"Children are dropping out of childhood. We must envision a society free of conflict where children can grow up as children, not weapons of war."
-Devaki Jain, Indian economist serving as advisor to UNICEF and other UN agencies.

**Definition**

Armed conflict affects the lives of children in many different ways and has extremely negative impacts on them physically, physiologically and environmentally. Often, the human rights of children are severely compromised due to armed conflict. In fact, the United Nations Security Council has classified many of these abuses into six categories: killing or maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; attacks against schools or hospitals; denial of humanitarian access for children; and abduction of children. As a result, any debate focused on protecting children in armed conflicts should be rooted in the prevention of one or more of these six grave conditions.

**Location**

While children anywhere could be affected by the outbreak of conflict, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSGCAC) has identified 23 countries where grave violations of rights of children are being committed due to armed conflict.

---

1 This document was prepared by InterConnections 21. Copyright 2014.
The 23 “country situations” where children are currently facing the impacts of armed conflict are Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Iraq, Israel and the West Bank, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, and Yemen.4 This list, however, is not conclusive, and some humanitarian organizations believe violations against the rights of children are occurring in more countries throughout the world.

History
The effect of armed conflict on children is an issue that has existed as long as war. Mentions of the involvement of children in conflicts date back as far as the Bible and Greek mythology. In the Bible for example, David was a child soldier in Christian theology. He served in King Saul’s army and fought directly against enemies including the giant Goliath. Additionally, in Greek mythology, as a child, Hercules fought many battles.

Outside of religious stories and myths, children throughout history served as charioteers in Mediterranean conflicts, squires for European knights, and drummer boys or other communicators around the world. In the United States, drummer boys were used during both the American Revolution and the Civil War. During the Civil War, children were also used as soldiers, with reports indicating that children as young as 15 were celebrated and recognized for their role in the war.

The use of children in armed conflict was also a reality in both of the World Wars. In World War I, the youngest Allied soldier was 11 years old.5 In World War II, the Hitler Youth became infamous as a creator of child soldiers and entire Panzer divisions were made up of Hitler youth.6 In response, Jewish and Polish resistance efforts also heavily utilized children. Allied troops reported great revulsion, fighting and killing children and watching them die alongside them.7 Since World War II, the U.S. and other Western countries have pushed policy development to end the use of child soldiers. In 2008, U.S. legislation was passed making the recruitment or use of child soldiers under the age of 15 illegal worldwide and spelling out penalties for prosecution in the U.S.8 Since passage of this law, however, presidential waivers have been granted to some countries violating the law.9

Outside of Europe and the US, such policy has not prevailed, despite the growing global consensus that children should not be involved in war. For example, from 1991 to 2002, children in Sierra Leone were abducted, drugged, and forced to fight on both sides of its civil war.10 In addition to the use of boy soldiers, sexual violence against young girls was used as a weapon in the war. Thousands of young girls were kidnapped and raped by officers as a means to scare and threaten parents and anyone standing in the way of the soldiers and rebels.11

Many child survivors of war and armed conflict have documented their experiences to shed light on the horrors of war from a child’s perspective. Their hope is to inspire change internationally and eliminate the use of children in

war. Ishmael Beah, for example, became famous for recounting the horrors of being forced into slavery as a child soldier in Sierra Leone in his book *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*.

Also in the international spotlight are those who gain infamy as a result of their atrocious support of and use of child soldiers. In recent history, Joseph Kony has gained much attention worldwide as a result of his extensive recruitment of child soldiers. While he is currently branded a war criminal, authorities have yet to locate and arrest him in Uganda.12

**Current Threats to Children**

While using children as soldiers has become less acceptable universally, child soldiers continue to be used in the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. As the Brookings Institute points out, “although there is global consensus against the morality of sending children into battle, this terrible practice is now a regular facet of contemporary warfare. There are some 300,000 children under the age of 18 (both boys and girls) presently serving as combatants around the globe, fighting in approximately 75% of the world's conflicts.”13

Despite the extensiveness and severity of the role of child soldiers, this scenario represents just one area in which children are involved in war. In fact, the population of children that are indirectly and directly impacted by war and armed conflict is much larger than the population of child soldiers. The Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment finds that, “the greatest effects on children occur when parents are killed, harmed, terrified, or unable to function and when the child experiences violent harm to self or loved ones, or threats of such violence, or engages in arming others.”14

One example of a direct impact of war on children is attacks on civilian populations. When countries launch strikes without the ability to effectively target the military, civilian populations are often hit. If civilians are killed, this affects children in one of two ways. First, the safety of the children themselves is at risk as they are vulnerable as civilians; and second, damage is done to the children if the strikes kill their family, caregivers or loved ones. The United States Drone program, for example, has killed an estimated 168 to 200 children via drone strikes in Pakistan, with even more Pakistani children having been affected when their parents or family members were killed.15 That said, drone strikes are just one of a number of ways that civilians are killed during war. The Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University lists the many different ways that war can lead to the death of civilians, whether intentionally or accidentally.

