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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## Children and armed conflict

### Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

#### *Summary*

In her report, which covers the period from December 2019 to December 2020, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict explores challenges in ending and preventing grave violations and in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict. She outlines the activities undertaken in discharging her mandate, including by working with human rights entities and mechanisms, and the progress achieved in addressing grave violations against children. The Special Representative also lays out her advocacy activities, including through her focus on lessons learned and best practices. In addition, the Special Representative provides information on her field visits and on her efforts to engage with regional organizations and international partners. She outlines challenges and priorities on her agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by conflict.

## I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from December 2019 to December 2020 and is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 73/155, in which the Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to submit a report to the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, on progress achieved and on challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The Special Representative further elaborates on her activities with regard to the request of the Assembly in its resolution 72/245 to increase her engagement with States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional organizations and subregional organizations, and to increase public awareness activities, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned, in accordance with her mandate. In the report, she also elaborates on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on her work and on ending and preventing grave violations against children more broadly.

## II. Working with human rights entities and mechanisms

2. With a view to achieving the universal ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Special Representative continued to advocate with Member States. On the occasion of the anniversary of the Optional Protocol, on 25 May 2020, she issued, jointly with the Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, a press release on protecting children from sale, sexual exploitation, and recruitment and use in hostilities. Public events to mark the anniversary of the Optional Protocol that the Special Representative had planned to attend in Brussels and Geneva were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee continued to raise the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the national reviews of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Special Representative continued to cooperate with the Committee on the Rights of the Child and took note of the Committee's observations on the initial report of the State of Palestine (CRC/C/PSE/CO/1). The Committee urged the State of Palestine, inter alia, to fully implement the Palestinian Security Forces Military Service Act No. 8 of 2005 and article 46 (1) of the Palestinian Children's Act, which prohibits the recruitment and involvement of children in hostilities, and to take prompt measures to investigate, prosecute and sanction the perpetrators in cases of the recruitment of children. The Office of the Special Representative will continue to work with the United Nations on the ground to support the implementation of these recommendations.

4. The Special Representative continued to cooperate closely with the Human Rights Council. On 2 July 2020, she made a virtual presentation of her report to the Council (A/HRC/43/38). The Special Representative submitted contributions to the universal periodic reviews of Lebanon, Myanmar and Somalia. During the interactive dialogue on Libya in 2020, for which her Office had previously submitted a contribution, States highlighted the protection needs of children in the context of the armed conflict and reiterated the points noted in the Special Representative's submission. The Office of the Special Representative will support Libya in implementing the recommendations relating to children and armed conflict.

5. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the special procedures of the Human Rights Council to exchange information and identify common areas of concern. In February 2020, she met with the commissioners of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and, in June 2020, she had a telephone call with the Head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. In October 2020, the Special Representative met virtually with the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other

child sexual abuse material. Also in October, she had a telephone call with the Head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

6. The Office of the Special Representative also provided inputs for multiple reports and field missions of special rapporteurs and independent experts and regularly collaborated with commissions of inquiry on situations of mutual interest. Furthermore, the Office of the Special Representative interacted at the working level with the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen.

7. Within the United Nations system, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) continued to be an important partner for the Special Representative, including through its field level participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict. The Office of the Special Representative also closely cooperated with OHCHR on the implementation of the child protection provisions contained in the compliance framework of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel. The participation of her Office in a training of the Joint Force in San Remo, Italy, on international humanitarian and human rights law was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A child protection module was, however, added to the training package and elements of it were covered during the protection of civilians training. In addition, the Office of the Special Representative contributed to the upcoming report of OHCHR on child rights for the high level political forum on sustainable development in 2021. The Office actively participated in implementing “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights”, launched by the Secretary-General on 24 February 2020. Engagement by the Special Representative with Geneva-based mechanisms and institutions was facilitated through her liaison office in Brussels.

### **III. Challenges, trends and progress in ending and preventing grave violations**

8. The number of grave violations against children remained high during the reporting period, with the COVID-19 pandemic increasing the vulnerability of conflict-affected children and placing an additional burden on child protection actors. Despite persisting and emerging challenges, important progress to end and prevent grave violations was achieved in relation to several country situations on the children and armed conflict agenda, including in the area of transitional justice.

#### **A. Progress in ending and preventing grave violations**

9. In Afghanistan, the Special Representative engaged with her counterparts to revitalize the road map of 2014 for the implementation of the action plan of 2011 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, and the Afghan National Police, including the Afghan Local Police. The Ministry of Interior Affairs continued its efforts to prevent the recruitment of children into the Afghan National Police through child protection units located in the recruitment centres of the police across the country. More than 120 child applicants were prevented from enlisting in the Afghan National Police between January and September 2020. Although a special presidential decree on the pardon and suspension of the implementation of sentences of juveniles and prisoners was issued in March 2020, provisions for the release of children held on charges relating to national security should also be included in upcoming decrees on the prevention of COVID-19. A national policy for the protection of children was drafted in support of the Child Act, led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and with the input of child protection actors, but its finalization was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the political situation. The Special Representative continued to advocate for reinforced measures to mitigate child casualties during military operations and encouraged the Government of Afghanistan to broaden its engagement with the United Nations to strengthen the prevention of grave violations against children. The Special Representative also urged the Government and

international partners to include child protection issues in the intra-Afghan peace negotiations.

