

Committee: GA3 Social, Cultural, & Humanitarian Committee (SOCHUM)

Agenda Item: Defending children's rights in active conflict zones focusing on; prevention of child labor, access to education, healthcare and protection

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Introduction

Armed conflict continues to be one of the gravest obstacles to the fulfilment of children's rights worldwide. According to UN estimates, hundreds of millions of children live in regions where there is conflict, and this has implications of weakening social structures and restricting access to basic services. In such environments, children are most vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and deprivation in terms of forced labor, education, health, and inappropriate protective agendas.

The Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian Committee (SOCHUM) is mandated to deal with humanitarian issues and support the promotion of basic human rights. I would encourage each of you to delve into the plight of children caught up within a conflict zone and to formulate comprehensive strategies to deal with their plight within the context of international obligations.

Definition of Significant Terms

Non-state actors (NSAs)	Non-state actors (NSAs) are influential organisations that are not controlled by or affiliated with a recognised government. Common examples of non-state actors include privately owned financial institutions, corporations and business entities, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
Active Conflict Zone	A geographical area experiencing ongoing armed conflict involving state or non-state actors.
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	Individuals forced to flee their homes due to conflict or violence, but who remain within their country's borders.
Grave Violations Against Children	Six violations identified by the UN: killing and maiming, recruitment or use of children, sexual

	violence, abduction, attacks on schools or hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.
Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)	A UN mechanism established to document and report grave violations committed against children in armed conflict.

Detailed Background of the Issue

Armed conflict has long been recognised as a major driver of child rights violations. Since the late 20th century, the nature of warfare has increasingly involved non-state armed groups, urban conflict, and prolonged instability, all of which disproportionately affect civilians, especially children.

According to UNICEF, over 400 million children currently live in areas affected by armed conflict. The breakdown of public institutions, combined with poverty and displacement, exposes children to exploitation and long-term developmental harm.

“By almost every measure, 2024 has been one of the worst years on record for children in conflict in UNICEF’s history—both in terms of the number of children affected and the level of impact on their lives,” said UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell. “A child growing up in a conflict zone is far more likely to be out of school, malnourished, or forced from their home—too often repeatedly—compared to a child living in places of peace. This must not be the new normal. We cannot allow a generation of children to become collateral damage to the world’s unchecked wars.”

Child Labor in Conflict Zones

Conflict destroys livelihoods and increases household poverty, forcing families to rely on children as economic contributors to their households. In conflict zones, child labour often takes the form of hazardous work, informal labour, or forced service for armed groups. Children may be used as porters, messengers, or combatants, violating international humanitarian law. The loss of income sources, inflation, and lack of social protection systems increase dependency on child labour as a survival strategy.

Access to Education

Education systems are among the first casualties of armed conflict. Schools are frequently destroyed, occupied by military forces, or closed due to insecurity. Displacement further disrupts education, as refugee and internally displaced children often lack access to formal schooling. Schools are increasingly targeted, reducing safe learning spaces and discouraging attendance, particularly for girls.

Healthcare Access

The healthcare infrastructure in conflict zones is often damaged or purposely targeted. Children suffer from preventable diseases, malnutrition, untreated injuries, and psychological trauma. Immunisation programs are disrupted, increasing mortality rates among infants and young children. Exposure to violence, displacement, and loss contributes to long-term psychological consequences, which are rarely addressed due to limited mental health services.

An example from Ottolini et al. would be the evidence presented in Table 1, which demonstrates how armed conflict systematically undermines children's access to healthcare. Data from conflicts between 1990 and 2017 show a significant rise in maternal and under-five mortality, largely caused by major drops in routine immunisation and the spread of communicable diseases as the main cause of death. Studies of displaced and asylum-seeking populations further identify substantial immunity gaps to measles, diphtheria and hepatitis, alongside a high prevalence of antimicrobial-resistant infections. When combined with the collapse of sanitation and disease-surveillance systems, these disruptions repeatedly result in large-scale outbreaks of respiratory, diarrhoeal and water-borne diseases, such as cholera in Yemen, illustrating how weakened health systems directly translate into preventable child mortality during conflict.

Protection and Safety

Children living in conflict-affected areas face heightened protection risks, including recruitment by armed groups, sexual violence, trafficking, and family separation. Weak or collapsed legal systems limit accountability for these violations, while insecurity restricts the ability of humanitarian actors to provide protection services. The lack of civil documentation, such as birth registration, further worsens these challenges. Without legal identity, children may be excluded from education, healthcare, and formal protection mechanisms. Forced, or in other words, obliged recruitment remains a persistent issue in several conflicts, complicating post-conflict recovery and reintegration efforts.

In the latest available data, from 2023, the United Nations verified a record 32,990 grave violations against 22,557 children^[9]—the highest number since Security Council-mandated monitoring began. With the overall upward trend in the number of grave violations—for example, thousands of children have been killed and injured in Gaza, and in Ukraine, the UN verified more child casualties during the first 9 months of 2024 than during all of 2023^[10]—this year is likely to see another increase.

