

## Progress and challenges for children living in armed conflict

Every day, children living in wars across the globe are facing unspeakable horrors. They are not safe sleeping in their homes or playing outside, learning in school or seeking medical care at hospitals. From killing and maiming, abduction, and sexual violence to attacks on education and health facilities, and the denial of the humanitarian assistance that they desperately need, children are being caught in the crosshairs of warring parties at a staggering scale.

In 1996, Mrs Graça Machel presented her seminal report on the impact of armed conflict on children to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. This report set in motion a process that led the UN to establish a unique and robust mechanism in 2005: the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to document grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

Based on sixteen years of data from the Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF's analysis<sup>1</sup> reveals that the UN has verified over 266,000 grave violations against children committed by parties to conflict in more than 30 conflict situations across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The annual number of verified violations has gradually increased since 2005 and surpassed 20,000 for the first time in 2014. Between 2016 and 2020, three grave violations against children occurred every hour and the daily global average of verified violations stood at an alarming 71 violations. At least 10 per cent of child victims in 2020 faced multiple grave violations.

Other findings from the report include the following<sup>2</sup>:

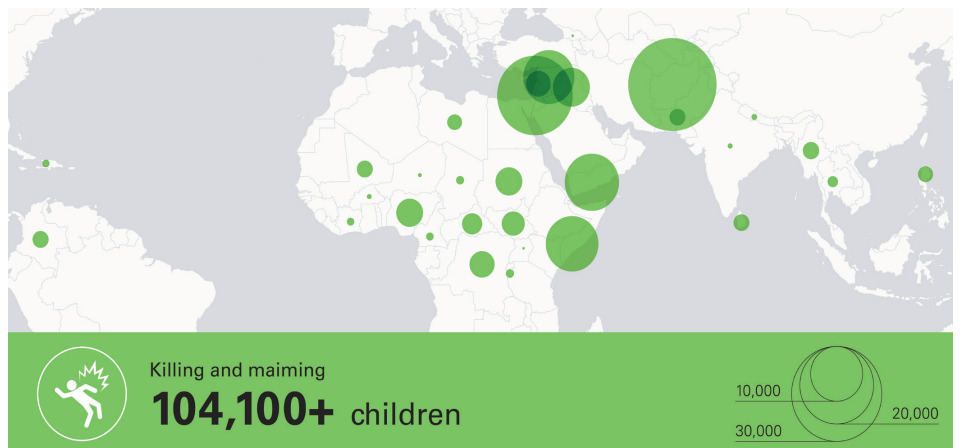
### 1

Since 2005, more than 104,100 children have been verified as killed or maimed<sup>3</sup>

- More than two-thirds of these incidents have been verified by the UN between 2014 and 2020, with an average of 10,500 children killed or maimed each year.

- Between 2016 and 2020, 14 per cent of all child casualties – 7,350 children – were a result of missiles and bombs dropped during aerial attacks.

- In 2020 alone, explosive weapons and explosive remnants of war were



responsible for at least 47 per cent – or about 3,900 cases – of all child casualties.

- Between 2016 and 2020, 79 per cent of all verified child casualties – or about 41,900 children – occurred in only five countries: Afghanistan (30%), Israel and

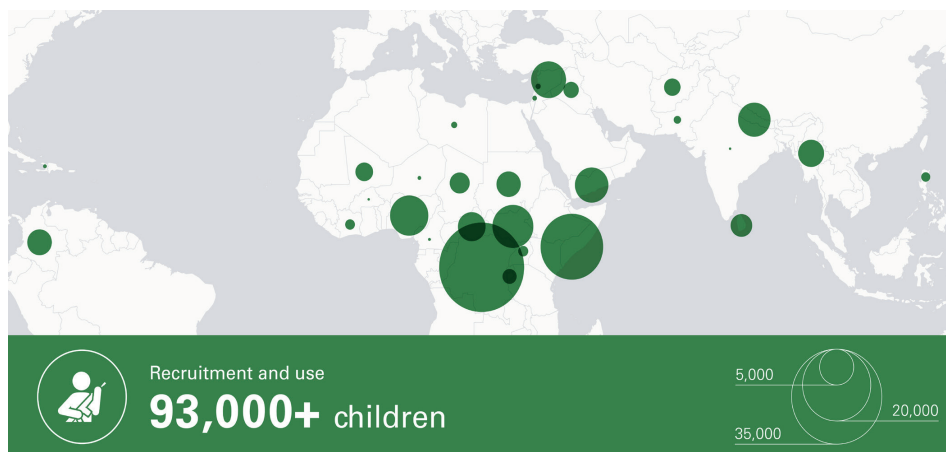
the State of Palestine (14%), Syria (13%), Yemen (13%) and Somalia (9%).

- State actors were responsible for at least 41 per cent of all verified cases of child casualties between 2016 and 2020, while non-state actors were responsible for 31 per cent.