10. In the Central African Republic, the United Nations continued to engage with the Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique, the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique and the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique to accelerate the implementation of their respective action plans signed in 2018 and 2019. The United Nations also engaged with other armed groups to adopt measures to end and prevent grave violations against children. These efforts led to the identification and separation of over 240 children between January and September 2020. On 15 June 2020, the President of the Central African Republic promulgated the Child Protection Code, following its adoption by the National Assembly on 27 February 2020. The law criminalizes, *inter alia*, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, sexual violence, attacks against schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access. It also considers children associated with armed forces and groups as victims. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the Government of the Central African Republic for the development of a national plan to prevent grave violations against children. Activities relating to the prevention plan, such as the organization of national and prefectural workshops, were temporarily suspended due to COVID-19 pandemic protection measures and related travel restrictions.

11. In Mali, during the reporting period, the national monitoring committee in charge of the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration adopted its action plan and identified priority activities addressing, *inter alia*, the military use of schools during conflict. Three regional committees were established and are functioning. In February 2020, the United Nations organized a workshop bringing together representatives from the regional committees to discuss strategies for the protection of education facilities from attacks and military use. In June and July 2020, the United Nations, alongside national authorities, conducted an age-based screening of combatants in armed groups participating in the accelerated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process in the Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu regions to identify children among them and facilitate their release. One boy was identified, and the United Nations was continuing to advocate for his release at the time of writing. The awareness of some 226 combatants was raised on issues of child protection and on the prevention of grave violations against children.

12. In Myanmar, the Tatmadaw was delisted for the violation of recruitment and use, following the signature of a joint action plan in 2011, which had resulted in a continued significant decrease in the recruitment of children, ongoing prosecutions and an agreement to continue to trace and release children who had been identified in previous years (A/74/845-S/2020/525, para. 240, and annexes). Since then, the Special Representative has been in regular communication with the Government. It issued multiple military directives to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and in January 2020, the Tatmadaw released 18 children and young people. The Tatmadaw remains listed for the killing, maiming and rape of, and other forms of sexual violence against, children. The Special Representative continued to urge the Government to sign a joint action plan to end and prevent both violations. In November 2020, a joint action plan was signed between the United Nations and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, the first action plan of its kind with an armed group in Myanmar to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

13. In Nigeria, the United Nations continued to support the implementation of the action plan signed by the Civilian Joint Task Force in 2017 to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. During a consultation, Civilian Joint Task Force commanders and representatives of Borno State ministries and of United Nations agencies reviewed the progress made in the implementation of the action plan. The United Nations also engaged with the Civilian Joint Task Force leadership to reinforce zero tolerance of the recruitment and use of children following an incident involving two boys who were used by the group at the entrance of a camp for internally displaced persons in 2020.

14. In the Philippines, following the enactment of Republic Act No. 11188 and its implementing rules and regulations, the Office of the Special Representative supported, through the United Nations in the field, the completion of the Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Handling Protocol in September 2020 to update and combine all previous guidelines and regulations issued by different national implementing agencies. To sustain the gains of

the completed action plan between the United Nations and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the United Nations continued to support the reintegration of disengaged children, including through psychosocial assistance and life skills training. No cases of re-recruitment by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front were verified. Building on previous gains and experiences in community-level engagement, the United Nations engaged with religious leaders to deliver messages on child rights and child protection during Islamic religious services.

15. In Somalia, the United Nations continued to work with the Federal Government of Somalia to expedite the implementation of the two action plans signed by the Government in 2012 to end and prevent the recruitment, use, killing and maiming of children, and the road map signed in October 2019. Sub-working groups on children and armed conflict were established in South-West and Galmudug States and the screening of Somali National Army soldiers was ongoing. On 12 February 2020, on the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, the Federal Government reiterated its commitment to screen its soldiers and those being integrated into the Somali National Army, and to separate identified children. On 1 March 2020, the country task force on monitoring and reporting in Somalia negotiated the release of nine boys allegedly associated with Al-Shabaab and transferred the children to a reintegration centre. More than 1,000 children continued to benefit from reintegration programmes supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), including interim care, family tracing and reunification, formal education and vocational training.

16. In South Sudan, notable progress was achieved when, on 7 February 2020, the Government signed a comprehensive action plan covering all six grave violations against children in the presence of the Special Representative. The action plan is uniquely comprehensive as it addresses all of the grave violations against children and requires multiple parties to conflict to work under the same action plan. While the Government of South Sudan bears the primary responsibility for implementing the action plan, it was endorsed by all parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. In addition, the action plan will apply to any armed group that may be integrated into the national army in the future. The signing and endorsement of the action plan was the result of sustained engagement by the Special Representative and the country task force on monitoring and reporting in South Sudan, particularly during the Special Representative's two visits to the country in September 2018 and in February 2020. Since the signing, the United Nations has worked with the parties to implement the action plan, including by delivering child protection training sessions to security forces and by supporting the establishment of high-level ministerial and national-level technical committees as key oversight structures for the implementation of the action plan.

17. In the Sudan, the United Nations continued to engage with the transitional Government to ensure the sustainability of measures following the completion in 2018 of the Government's action plan of 2016 on ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children and its commitment to a road map in 2019 to ensure continued compliance. Screening exercises in the barracks of the Rapid Support Forces were ongoing and two verification missions to South Darfur and West Darfur were completed between April and June 2020. The country task force on monitoring and reporting continued to engage with armed groups to ensure the implementation of their respective action plans, including by developing road maps, specifically with the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi on its action plan of 2007, with the Justice and Equality Movement on its action plan of 2012 and with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North on its action plan of 2016. In March 2020, a workshop between the country task force and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction to assess the status of the implementation of its action plan of 2017 also led to the development of a road map. The Special Representative continued to urge the Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid to engage with the United Nations on the development of an action plan and called upon the parties to conflict not listed in the annexes to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict to adopt measures to prevent grave violations against children.

18. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the implementation of the action plan signed by the Syrian Democratic Forces to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children continued. Troop screenings of the Syrian Democratic Forces resulted in the release of 51 girls in early 2020 and their transfer to an interim care facility. Eighteen boys were also separated awaiting

formal release. Through engagement relating to the action plan, the Special Representative advocated with the Syrian Democratic Forces for access by the United Nations to all civilian and military detention facilities in north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic, where children are known to be detained. At the time of writing, access to three facilities had been granted and the United Nations conducted a humanitarian assessment of the situation of the children there.

19. In Yemen, the implementation by the Government of the action plan of 2014 and the road map of 2018 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children continued but were slowed by the volatile situation in southern Yemen and the absence of key interlocutors in Aden. In February 2020, the President issued a directive instructing all forces to comply with the action plan and road map, requesting, *inter alia*, the creation of child protection units in the forces overseen by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior. The interministerial committee on children and armed conflict resumed its work in August 2020. The Houthis/Ansar Allah (previously the Houthis) issued a directive in April 2020 for the handover of children captured or detained during military operations while dialogue on the signing of an action plan continued. This engagement led to the release in January 2020 by the Houthis/Ansar Allah (previously the Houthis) of 68 children detained for their actual or alleged association with opposition parties. The Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen endorsed a programme of time-bound activities, through an exchange of letters with the Special Representative, in order to support the implementation of the memorandum of understanding to strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict in Yemen, signed in March 2019. The Coalition was delisted for the violation of killing and maiming, following a sustained significant decrease in killing and maiming due to air strikes and the sustained implementation of the programme of time-bound activities to support the implementation of the memorandum of understanding of 2019. Since July 2020, the Special Representative has engaged with all members of the Coalition to sustain the implementation of the workplan of agreed activities. A number of consultations were held between the Special Representative, her Office and the Permanent Mission of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations on behalf of the Coalition to identify the remaining key priority activities for implementation. In November 2020, a meeting took place between the Special Representative and the Force Commander of the Coalition. The Coalition continued to send quarterly progress notes on all aspects of the implementation of agreed actions, including the investigation of allegations of violations.

## **B. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ending and preventing grave violations**

20. Confinement measures and movement restrictions were put in place in most of the situations on the children and armed conflict mandate, sometimes as early as the first week of March 2020. While such measures were necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect populations, including children, many activities relating to the children and armed conflict mandate were disrupted.

21. Restrictive measures to contain the pandemic often had an adverse effect on children. For instance, in Afghanistan, restrictions disrupted children's access to education, health care and social services and placed additional stressors on parents, guardians and caregivers. The closing of schools made children more susceptible to recruitment and use by parties to the conflict, while stigma and discrimination relating to COVID-19 also increased children's vulnerability to violence and psychosocial distress. Attacks against hospitals and personnel were particularly egregious considering the fragile state of the health-care system of Afghanistan and the heavy burden it carries during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Colombia, the closure of all schools, the reduced presence of protection and humanitarian actors in conflict-affected areas, and the reduction in family incomes may increase the risks of the recruitment and use of children and other grave violations against children by armed groups. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, trials against child recruiters were suspended. At the same time, fewer separated children were able to benefit from support services. In Iraq, the pandemic exacerbated an already adverse protection environment for children, especially in camps for internally displaced persons and in detention. In Myanmar, travel restrictions and mitigation strategies seriously affected humanitarian access and exacerbated pre-existing

operational and access challenges as humanitarian partners already had extremely limited access to more than half a million people, including 130,000 stateless Rohingya confined in camps in Rakhine State. There is particular concern about the limited access of internally displaced persons and stateless persons to health care.

22. The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on the ability of the United Nations to carry out vital work to end and prevent grave violations against children and greatly reduced opportunities for engagement with parties to conflict, although dialogue continued to the extent possible. In the Central African Republic, the pandemic affected activities under the Special Representative's Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict campaign. Planned training and sensitization sessions, as well as visits to field locations, had to be suspended. In Myanmar, lockdowns and travel restrictions delayed high-level political engagement with the Government on the follow-up to the joint action plan on the recruitment and use of children, while technical engagement was able to proceed. Restrictions also delayed the signing ceremonies of joint action plans between the United Nations and armed groups in Myanmar. In Nigeria, a planned workshop to review progress on the implementation of the Civilian Joint Task Force action plan between the United Nations, the Civilian Joint Task Force and representatives of Borno State ministries had to be postponed for several months due to COVID-19-related restrictions. The workshop was eventually held in August 2020. In the Philippines, the country task force on monitoring and reporting faced difficulties in accessing conflict-affected areas due to security challenges and movement restrictions amplified by the pandemic. Verification activities and further engagement with parties to conflict were delayed, with most verification missions being rescheduled continuously, whereas obtaining information on grave violations from primary sources was further constrained. In South Sudan, the implementation of the comprehensive action plan on the six grave violations against children, in particular the creation of key oversight structures for the implementation of the action plan and capacity-building on child protection, were hampered by restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Sudan, planned child protection trainings for government forces, as well as verification missions to the barracks of the Rapid Support Forces, were suspended.

23. Despite COVID-19-related lockdowns and mobility restrictions, the monitoring and verification of grave violations against children continued, in accordance with the verification standards of the monitoring and reporting mechanism. Country task forces on monitoring and reporting and country teams have worked with partners to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on conflict-affected children and to facilitate greater protection for them.

