targeted funding for children in emergencies,** including child protection (among them gender-based violence prevention and response), education and health, and ensure traceability of these resources.
- **Stop arms transfers** where there is an overriding risk they will be used to commit violations against children.
- **Develop national child protection strategies** in conflict that integrate diplomacy, security, humanitarian and development approaches.
- **Prioritise child protection expertise** within humanitarian responses, coordination structures and peace operations.

2. Ensure that perpetrators of violations against children are held accountable

- **Strengthen international and national accountability mechanisms:** explicitly include

crimes against children in their mandates, ensure child-sensitive and survivor-centred approaches, and resource gender- and child-specific expertise.

- **Support and resource the UN CAAC agenda:** maintain an independent senior-level SRSG, strengthen in-country Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms and Country Task Forces, ensuring meaningful civil society participation and protection, and ensure impartial listing of perpetrators in the Secretary-General's annual report.
- **Support regional accountability mechanisms,** including the African Union's work on children and armed conflict.
- **For UN Security Council members:** actively support – and refrain from impeding or vetoing – Security Council action to hold perpetrators of grave violations of children's rights in conflict to account.

3. Invest in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding

- **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.
- **Increase investment in addressing root causes of conflict,** including conflict-sensitive education, climate action, gender equality, child protection, poverty reduction and human rights.
- **Support inclusive peace efforts** at national, regional and international levels, ensuring they are gender-sensitive and child-centred.
- **Strengthen peace research** and ensure children's perspectives are included.

4. Listen to and involve children

- **Guarantee children's meaningful and safe participation** in peace processes, humanitarian response and policy development.
- **Include children in global, regional and national forums** on issues shaping their futures.

Jok*, 12, writes notes on his hand during a lesson at his school in South Sudan.

PHOTO: ESTHER MBABAZI / SAVE THE CHILDREN



METHODOLOGY ANNEX

The findings presented in this report are based on the following main methods and sources set out below. We have included limitations associated with each of them.

- 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 Program's Georeferenced Event Data Set (UCDP GED) until 2024. To estimate the number of children living in conflict areas, and populations more generally, PRIO cross-referenced the conflict data with population data from the 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 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 of where one or more conflict incidents take place in a given year, within the borders of a country".
- 2. Analysis of the 2025 UN annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (CAAC),** based on data reported and verified in 2024. The analysis also draws on previous Save the Children mapping of the number of grave violations in the 2005–24 CAAC reports. The CAAC report tracks 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. This methodology is chosen to give a fuller

picture of the harm experienced by children in each country context.

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. The reporting and verifying process takes time, so some violations that have taken place in a given year might only be included in the report covering the following year. For 2024, the UN CAAC report has 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.

- 3. Beyond exposure: exploring additional risk factors.** To better understand why some countries experience disproportionately high levels of grave violations relative to their exposure to conflict, we introduced a new layer of analysis in Chapter 3. First, we calculated the proportion of children living in conflict zones and the proportion subjected to grave violations, using data from PRIO and the 2025 UN Secretary-General's CAAC report. Then we attributed each country different risk scores based on a comparison between the calculated proportions and the full historic distribution of data (see full explanation in table on next page).

CALCULATING THE PROPORTION OF CHILDREN EXPOSED

DIMENSION 1: CHILDREN AT RISK OF CONFLICT	DIMENSION 2: GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN
- Conflict exposure: children living in a conflict zone as the % of the child population) - Intensity exposure: battle deaths as % of total population	1. Killed and maimed 2. Sexual violence 3. Abductions 4. Recruitment and use of children 5. Attacks on and use of schools and hospitals 6. Denial of humanitarian access 7. Late verified unspecified (all as % of the child population)



CALCULATING HISTORICAL QUINTILES

To ensure comparability across time and contexts, we place each country within a global distribution of proportions for each indicator, using quintiles (1 = best 20%, 5 = worst 20%). These thresholds are based on historic data from PRIO (1990–21) and CAAC reports (2005–21) and are updated every five years.



CALCULATING THE RISK SCORES

DIMENSION 1: CHILDREN AT RISK OF CONFLICT	DIMENSION 2: GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN
Conflict exposure: % of children living in a conflict zone compared with full historical distribution of conflict exposure scores and placed in risk score 1. Intensity exposure: % battle deaths compared with full historical distribution of intensity exposure and placed in risk score 1-5. Children at risk score: The average of the exposure to conflict and exposure to intensity risk scores.	% Killed and maimed % Sexual violence % Abductions % Recruitment and use of children % Attacks on and use of schools and hospitals % Denial of humanitarian access % Late verified unspecified All compared with the full distribution of scores for individual grave violation, except the late verified unspecified violation which are compared to the scores for all violations and placed in risk score 1-5. Grave violations risk score: The average of all individual violations risk scores.