1. Figures used in this fact sheet are derived from the UNICEF report and are exclusively based on verified data and information included in the annual reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict between 2005 and 2020. These figures do not represent the actual total number of children impacted.

2. Numbers include violations committed prior to 2020 and verified at a later date in 2020.

3. Charts reflect cases verified since 2005: comparison between countries is cautioned, as each is included in the annual reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for a different period of time.



2

**Since 2005, more than 93,000 children have been verified as recruited and used by parties to conflict**

Between 2016 and 2020, the UN verified the recruitment and use of an average of 8,756 children annually (8,521 in 2020).

More than 80 per cent of those children were recruited and used by non-State actors, while State forces were responsible for approximately 51 per cent of cases.

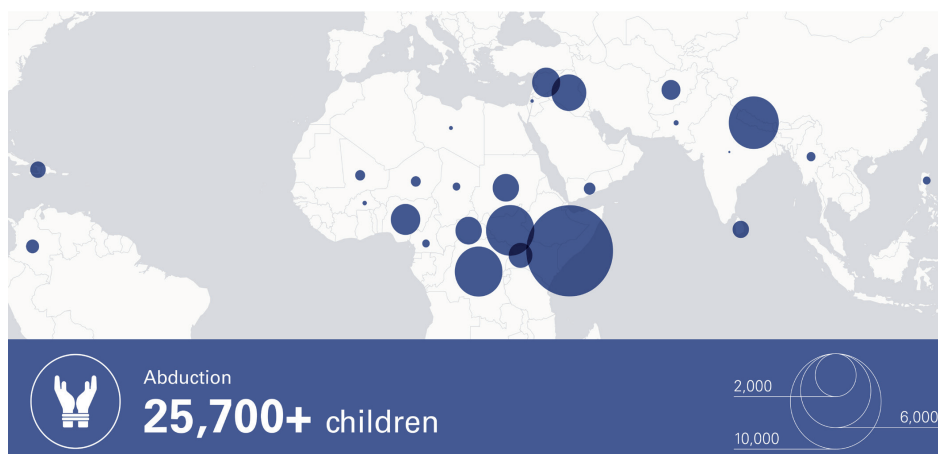
Children were most affected in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and South Sudan. In 2020, steep increases in recruitment and use were seen in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, and Myanmar.

UN access to places where children are deprived of their liberty remains challenging and is not systematically granted by parties to conflict in most conflict situations.

The total number of children verified as detained for their alleged or actual association with parties to conflict or security reasons has gradually increased to an average of 3,000 each year from 2016 to 2020, three times the average observed in the previous five years.

3

**Since 2005, more than 25,700 children have been verified as abducted**



Two-thirds of the UN-verified cases over the past 16 years have occurred between 2014 and 2020, with an annual average of 2,414 abducted children (3,202 in 2020).

Boys account for three-quarters of verified instances of abducted children.

However, girls remain at risk of being abducted, including for the purpose of sexual violence and exploitation.

Between 2014 and 2020, abductions were verified in almost all conflict situations, with 89 per cent of all cases recorded in six countries – the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria.

Incidents of abduction were predominantly committed by non-State actors, accounting for 90 per cent of all verified cases.



4

Since 2005, more than 14,200 children have been verified as subjected to rape and other sexual violence

❖ The annual average is 890 child victims, with the highest record standing at 1,268 in 2020. This, however, is not reflective of the actual scale of conflict-related sexual violence affecting children. Cases of sexual violence, including sexual violence against boys, are particularly underreported.

❖ Sexual violence disproportionately affects girls, who were victims in 97 per cent of cases in the last five years. Verified cases of sexual violence against boys were recorded in about half of all conflict situations, with the highest numbers recorded in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

❖ Between 2016 and 2020, non-State actors were the main perpetrators of

sexual violence, including 56 per cent in 2020. State actors were responsible for about 30 per cent of verified cases.

❖ Between 2016 and 2020, sexual violence was predominantly verified in six conflict situations – Somalia, followed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, and Nigeria – which accounted for 92 per cent of all verified cases.

5

Since 2005, more than 13,900 attacks on schools and hospitals have been verified



❖ Nearly three-fourths of these incidents concerned education facilities, personnel, and pupils, with an annual average of 873 attacks, including 1,032 between 2016 and 2020.

❖ Attacks against hospitals have increased since 2014, with an annual average of 347 verified incidents (321 in 2020).

❖ Non-State actors were the main perpetrators of such attacks, accounting for more than half of the incidents. One-third were attributed to State actors.

❖ Between 2016 and 2020, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria were the most affected countries, accounting for 52 per cent of all incidents.

❖ Between 2005 and 2020, the UN verified at least 2,100 incidents of military use of schools and hospitals, with the vast majority (96%) affecting schools.

❖ State actors were responsible for half of such incidents, with the highest numbers of military use attributed to defence and security forces verified in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and South Sudan.



6

Since 2005, more than 14,900 incidents of denial of humanitarian access have been verified

❖ Around 80 per cent of incidents took place in the past five years, demonstrating strengthened efforts to document and verify these incidents, as well as the increasingly difficult and shrinking space in which humanitarian actors must operate.