24. As the vulnerability of boys and girls living amid hostilities continues and is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, processes such as ceasefires, peace negotiations and security sector reforms must be seized as opportunities to strengthen mechanisms to protect children. Parties to conflict are called upon to adhere to the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire issued on 23 March 2020. In particular, parties to conflict must respect the civilian nature of schools, health infrastructure and associated protected personnel, as they increasingly become strategic assets in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. School buildings that are empty because of lockdown measures should not be used for military purposes. In the context of already fragile education systems, where access to education is a scarce commodity, the use of schools comes at such a high price that it can never be justified.

25. As the world commemorated World Humanitarian Day on 19 August 2020, the Special Representative issued a statement to underscore that the full, safe and unhindered access for the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance was fundamental for the protection of boys and girls in armed conflict and even more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is against the backdrop of an already worrisome rise of more than 400 per cent in incidents of the denial of humanitarian access in 2019, as outlined in the latest report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. These incidents included direct attacks or threats against humanitarian aid and child protection workers, restrictions of movement and the looting of supplies, and are increasingly disturbing the provision of vital assistance to children.

### C. Transitional justice and conflict-affected children

26. In his report on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies (S/2004/616), the Secretary-General defines transitional justice as the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. These may include both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, with differing levels of international involvement (or none at all) and individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and dismissals, or a combination thereof.

27. Given the profound negative effects of armed conflict on boys and girls and their unique needs, it is important to ensure their inclusion and participation in all aspects of transitional justice. Throughout the years, transitional justice mechanisms have increasingly involved children for accountability and reconciliation purposes. The inclusion of children in traditional transitional justice processes, such as judicial mechanisms, truth commissions and truth-seeking mechanisms, is key to breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and preventing future violations. It provides children with an opportunity to seek redress for crimes committed against them and their families. Participation in transitional justice processes is not only a right but also a means to provide children with avenues for coming to terms with the past and building a new future for themselves and their communities.

28. The inclusion of children formerly associated with parties to conflict in transitional justice is particularly important as these children may have simultaneously been victims, witnesses and alleged perpetrators. An important point to highlight in this regard is that children actually or allegedly associated with parties to conflict must be treated primarily as victims and in line with international juvenile justice standards. The detention of children should be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible period of time, while preference should be given to alternatives that contribute to the children's rehabilitation. Inclusive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive processes of transitional justice and peacebuilding are essential parts of reintegrating war-affected children.

29. In 2002, the indictment for grave violations against children of all the individuals charged by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, as well as the involvement of children in that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, signified a shift that placed the issue of child participation centrally in the international discourse on justice and truth-seeking mechanisms. Since then, there has been significant investment to create guidance and common perspectives on the basis of lessons learned and of best practices from Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

30. In 2012, the guilty verdict rendered by the International Criminal Court in the trial of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, as well as the sentence of 14 years of imprisonment, upheld on appeal in 2014, was a landmark decision to advance accountability for violations against children, as was the sentencing in 2019 of Bosco Ntaganda to 30 years in prison by the Court, including for conscripting children under the age of 15 years into an armed group and using them to participate actively in hostilities.

31. The aforementioned judgments have given hope to many children around the world. To be truly effective, however, national legislation, national prosecutions and national systems to end and ultimately prevent violations must be put in place and used. The work of the United Nations country task forces on monitoring and reporting in advocating for and supporting transitional justice efforts at the national level is crucial.

32. In Colombia, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, which is part of the Colombian Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition, continued to advance a case opened in March 2019 focusing on the recruitment and use of children between January 1971 and December 2016. In September 2020, several former leaders of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) appeared before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace to render their versions regarding this case, and victims participated in the sessions by presenting observations and requesting information on specific cases. Some of the former FARC-EP leaders acknowledged the presence of children in the ranks of the armed group. In addition, they recognized that sexual violence and forced abortions had been perpetrated and asked for forgiveness. Others emphasized that the group

did not have a policy of forced recruitment of children and claimed that it was not possible for it to monitor the conduct of all of its units. While the call for forgiveness was perceived as a positive gesture by the international community, several victims' organizations, the Government and other actors criticized that narrative and called upon former FARC-EP leaders to fully acknowledge their responsibilities.

33. In Mali, during the reporting period, the United Nations continued to support the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2015, in its efforts to include children in the transitional justice process and to allow them to play their critical role in processes that seek truth, justice and reconciliation. In December 2019, the first public hearing focusing on violence against children, among other issues, was held and will inform five subsequent hearings. The United Nations provided representatives of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission with training and coaching sessions on the inclusion of child protection and the participation of adolescents in their work. In February 2020, the Commission organized a training session on child-friendly interviewing techniques and on approaches to assess the physical and psychological vulnerability of child victims for the investigation unit and the personnel taking statements from children.

34. While there has been progress in including children in transitional justice processes, accountability efforts remain adult-centric, and violations affecting children have not received the sustained attention they deserve. To support research into accountability gaps, the Office of the Special Representative participated in October 2020 in a virtual round-table discussion on overcoming barriers to accountability for violations and crimes affecting children in conflict. The discussion was organized by Save the Children and by the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict of the Blavatnik School of Government in the framework of research they are conducting on the barriers to the effective investigation and documentation of, and indictments for, violations and crimes affecting children, as well as possible solutions.

#### **IV. Raising awareness and mobilizing global action**

35. Throughout 2020 the Special Representative continued to enhance her mandated activities in terms of raising public awareness and mobilizing global action, including through field visits and high-level events, advocacy, the collection and dissemination of best practices and lessons learned, and building and supporting alliances and engagement with a broad range of actors.