Timeline of Key Events

1949	Adoption of the Geneva Conventions, establishing protections for civilians, including children.
1989	Adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

2000	Adoption of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.
2005	Establishment of the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM).
2015	Adoption of the Safe Schools Declaration.
Ongoing	Continued conflicts in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, and the DRC are affecting millions of children.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF):

UNICEF is the primary UN agency responsible for protecting children affected by armed conflict. Its work focuses on education, healthcare, nutrition, child protection, and emergency relief. UNICEF has supported the establishment of temporary and rehabilitated learning environments in conflict-affected areas such as Syria and Yemen, enabling displaced children to continue their education despite instability. The organisation also operates Child-Friendly Spaces in refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where children receive psychological and social support along with protection from exploitation. In addition, UNICEF conducts emergency immunisation campaigns in high-risk areas, particularly targeting preventable childhood diseases, and supports birth registration initiatives to ensure displaced children gain legal identity and access to essential services.



Figure 1: UNICEF-supported temporary learning space in a conflict-affected area¹

International Labour Organisation (ILO):

The ILO focuses on eliminating child labour through international labour standards and targeted programs in conflict-affected regions. Through initiatives such as the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), the ILO has assisted conflict-affected states, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in removing children from hazardous labour sectors such as mining and armed group support roles. The organisation also works with local authorities and communities to provide income-generating support and vocational training for families, reducing economic dependence on child labour. These efforts are often combined with reintegration into education systems.,

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Operating under the principles of neutrality and international humanitarian law, the ICRC provides critical assistance to civilians, including children, in armed conflict. The ICRC delivers emergency medical care to children injured during hostilities and supports the operation and rehabilitation of damaged healthcare facilities in conflict zones. It also runs family tracing and reunification programs, helping children separated from their families reconnect with relatives. Additionally, the ICRC actively advocates for respect for the protection of schools and hospitals under the Geneva Conventions.

United Nations Security Council:

Addresses grave violations against children through resolutions and mandates peacekeeping missions with child protection components. The Security Council also established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to systematically document grave violations

against children, including recruitment by armed groups and attacks on schools and hospitals. Information collected through the MRM informs UN reports, supports the creation of action plans with offending parties, and has led to targeted sanctions and the deployment of child protection advisers in peacekeeping missions.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):

Organisations such as Save the Children and World Vision deliver humanitarian aid and advocate for child protection policies. Save The Children, provides emergency education kits and accelerated learning programs for children whose schooling has been interrupted by conflict. It also operates child protection monitoring systems to identify cases of abuse, exploitation, or recruitment. Furthermore, Save the Children delivers nutrition and basic healthcare services to children suffering from conflict-related malnutrition while advocating internationally for stronger child protection policies.



Figure 2: "Leila, 48, a mother of three children told us that 'the food parcel came at the exact moment we needed it the most. My children hadn't eaten anything for days, and your support brought us hope. It's more than just food; it's a lifeline for my family.'"²*

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

(UN General Assembly, 1989)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most comprehensive international treaty concerning children's rights and has been ratified by nearly all UN Member States. It establishes children as independent rights-holders and obligates states to ensure access to education, healthcare, protection from exploitation, and survival and development.

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000)

(UN General Assembly, 2000)

The Optional Protocol strengthens the CRC by raising the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities and compulsory recruitment to 18 years. It also requires states to criminalise child recruitment and support the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers.

ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour

(International Labour Conference, 1999)

ILO Convention No. 182 calls for the immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including slavery, forced labour, child trafficking, and the use of children in armed conflict. It has achieved near-universal ratification.

Safe Schools Declaration (2015)

(Oslo Conference, 2015)

The Safe Schools Declaration represents a political commitment to safeguard education in times of armed conflict. Countries that sign the declaration commit to refraining from using schools for military activities and to investigating attacks on educational institutions.

Despite the existence of these international frameworks designed to protect education during armed conflict, enforcement remains inconsistent and often inadequate. This inconsistency is largely due to ongoing conflict situations, limited resources, and the absence of robust accountability mechanisms. As a result, violations frequently go unpunished.

Alternative Solutions

- Strengthening economic support programs to reduce reliance on child labour
- Expanding mobile education and healthcare services in conflict zones
- Increasing accountability for armed groups through the encouragement of international sanctions
- Enhancing reintegration programs for former child soldiers
- Strengthening cooperation between UN agencies, NGOs, and local governments

Useful Links

<https://www.unicef.org>

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org>
<https://www.ilo.org>
<https://www.safeschoolsdeclaration.org>
<https://www.savethechildren.net/>
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8656442/>

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International Labour Organisation. Child Labour in Conflict and Fragile Situations. ILO, www.ilo.org.

United Nations Security Council. Children and Armed Conflict: Annual Report. United Nations, recent edition.

¹ UNICEF. “Education in Emergencies.” UNICEF,
<https://www.unicef.org/education/emergencies>

² Save The Children. “Saving Lives Amid Blockades: How Save the Children brought hope to Gaza.” Save The Children, [Saving Lives Amid Blockades: How Save the Children brought hope to Gaza](https://www.savethechildren.net/press-releases/saving-lives-amid-blockades-how-save-the-children-brought-hope-to-gaza)

UNICEF. “Not the New Normal’ – 2024: One of the Worst Years in UNICEF’s History for Children in Conflict.” UNICEF, 28 Dec. 2024,
www.unicef.org/press-releases/not-new-normal-2024-one-worst-years-unicefs-history-children-conflict

Ottolini, Martin, et al. “Pediatric Infectious Diseases Encountered During Wartime—Part 1: Experiences and Lessons Learned from Armed Conflict in the Modern Era.” Current Infectious Disease Reports, vol. 23, no. 12, Dec. 2021, article 27, doi:10.1007/s11908-021-00770-1

