

We must protect Children in Armed Conflict: “Children have been robbed of their childhood and forced to participate in brutal wars”

Thank you, Mr President.

I'm very pleased to be able to salute those efforts and the progress of this important dossier has made under Belgian leadership. Welcome also to the ministers here and thank you again for being with us and thank you to the Secretary-General, Commissioner Chergui and Ms Becker for your important briefings.

We've all seen and we've all heard of the dreadful and lasting effects that global conflicts have on children, their communities and also their future. And I won't repeat that. If I may, Mr President, I'd just like to highlight a couple of case studies that really illuminate how this impact devastates children's lives.

So in Syria, as stated in the recent report on children's rights by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, children continue to be, and I quote, “robbed of their childhood and forced to participate in a brutal war.” They've been killed, maimed, raped, abducted and detained. They've been forced to act as combatants and, in the case of Daesh, as executioners. Places where they are meant to be safe and nurtured, such as schools and hospitals, have been targeted.

Over 2.5 million children have been displaced in Syria, leaving many at the mercy of the elements and without adequate sustenance or services. And this trend is far from over; as Undersecretary-General Lowcock told the Council last week, the bombardment of Idlib has seen the continued killing of civilians and attacks on civilian objects, and the displacement of over 300,000 children in north-east Syria since early December last year alone.

And as the Commission of Inquiry report found, the mental health of children is and will continue to be deeply affected for years to come. Children and young people have sustained crucial damage to their long-term prospects, and a huge number have missed out on years of education.

Turning to Mali, children continue to suffer the effects of continuing conflict, particularly in central Mali, where they are killed and maimed as direct targets of attacks in the course of inter-communal violence. Insecurity, attacks and threats on schools and teachers, the absence of state authorities and a lack of equipment have led to the closure of more than 900 schools at the last count.

As with Syria, children are suffering both the immediate effects of conflict

as well as long-term effects on their mental well-being and the lack of access to services such as medical care and detention.

And in Cameroon, the impact of conflict on children in the Anglophone region is significant. Children's education is used as a political bargaining chip by the separatists who have closed down schools and taken children hostage. UNICEF estimates that 80% of schools have remained closed since 2016, and the ban on education has affected over 600,000 children.

Mr President, the scale of the impact of conflict on children is clear. But when it comes to peace and efforts for peace, their needs and their views are often neglected.

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

We welcome, Secretary-General, your personal investment in the guidance, and we look forward to its broad dissemination.

I also take this opportunity to urge all mediators, facilitators and negotiators involved in peace and mediation processes to use it as a tool in their work, noting that engaging on issues of children and armed conflict may open doors to discussion of other priorities.

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

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

Thank you, Mr President.