##### **A. Field visits and high-level events**

36. The Special Representative and her Office continued to use visits to countries on the children and armed conflict agenda and international high-level events to raise awareness and advocate for the protection of children affected by conflict. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Special Representative has continued her global engagements remotely, including through participation in virtual events and by issuing video messages.

37. In January 2020, the Special Representative travelled to Myanmar to meet with key stakeholders, including the State Counsellor, the Minister for Defence and the Tatmadaw, to give renewed impetus to the implementation of the action plan with the Tatmadaw on the recruitment and use of children, to accelerate accountability measures put in place within the framework of the Child Rights Law and to encourage the Government to sign an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent killing, maiming, and rape and other forms of sexual violence. She also met with three non-State armed groups, namely the Karen National Liberation Army, the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, and urged them to sign and implement action plans to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. The signature of an action plan with the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council was delayed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

38. The Special Representative visited South Sudan in February 2020 to witness the signature of the comprehensive action plan to end and prevent all six grave violations. In view of the unification of their forces with the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, and

pursuant to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance have bound themselves to this action plan. The Special Representative also inaugurated the child protection office at the headquarters of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, built with the support of the country task force on monitoring and reporting, and serving as the coordination centre for child protection activities in South Sudan.

39. In March 2020, upon invitation by the Russian Federation, the Special Representative travelled to Moscow, where she met with the presidential commissioner for children's rights. The presidential commissioner presented the work of the Russian Federation in repatriating Russian children actually or allegedly associated with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, including the methodologies for the identification of unaccompanied Russian children in order to proceed with their repatriation and reunification with their families. The Special Representative briefed the presidential commissioner, *inter alia*, about her work with the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers and the importance of focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children formerly associated with parties to conflict.

40. Programmed missions to Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and the State of Palestine had to be postponed owing to unforeseen political events and COVID-19-related travel restrictions. The Special Representative organized videoconferences with some of the scheduled interlocutors and continued to enhance her engagement as requested by the Secretary-General in his most recent annual report on children and armed conflict.

41. In December 2019, the Special Representative participated in a high-level event entitled "The United Nations at 75: a time for renewal and innovation", organized in the framework of the nineteenth Doha Forum. The same month the Special Representative was a speaker at an event held by the World Bank Group entitled "Overcoming the humanitarian-development divide for child soldiers" in Washington, D.C. In September 2020, the Special Representative spoke at a high-level virtual event for the first commemoration of the International Day to Protect Education from Attack, following its proclamation by the General Assembly in 2019. The event was organized by Qatar, the Education Above All Foundation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and UNICEF. In November 2020, the Special Representative shared a video message on the topic of child protection in armed conflict for the Mediterranean Dialogue, organized by Italy.

## **B. Advocacy**

42. The Special Representative continued to use her voice as the highest United Nations advocate for the protection of children affected by conflict to publicly call for their increased protection, including by issuing some 50 press releases and public statements, several of which were published jointly with other high-level United Nations officials as mentioned below. Furthermore, in July 2020, the Special Representative delivered a radio message for the International Criminal Court's access to justice radio programme in the Central African Republic on the theme of justice and the protection of children in situations of armed conflict.

43. In April 2020, the Special Representative issued a donor report covering 2018 and 2019, in which she articulated her Office's achievements around four pillars that would inform her actions in the coming years: protecting children used and abused by, for and in armed conflict; preventing violations committed against children from occurring in the first place; raising awareness and strengthening partnerships for children; and promoting lessons learned and best practices.

44. By positioning children and armed conflict at the core of the peacebuilding, development and prevention agendas, the Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict campaign supported global advocacy efforts and was a strategic part of the global communications strategy of the Office during the reporting period. In February 2020, the campaign was launched in South Sudan. It will run until the end of 2022.

### C. Collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned

45. Collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned as mandated by the General Assembly remained a key priority for the Special Representative.

46. As mentioned in previous reports to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/40/49 and A/HRC/43/38), the Special Representative, in coordination with UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, organized a series of regional consultations with the co-chairs of country task forces on monitoring and reporting and country teams. The consultations were aimed at, inter alia, fostering exchanges and sharing lessons learned on the monitoring and reporting mechanism and on United Nations engagement with parties listed in the annexes to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. The fourth and last regional workshop, held in Dakar in January 2020, brought together the Special Representative, UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations, as well as country task forces and United Nations country team representatives from the Central African Republic, Colombia, Mali and Nigeria. The next steps will be to discuss the workshop recommendations at the Headquarters level and coordinate the implementation of the recommendations with partners in the field.

47. In August and September 2020, the Special Representative and her Office contributed to the high-level and technical webinars organized by the country task force on monitoring and reporting in the Philippines. The webinars were aimed at discussing the policies and practices of the monitoring and reporting mechanism, identifying ways to enhance the contribution of United Nations agencies to the monitoring and reporting mechanism, and formulating recommendations and priorities for 2020 and 2021.

48. In Colombia, in June and October 2020, the Office of the Special Representative supported the country task force on monitoring and reporting in delivering virtual capacity-building trainings to members of the country task force and child protection organizations to strengthen existing monitoring and reporting capacities on grave violations against children.

49. On 12 February 2020, the Security Council held a briefing to launch the *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict*, which was developed by the Office of the Special Representative in collaboration with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations and UNICEF. The briefing took place in the presence of the King and the Queen of Belgium and the Secretary-General. On the same day, the Special Representative, together with Belgium and Sweden, held a high-level event to present the *Practical Guidance* to the wider public, highlighting the added value of including child protection issues in peace processes with a view to sustainable and long-term peace and security.