To examine the link between exposure to conflict and exposure to grave violations, we cross-referenced their risk scores. Here, we used the average risk scores for conflict exposure (meaning without the intensity risk score) and the average risk scores for grave violations. Based on this analysis we found that the conflict exposure risk score had an R^2 value of 0.063. To explore potential explanatory factors, we then compared these differences with a set of structural and operational variables:

- Conflict intensity:** First, we crossed the 2024 average children living in conflict risk score with the 2024 grave violations risk score for each country and found an R^2 value of 0.3067. Second, we compared the composite average risk score for exposure and intensity with the average and individual risk scores for grave violations for the period from 2005 to 2021. See full table below.
- Militarisation:** Our assessment is based on the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies

(BICC) definition of militarisation as “the relative weight and importance of a country’s military apparatus in relation to its society as a whole”. For this, the GMI records a number of indicators to represent the level of militarisation of a country:

- the comparison of military expenditures with its gross domestic product (GDP) and its health expenditure (as share of its GDP)
- the contrast between the total number of (para)military forces and the number of physicians and the overall population
- the ratio of the number of heavy weapons systems available and the number of the overall population.

The GMI is based on data from the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization, the International Institute for Strategic Studies and BICC.⁷⁶

4. Compliance with International humanitarian law (IHL): Drawn from the 2025 IHL in Focus report, which evaluates IHL compliance across 22 armed conflicts selected from the Geneva Academy’s Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts project. These contexts were chosen based on a multi-criteria overlay analysis considering the intensity of military operations, civilian impact, prima facie IHL concerns, escalation risk, and geographic diversity. The report assesses the eight categories of IHL violations most relevant to civilian harm and feasible to assess through open-source data: conduct of hostilities;

means and methods of warfare (separately); treatment of persons (including displacement, sexual violence, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment); deprivation of liberty (including abductions, hostage-taking arbitrary deprivation of liberty, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings) ; access to humanitarian relief; access to medical care (including respect for and protection of medical personnel, units and transports); and protections for specifically vulnerable populations (including women and children).

5. Legal and political commitments. This framework is built on two dimensions that provide an assessment of 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 can voluntarily endorse, as a special commitment to safeguarding children and their rights during armed conflict. The following overview describes the legal and political instruments and explains their relevance to the protection of children in 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 indicators are identical to those in the 2024 report, with the exception of the addition of the Cluster Munitions Convention and the Vancouver Principles.

	AVG_CHRISK~t	SH_KILL_MA~t	SH_CH_SOLD~t	SH_ABDUCT~t	SH_ATTACKS~t	SH_DENIAL~t	
avg_chRISK~t	1.0000						
sh_kill_ma~t	0.5825*	1.0000					
sh_ch_sold~t	0.2995*	0.4607*	1.0000				
sh_abduct~t	0.2533*	0.3292*	0.4892*	1.0000			
sh_attacks~t	0.5993*	0.7440*	0.3584*	0.3704*	1.0000		
sh_denial~t	0.4719*	0.6852*	0.3911*	0.3009*	0.7160*	1.0000	
sh_sexual~t	0.1150	0.3249*	0.5693*	0.6361*	0.3606*	0.3598*	1.0000

76 Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. [Global Militarisation Index 2024](#). 2025.

LEGAL DIMENSION

LEGAL INSTRUMENT	INDICATOR NAME	DESCRIPTION	RELEVANCE
Geneva Convention I-IV	GC I-IV 1949	Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field; Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea; Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War; Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.	The GC I-IV common article 3 protects children as persons taking no active part in the hostilities. the conventions provide general protection of children, as members of the civilian population. GC IV is more specific as it is relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war.
Additional Protocol I	AP I 1977	Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977.	Protocol I under article 77, states that: Children shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected against any form of indecent assault. The parties to the conflict shall provide them with the care and aid they require, whether because of their age or for any other reason. The principle of the special protection of children during international armed conflicts is thus explicitly laid down.
Additional Protocol II	AP II 1977	Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 8 June 1977.	Protocol II of 1977 codifies the principles according to which the civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack.
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	CRC 1989	Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989	Protection of children and fulfilment of rights.
Optional Protocol CRC	Opt Prot. CRC 2000	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, New York, 25 May 2000.	Protection of children from taking active part in hostilities or being recruited into the armed forces.
Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court	ICC Statute 1998	Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 17 July 1998	The Rome Statute defines conscription of children under 15 as a war crime. Commitment to ensuring accountability and combating impunity for international crime is relevant for the protection of children in armed conflict.
Mine Convention	AP Mine Ban Conv. 1997	Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, Oslo, 18 September 1997.	Research indicates that children are particularly at risk of death or injury as a result of landmines.
Arms Trade Treaty	ATT 2013	Arms Trade Treaty, 2 April 2013	Under article 7 (4) of the ATT, the export authorities must consider the risk of the arms being used to commit serious acts of gender-based violence or violence against women and children.
Nuclear Treaty	TPNW 2017	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 7 July 2017	Nuclear weapons challenge the basic premises of IHL.
Cluster Munitions 2008	Cluster 2008	Convention on Cluster Munitions	Children are often drawn to unexploded cluster munition remnants resembling toys, making them particularly vulnerable. According to the Cluster Munition Monitor, nearly half of all casualties from cluster munition remnants in 2023 were children.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