People have been killed in their homes at night and in markets and on roadways during the day. They have been killed by bombs, bullets and fire and by weapons whose acronyms have newly entered the lexicon—improvised explosive devices (IED) and remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs or "drones"). Civilians die at checkpoints, as military vehicles run them off the road, when they step on a mine or a cluster bomb, as they try to collect wood or tend to their fields, and when they are kidnapped and executed for purposes of revenge or intimidation. They have been killed by the US and its allies have killed them and they have been killed by insurgents and sectarians in the civil wars spawned or fanned by the invasions and what followed.16

The Watson Institute estimates that as of February 2014, the wars in the Middle East led by the US and its allies have resulted in at least 21,000 civilian deaths in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the total number of civilians killed in

---


Pakistan is even higher, with estimates ranging widely between 20,000 and 50,000-recorded deaths. These numbers are especially frightening because the United Nations estimates that 41 percent of all civilians killed or affected by war are children.\(^{17}\)

Far more direct than drone strikes or explosions that kill civilians indiscriminately, including children, are attacks with children as the target. Children are often targeted by radical organizations to inspire fear and push a religious or political message. Two groups have become especially infamous for their attacks targeting girls attending school: the Pakistani Taliban and Boko Haram.\(^{19}\)

The Pakistani Taliban targets girls at school with bombings and acid attacks. From 2009 to 2012, 919 schools were destroyed or damaged, 138 children were abducted, and 30 were killed in shootings, bombings, or acid burns.\(^{20}\) Boko Haram employs similar tactics, bombing and attacking schools in order to terrify families and prevent Nigerian children from attending school. In April of 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 girls from a Nigerian school, 219 of whom remain missing as of June 2014.\(^{21}\)

It is not just terrorist organizations that harm schools and children, however. As recently as the Israel-Hamas conflict in the summer of 2014, schools were attacked. While bombing Hamas strongholds in the Gaza strip, Israel destroyed a UN school and killed 10 Palestinian civilians, including children.\(^{22}\)

Along with direct and indirect violence against children, millions of children are displaced or left without their families or any support as a result of armed conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was dealing with an estimated 10.4 million refugees at the beginning of 2013. Almost half of who were children.\(^{23}\)

These children often lack basic access to food and clean water in overcrowded refugee camps. One example of this type of refugee environment is Syria where recently, one million children have lost their parents or homes as a result of their conflict.\(^{24}\)

One UN organization that works directly with the problem of child refugees is the UN Works and Reliefs Agency. It deals with children displaced or threatened by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and provides shelter, schooling and protection to children in harm’s way.\(^{25}\)

**UN Actions**

It is clear that the protection of children during armed conflict is a pressing and significant issue that needs to be of high priority internationally. As a result, the UN has taken the following measures to protect children:

Article 25 of the UN declaration of Human Rights states: “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.” \(^{26}\)

---


• The Convention on the Rights of the Child passed in 1990 states: “State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities. However minors who are over the age of 15 but still remain under the age of 18 are still voluntarily able to take part in combat as soldiers.”

• General Assembly resolution A/RES/51/77 passed in 1996 established the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

• UN Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999) condemned the targeting of children in armed conflict including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

• UN Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005) implemented a monitoring and reporting mechanism regarding the use of child soldiers that contributes to a comprehensive framework for addressing the protection of children affected by armed conflict.


• The Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) was introduced in July 2005 to recommend methods of protecting children impacted by armed conflicts.

Organizations
Many organizations are working to protect children from armed conflict. Each of the organizations below promotes policies that place importance on the protection of children. From their websites, one can find educational videos, links, and articles that explain the ways in which children are being protected. The strategies that these organizations have successfully developed could help to form the framework of a resolution.

• **Chatham House** is working with eight government security forces (including Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan and South Sudan) to sign agreements that would end their use of child soldiers.

• **United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)** has done a massive amount to protect children; some of their current initiatives include:
  - Collecting data on the needs of children in conflict areas;
  - Sending goodwill ambassadors to ensure humanitarian aid reaches children;
  - Funding secure education across the globe;
  - Providing emergency aid and humanitarian action for children in Syria;
  - Ensuring that children in refugee camps are well fed;
  - Providing immunizations for disease;
  - Protecting and reintegrating children who are disabled in conflicts.

---


• **Child Soldiers International** researches the causes of child recruitment in wars and proposes policy solutions at national and international levels to stop child involvement in wars.

• **Invisible Children** works to increase awareness of exploitation of children in wartime in the western world with a view to prompting governments in conflict areas to take action. It also partners with other NGOs to warn rural communities of attacks.

• **The Child Protection Working Group** increases coordination between many groups providing humanitarian aid to or working to protect children.

**Further Reading**

The best source for news related to solutions and UN actions about children and conflict is the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict: http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/.

**Recommended viewing**

- “What are Child Rights?” UNICEF Australia: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1BFLitBkco
- Panel Discussion: "Protecting the Rights of Children Affected by Armed Conflict" Princeton University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcoUug_08Q
- “Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RK4xXsYdSTg

**Conclusions**

As the weapons of war become more deadly and widespread, children will continue to be placed in harm’s way. Armed conflict poses one of the greatest threats to the rights of the child. Children can be directly targeted, killed, kidnapped, and/or raped to send messages and fear to enemies; or they can be affected indirectly by becoming refugees or not having their basic rights to food, water, shelter and education met. In order to address these threats, new rules and methods of enforcement must be created to deal with military tactics that are increasingly being used by groups that have no connection to a nation’s military and international law.

**Questions for Reflection**

When determining your country’s position, there are several questions to consider:

- Has my country signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child?
- Does my country view children as full citizens?
- Is my country one that accepts a large number of child refugees from bordering nations?
- Is there a conflict occurring within my country’s borders that places children at risk?
- Has my country acted in ways that have prevented humanitarian aid from reaching children?
- Does my country supply children with humanitarian aid?
- Has my country had humanitarian aid shipments to children cut off?
- Does my country employ military tactics that kill a large number of civilians, including children?