50. The *Practical Guidance* is a key component of the Special Representative's work to support Member States in placing children at the centre of initiatives aimed at preventing and ending conflicts. One of the main findings of the consultative process launched in 2018 to develop the *Practical Guidance* was that child protection issues were mostly addressed in an ad hoc manner, as the priorities identified by parties to conflict and through the support of mediators were not necessarily focused on children. One reason for this is that mediators are seldom provided with specific and effective tools designed to identify child protection and child rights issues, including those on how to appropriately consult children and to channel their added value in peace negotiations. Although it is widely acknowledged that the protection of children is essential to community stability and development, the inclusion of child protection issues in peacemaking is often forgotten.

51. The *Practical Guidance* is aimed at addressing this gap by providing mediators and other stakeholders supporting mediation efforts with specific measures for consideration at the early stages of peace talks and agreements. By doing so, it is intended to assist them in the identification of entry points and possible confidence-building measures to engage parties on this issue. It also provides mediators with practical tools to conduct a child protection-focused conflict analysis by tackling all aspects relating to the six grave violations against children.

52. By identifying best practices for the integration of child protection issues into peace processes, the *Practical Guidance* supports prevention and mediation efforts by the United Nations and by regional, subregional, national and local actors.

53. The successful inclusion of child protection issues in peace processes can lower the impact of transition for children victims of armed conflict and, at the same time, inform the development of prevention and accountability systems in the post-conflict period. The guidance illustrates how the involvement of United Nations entities with child protection expertise has proved to be useful in monitoring the implementation of agreements in the form of joint monitoring mechanisms. Concrete examples of lessons learned and best practices highlighted in the *Practical Guidance* include the child-inclusive approach in Colombia in the framework of the peace talks between the Government and FARC-EP in 2016, as well as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in 2006, which resulted in the release of children.

54. The *Practical Guidance* was published in English and translated in Arabic, French and Spanish. The Chinese and Russian versions will be available in 2021. The country task force on monitoring and reporting in Afghanistan adapted the *Practical Guidance* to include child protection issues in the intra-Afghan peace negotiations initiated in September 2020.

55. To further support the lessons learned and best practices of the Office of the Special Representative, a new hub is being established in Doha. It will bring together actors from across different geographic and thematic areas to study, inter alia, the issues outlined above with the aim to contribute to building institutional knowledge around current and future child protection efforts with particular emphasis on research on education for reintegration, including gender differentiated programmes and a focus on mental health.

#### **D. Building and supporting global alliances**

56. The Special Representative actively engaged with Member States and other key stakeholders to build and support global alliances aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children. She continued to advocate for the endorsement by Member States of political commitments such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles), the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (the Vancouver Principles). In May 2020, the Special Representative was a speaker at a virtual event entitled “Protecting education from attack: scope, impact and response”, marking the fifth anniversary of the Safe Schools Declaration and co-organized by Argentina, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Uruguay and the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

57. As in previous years, the Special Representative held regular exchanges with the New York-based Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, and in October 2020 she had her annual briefing to the Geneva-based Group of Friends. The same month, she also participated in a joint virtual briefing of the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict in New York and Kabul, and the Group of Friends of Afghanistan in New York. She further met with the Group of Friends of South Sudan in Juba in February 2020. In January 2020, her liaison office in Brussels provided training to the members of the Geneva-based Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict.

58. As a member of the United Nations inter-agency task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty, the Special Representative and her Office remained committed to supporting the follow-up to the recommendations of this study, mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/157. Her Office participated in the drafting of key messages on children deprived of liberty and contributed to a mapping that was elaborated as a follow-up to the Global Study.

59. In July 2020, the Office of the Special Representative participated in a webinar organized by the non-governmental organizations Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, Human Rights Watch and Defence for Children International, entitled

“United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty: the implications of COVID-19, good practices and next steps”.

60. The Office of the Special Representative continued to spearhead the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, launched in 2018 together with UNICEF. This broad, geographically representative group of Member States, United Nations entities, the World Bank, non-governmental organizations and academia researched and published in 2020 three briefing papers, namely: “Reframing child reintegration: from humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond”,<sup>1</sup> “Gaps and needs of children associated with armed forces or armed groups’ successful reintegration,” and “Financing support for child reintegration”. Their main findings were also compiled and published in June 2020 in a report entitled “Improving support to child reintegration: summary of findings from three reports”.<sup>2</sup> A high-level launch, planned with the Deputy Secretary-General, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, the Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, actor and activist Forest Whitaker and the Chief Executive Officer of War Child UK, was cancelled due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

61. As part of the second phase of the initiative, an academic advisory group on reintegration is being set up. Furthermore, specific aspects of the studies will be analysed in greater detail, including the use of innovative financing for reintegration activities, the strengthening of mental health and psychosocial support for separated children, and the differentiated needs of girls and boys in reintegration programmes.

## **E. Working with regional and subregional organizations**

62. Developing and advancing existing cooperation with the regional and subregional organizations mentioned below remained a priority for the Special Representative.

### **European Union**

63. The partnership between the Office of the Special Representative and the European Union continued throughout the reporting period. The Special Representative had virtual meetings with several European Union officials, including the co-chairs of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights and the European Commissioner for Crisis Management. In December 2020, she also had a virtual meeting with the Commission’s Vice-President for Democracy and Demography in charge of launching a new comprehensive European Union strategy on the rights of the child. In June 2020, her Office participated in a side event to the fourth Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. The side event was organized by the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights with the association of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, and the topic was children at the al-Hol camp.