❖ Of those attributed, more incidents were verified as having been committed by non-State actors (47%), closely followed by State actors (42%).

❖ Between 2016 and 2020, incidents of denial of humanitarian access have

been verified by the UN in about three-fourths of all conflict situations. The largest number of incidents have been verified in the Central African Republic, Israel and the State of Palestine, Mali, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen

The report also examines how the documentation of grave violations has enabled UN engagement with State and non-State parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, particularly through the development and implementation of concrete Action Plans. Identified as a tool to bolster accountability, Action Plans are written commitments signed between the UN and a party to conflict listed in the annexes of the Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, which commits them to take specific, concrete, and time-bound actions to protect children from the impact of conflict. Between 2005 and 2021:

- 37 Action Plans have been signed with parties to conflict in 17 situations to end and prevent grave violations against

children. Most Action Plans were signed with non-State actors (26, 70%), followed by State actors (11, 30%).

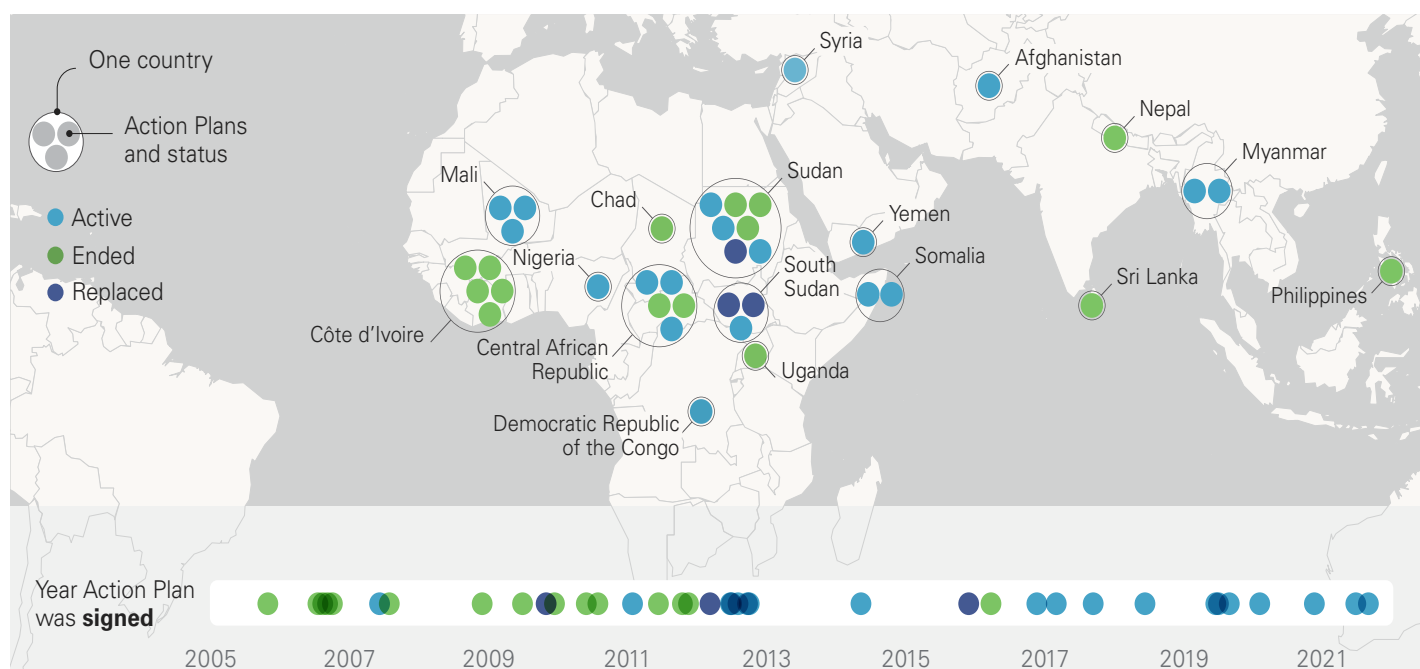
- 11 Action Plans have been completed, leading to the delisting of the parties to conflict from the annexes of the Secretary-General’s annual report on children and armed conflict.

- 22 Action Plans remain under implementation, of which more than half have been under implementation for at least 7 years.

- Less than 25 per cent of the 61 parties to conflict listed in the Secretary-General’s annual report have signed an Action Plan or even engaged with the UN.

- Over 12,643 children were released by armed groups and forces following UN advocacy in 2020.

### 37 Action Plans have been signed with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations against children



This infographic presents all Action Plans signed between 2005 and 2021. Action Plans signed in 2022 are not shown

## Engagement through International Commitments

- 171 States Parties have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC)
- 111 Countries have committed to protecting education and signed the Safe Schools Declaration
- 112 States have endorsed the Paris Principles and Commitments
- 103 Countries have endorsed the Vancouver Principles



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