LEGAL INSTRUMENT	INDICATOR NAME	DESCRIPTION	RELEVANCE
Safe Schools Declaration	Safe School Declaration	The Safe Schools Declaration was developed with the objective of avoiding military use of schools and strengthening protection of children and education in conflict.	States commitment to avoiding military use of schools and strengthen protection of children and education in conflict is relevant to the protection of children in armed conflict.
The political declaration on EWIPA	EWIPA	The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)	Between 2018 and 2022, explosive weapons were responsible for nearly half – 49.8 % – of the more than 47,500 instances of children killed and maimed that were verified by the United Nations, in more than 24 conflict zones globally. The vast majority of these instances occurred in populated areas. The use of EWIPA poses an threat to children worldwide.
The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers	Vancouver Principles	The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers	The Vancouver Principles are a set of political commitments focused on child protection in peacekeeping, including all stages of a conflict cycle. They comprise 17 principles that focus on preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers by armed forces and armed groups.
The Paris Commitments	Paris Commitments	Endorsement of the commitment/principles	Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, to prevent recruitment or use, securing the release of, protecting, and reintegrating children who have been associated with an armed force or armed group. Note that the tracking of this commitment is based on data from 2024, as no new updated list was provided for 2025.

All states' commitments can be found on our website: <https://data.stopwaronchildren.org/>⁷⁷

6. Analysis of problematic arms transfers. Our analysis of problematic arms transfers crosses the annex of the last UN Secretary-General's annual CAAC report, which lists parties to armed conflict that have committed grave violations against children, with the most comprehensive database worldwide on international arms transfers. The database is hosted by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). We use the newest available version of the SIPRI database, updated in August 2025. For this report we only look at the arms delivery data for 2024.

7. Country spotlights. The scope of the assessment is limited to commitment related to the ten countries where children were most affected by conflict in 2023 – as listed in the 2024 Stop the War on Children report – from 1 January 2023 until 1 January 2025. Commitment was examined across three dimensions:

- a) Political will and leadership based on integration of commitment in domestic governance, political priority as demonstrated through official statement and global leadership on the CAAC agenda
- b) Donorship
- c) Commitment to Child-centered Accountability based on submissions to international accountability mechanisms.

«MANY TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPEN TO CHILDREN IF THEY ARE NOT PROTECTED. FOR EXAMPLE, THEY CANNOT GO ALONE INTO THE FOREST, BECAUSE MANY ARE KILLED THERE. I WISH ALL CHILDREN COULD BE KEPT AWAY FROM WAR.»

Dieu Merci*, 13, DRC

⁷⁷ Includes entities that are not UN Member States, but that have signed one or more instruments.

MANAL*, 2, FROM YEMEN:

- WHENEVER CHILDREN PLAY OUTSIDE, WE FEAR FOR THEIR SAFETY

At just a year and a half old, Manal picked up what she thought was a toy outside her home in Taiz. But it was actually an unexploded ordnance (UXO). The explosion tore through her tiny hand, leaving her family in shock. Her father, Mousa, remembers: «We thought she was dead.»

At the hospital, Manal needed urgent surgery, but the family couldn't afford it. Save the Children stepped in and supported Manal through two operations that saved part of her hand and later referred her family to another organisation for financial assistance.

Manal's parents worry about how she will cope with her injury, and they live in constant fear for their children's safety due to the remnants of war, unable to leave the area because of financial hardship.

Manal's father tells of what happened that day.

«When the device first exploded, I woke up but couldn't see anything because of the heavy dust from the blast. Once it cleared, I saw my wife holding Manal and her siblings were crying beside her.»

«At first, we thought she was dead. I rushed her to the hospital leaving her siblings and grandmother crying behind us. After treating her wounds, she was taken to the intensive care unit, and we were told she needed surgery the next day and that I should have the money for the procedure and other needs. I told them I couldn't afford the operation and asked them to keep her until I find a solution.»

«After the incident, we brought in a de-mining team, and they found two other devices, one of them much larger than the one that had exploded. Our area is contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance, but we cannot leave because our financial and living conditions are so difficult that we cannot afford to live anywhere else. We do not have the money to move.»

«We have been living in extreme worry ever since the incident. Whenever children play outside, we fear for their safety. The worry was always there but now it's 100 times worse. The children are scared too and in the beginning they would not leave home.»

(*Name has been changed)



PHOTO: GLOIRE MUNESHA / SAVE THE CHILDREN



Save the Children