64. The Special Representative’s liaison office in Brussels provided information on children and armed conflict for the European Union Human Rights Dialogues and for members of the European Parliament, and closely followed discussions on European Union policy documents relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate. The German armed forces, inter alia, were provided with trainings on children and armed conflict.

### **North Atlantic Treaty Organization**

65. The Office of the Special Representative continued its partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), including by cooperating closely with the Senior Focal Point on Children and Armed Conflict at NATO headquarters and providing dedicated

<sup>1</sup> See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GCR-Reframing-Child-Reintegration-92020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GCR-Reintegration-Summary-paper-February-2020.pdf>.

technical assistance for further developing NATO activities to identify and prevent grave violations against children.

66. In May 2020, the Special Representative held a videoconference with the NATO Resolute Support Mission and forces of the United States of America in Afghanistan on measures taken by the international forces in Afghanistan to mitigate child casualties during military operations. In October 2020, her liaison office had a call with NATO Allied Command Transformation to discuss, inter alia, the development of an immersive training tool on children and armed conflict. In November 2020, her liaison office participated in a United Nations-NATO expert working group meeting on the protection of civilians, child protection and conflict-related sexual violence.

### **African Union**

67. The Special Representative continued her strong partnership with the African Union. In January 2020, her Office participated in a retreat of the African States that are members of the Security Council and of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, with a focus on children and armed conflict. In February 2020, the Special Representative was a speaker at the African Union Summit High-level Breakfast Dialogue on the theme “Stop the war on children: dividend of silencing the guns”. In her speech she made a strong plea for increasing prevention efforts to better protect children from hostilities. On the occasion of the anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, on 25 May 2020, the Special Representative issued a joint statement with the Commissioner for Peace and Security of the African Union and the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights.

68. The Office of the Special Representative regularly engaged with the African Union at the expert level, inter alia, to contribute to the drafting of the general comment on article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, published in September 2020 by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

### **League of Arab States**

69. The Special Representative also continued her engagement with the League of Arab States. On 12 October 2020, she held a virtual meeting with the Assistant Secretary-General, Head of the Social Affairs Sector of the League, to discuss the specific activities under the memorandum of understanding signed between her Office and the League of Arab States in 2014. The two officials shared their concerns over the impact of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic on children and discussed the importance of regional strategies to better protect children.

## **F. Working with United Nations mechanisms**

70. As in previous years, the Special Representative worked closely with the Security Council and relevant subsidiary organs. In June 2020, the Special Representative was a briefer at a Security Council open debate on children and armed conflict, organized by France. In September 2020, she was a briefer at a Security Council open debate convened by the Niger on the subject “Attacks against schools as a grave violation of children’s rights”. She briefed the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 2206 (2015) concerning South Sudan. She also briefed the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council on specific country situations, doing so virtually since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and provided the Working Group with two briefings regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children affected by armed conflict. The Secretary-General issued country reports on children and armed conflict in Colombia (S/2019/1017), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2020/1030), Iraq (S/2019/984), Mali (S/2020/1105), Myanmar, Nigeria (S/2020/652), the Philippines (S/2020/777), Somalia (S/2020/174), South Sudan, the Sudan (S/2020/614) and the Syrian Arab Republic. Four global horizontal notes were issued to the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The Office of the Special

Representative supported the organization of several videoconferences between the Working Group and the co-chairs of country task forces on monitoring and reporting and supported the visit of the Working Group to Mali in December 2019.

71. In November 2020, in an informal meeting organized by Belgium, the Special Representative, alongside the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, briefed Security Council experts on children and armed conflict on the theme “Promoting the protection of children affected by armed conflict: the work and synergies between the International Criminal Court Office of the Prosecutor and the children and armed conflict mandate”.

72. The Special Representative continued her cooperation and engagement with other United Nations entities, including UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Her Office continued to contribute to the ongoing review of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, regarding principles on the release and the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, and guidance on security sector reform.

73. The Office of the Special Representative continued to cooperate closely with the World Health Organization and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees regarding their participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict.

74. The Special Representative also strengthened her outreach with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect. In February 2020, she joined the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children in issuing a statement deploring continued reports of human rights abuses against civilians, including women and children, in the south-west and north-west regions of Cameroon. In June 2020, she jointly hosted, together with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Argentina, a virtual event to commemorate the annual International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. In November 2020, the Special Representative released, together with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, a joint statement on the conviction of Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka for the war crimes of rape, sexual slavery, the recruitment of children and murder in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

75. Cross-cutting issues relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate remained an important entry point for mainstreaming child protection concerns. Regarding sexual exploitation and abuse, the Office of the Special Representative participated, among others, in December 2019 in the meeting of the high-level steering group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse on a system-wide response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

## **G. Working with civil society and academia**

76. Building and maintaining strong partnerships with civil society organizations and academia remained a priority for the Special Representative. In addition to regular interactions with New York-based non-governmental organizations, engagement by the Special Representative with Europe-based non-governmental organizations, including in Geneva, continued through the Special Representative’s liaison office in Brussels. The Special Representative also met with civil society partners during her visits to Myanmar and South Sudan.

77. The Special Representative and her Office participated in dozens of events organized by civil society, and dozens more were attended by representatives from her Office.

78. In January 2020, the Special Representative took part in a workshop organized by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, Princeton University and the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.

79. In June 2020, the Special Representative held a virtual coordination session with the children and armed conflict group of non-governmental organizations in New York, and in October 2020 she briefed the non-governmental organizations working group on children and armed conflict in Geneva.

80. The Special Representative also delivered the keynote address at the Knowledge for Prevention online symposium, convened by the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative in September 2020. In October 2020, she sent a video message for a joint session with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the Victims' Rights Advocate, entitled "A global concern: United Nations perspectives on child safeguarding and development" and organized in the context of the Keeping Children Safe 2020 Summit.

81. Also in October 2020, the Office of the Special Representative participated in an online event on justice for all survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, organized by the All Survivors Project, together with Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the International Human Rights Clinic of Harvard Law School.

82. In December 2020, the Special Representative participated virtually in a meeting organized by the permanent missions of Belgium, Canada and the Niger in cooperation with her Office, the Department of Peace Operations and Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité. The meeting was focused on the results of a study by Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité on the benefits and challenges of child protection capacities in peace operations.

83. Concerning academia, in October 2020, the Special Representative recorded a statement for the webpage of the University of Geneva on the impact of her role and the challenges ahead. In November 2020, she was the keynote speaker at a conference entitled "Giving hope to girl children in armed conflict: a joint commitment from the academic community", organized by the University of Perugia, the Institute of Political Studies S. Pio V and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. This conference also marked the launch of the Universities Network for Children in Armed Conflict, the first such network for promoting the rights and the protection of children involved in armed conflict.

## V. Conclusions and recommendations

84. **The Special Representative remains deeply concerned by the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children and calls upon all parties to conflict to comply fully with international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law, and to immediately end and take all measures to prevent grave violations. She also calls upon the Human Rights Council and States Members of the United Nations to take all available measures to prevent violations from occurring.**

85. **The Special Representative expresses her concern about the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children affected by armed conflict and urges all parties to conflict to endorse the appeal of the Secretary-General for a global ceasefire and to put an immediate and effective halt to hostilities. She calls upon Member States to take into account child protection concerns when designing and enforcing measures to contain the pandemic and to ensure that child protection services can continue amid the pandemic, including by enabling unimpeded access to children, guaranteeing a safe environment for child protection actors to operate in and allocating adequate resources to child protection.**

86. **The Special Representative further calls upon parties to conflict to remove all impediments to humanitarian access to children and to enable unimpeded access to education for conflict-affected children. She expresses concern about the increasing instrumentalization of schools as part of hostilities and stresses that it is fundamental to preserve their civilian character, including during school closures enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She further calls upon all Member States that have not done so to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.**

87. The Special Representative underlines that hospitals and health-care institutions must be respected and protected in all circumstances, and even more so during the present global health emergency. She reminds all parties to conflict that attacks against schools and hospitals constitute grave violations against children and urges Member States to better protect schools, school children and teachers, as well as hospitals, health-care institutions and health workers, and to implement concrete measures to deter the military use of schools and hospitals.

88. The Special Representative calls anew upon Member States that have not done so to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and to enact national legislation and policies to prohibit and criminalize the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups. She also calls upon Member States to endorse instruments improving the protection of conflict-affected children, such as the Paris Principles and the Vancouver Principles.

89. The Special Representative welcomes national and international efforts to achieve accountability for perpetrators of grave violations against children and encourages Member States and donors to enhance support to national justice systems in conflict and post-conflict situations by providing sufficient resources and technical capacity for investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of grave violations against children.

90. The Special Representative underlines the importance of ensuring the inclusion and participation of children and the mainstreaming of child protection in all aspects of mediation and transitional justice. She further reminds Member States and regional and subregional organizations that the sustainable reintegration of children is crucial to ensuring sustainable peace and security and to breaking cycles of violence. The Special Representative calls upon Member States and other reintegration actors to provide sustainable political, technical and financial support for such efforts, and invites all of them to join the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers. She further encourages relevant actors to make use of the *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict*.

91. The Special Representative encourages Member States, United Nations partners, regional organizations, child protection actors and parties to conflict to join the Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict campaign.

92. The Special Representative calls anew upon Member States to treat children allegedly associated with armed groups, including groups designated as terrorist by the Security Council, primarily as victims, prioritize their rehabilitation and reintegration, and address the especially detrimental impact of stigma on their reintegration. She further reminds Member States that, if a child is accused of a crime during his or her association or alleged association, internationally recognized juvenile justice principles must be adhered to, including in relation to the minimum age of criminal responsibility and to ensuring that detention is used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible period of time, as well as due process and international fair trial standards. The Special Representative calls upon the Human Rights Council, treaty bodies and relevant special procedure mandate holders to focus closely on the impact of violent extremism on children, including the issue of children with links to United Nations-listed terrorist groups.

93. The Special Representative encourages the Human Rights Council to maintain the practice of including recommendations on the protection of children affected by armed conflict when considering or adopting resolutions on country-specific situations or thematic issues, and in the universal periodic review process, with particular attention paid to the implementation of such recommendations. The Special Representative also encourages the Human Rights Council to continue to include child rights violations in its resolutions establishing or renewing the relevant mandates of special procedures.

94. The Special Representative welcomes the continued attention paid to the impact of armed conflict on children in reports of States to the Committee on the Rights of the

**Child and the Human Rights Committee. She urges relevant Member States to include, as appropriate, specific references to information on grave violations against children, on gaps in their applicable legal and policy frameworks and on accountability initiatives in their submissions to those bodies. She further encourages relevant United Nations entities to use the recommendations of those bodies as advocacy tools with the Member States concerned.**

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