

# Prevention of Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Conflict Situations

**Prevention of Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Conflict Situations** Date | 05 October 2022

Tomorrow (05 October), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1110<sup>th</sup> session to deliberate on the prevention of recruitment of child soldiers in conflict situations.

Following opening remarks of the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, H.E. Ambassador Mohammed Arrouchi, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) and Co-chair of the Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts (AP CAAC), Bankole Adeoye is expected to deliver a statement. Robert Nanima, Special Rapporteur on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts and member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) is also expected to make a statement. Representatives of Save the Children International; United Nations (UN) International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Dallaire Institute's African Centre of Excellence for Children, Peace and Security are also expected to participate in the session.

Recruitment of child soldiers has been one of the critical issues that has featured in various PSC deliberations on children affected by armed conflicts (CAAC), a theme which formed part of its standing agenda items following the decision at its 420<sup>th</sup> session of February 2014. Demonstrating Council's growing attention to the theme, tomorrow's session marks the third meeting being held during the year to address

the plight of children in conflict situations. At its 1101<sup>st</sup> session which was the last time it discussed CAAC, Council affirmed its full support for initiatives dedicated to the conduct of studies and research on prevention of the phenomenon of child soldiers that aim to raise awareness on the situation and process of recruiting child soldiers. Tomorrow's deliberations are expected to contribute to overall continental efforts aimed at raising awareness and preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Forming one of the six grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflicts, recruitment and use of children has been one of the highest violations recorded globally throughout 2021 according to UN reports. Of the four countries globally where the highest number of recruitment and use of children by parties to conflicts were verified in 2021, three were African countries – the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali and Somalia. In the DRC, despite some progress being achieved in the fight against recruitment of child soldiers, particularly within the national army (the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC)) which has now been removed from the UN blacklist of armies that recruit and/or use children, armed non-State actors continue to widely recruit child soldiers. Recent reports indicate for instance that over 470 children were recruited by armed groups in South Kivu province, over the course of 2021. Out of these children, 50 have reportedly been killed while 169 are believed to have suffered sexual violence. In the DRC, of the six grave violations of children's rights in armed conflicts – recruitment and use; killing and maiming; sexual violence; abduction; attacks against schools and hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access – recruitment and use and abduction of children, committed in conjunction, are the most common violations.

In Mali, various reports indicate a dramatic increase in the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. During the

first half of 2022, a significant increase of 57% was recorded by the UN in grave violations against children as compared to the previous year. Of these, recruitment and use of children constituted the highest number of verified violations – of the 396 grave violations recorded during the period, 149 were cases of recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Further attesting to the increasing vulnerability of children to recruitment, there has been increasing incidents of attacks or direct threats against schools in Mali, perpetrated by jihadist groups. Not only have these incidents had devastating impact on maintaining children's education in affected areas, they are also indicative of a more worrying trend of targeting children by groups that aim to advance and spread extremist ideologies.

In Somalia, recruitment and use of 1,716 children was documented by the UN in 2021. The 6<sup>th</sup> report of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Somalia further elaborates that of the 8,042 grave violations against 6,501 children committed in the country between October 2019 and September 2021, 2,852 have been recruitment and use of children. This large percentage makes this violation one of the most prevalent ones perpetrated in Somalia. While both government and non-State actors have been implicated for the recruitment and use of children in hostilities, Al-Shabaab is the major perpetrator so far. UN reports show that while almost all abductions of children are committed by Al-Shabaab, 80% of the abductions are perpetrated for the purpose of recruitment and use of the children.

While DRC, Mali and Somalia simply exemplify the highest rate of acts of recruitment and use of children reported during 2021 and 2022, the issue remains prevalent across the continent affecting children caught in conflict situations in various African States. For instance, parties to the conflict in northern Ethiopia have extended accusations against each other for the recruitment and use of minors most of which are

allegedly forcibly conscripted. Central African Republic (CAR) also experienced a spike in the rate of forced conscription of children, following the flare up of violence in the country following contestations over the December 2020 elections. In early 2021 alone, recruitment of over 3,000 child soldiers was recorded by the UN, some having been conscripted from sites sheltering communities displaced due to the violence. In Mozambique, Islamic State (ISIS) affiliated armed groups have been accused of kidnapping thousands of children as young as 12 years old and using them to fight against government forces. In South Sudan, since the outbreak of the civil war in 2013, sources indicate that over 19,000 children have been recruited to be used as child soldiers. It is believed that both government forces, opposition groups and allied militias still continue to recruit and use child soldiers in direct hostilities as well as supportive roles.

These and other data demonstrate the rampant prevalence of child recruitment and use in hostilities within the continent. This prevalence is also one of the indications of how conflicts become cyclical as the energies of members of new generation are conscripted to become today's foot soldiers and tomorrow's organisers of conflicts. The key question Council members are expected to reflect on during tomorrow's session is what effective measures could be deployed in order to prevent children from being the victims of recruitment and use as child soldiers. In this regard, the first important consideration that may receive Council's attention is the adoption of relevant strategies and policies for the prevention of recruitment of child soldiers. At the international and regional levels, various instruments have been developed binding member States to take necessary measures against the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), the Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, the

Safe Schools Declaration, and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers are some of the principal international instruments playing a significant role in establishing basic norms and guidance to ensure protection of children from recruitment and use in armed conflicts. At the regional level, the prohibition of recruitment of children and their use in hostilities is well elaborated under Article 22(2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC).

Another important tool for the prevention of child recruitment and use in hostilities has been the signing of action plans between the UN and armed groups in various parts of the world. For instance, in September 2021, 'The Platform', a coalition of armed movements signatory of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed action plans with the UN in order to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. While the various international and regional instruments mentioned above are most significant for the prevention and eradication of recruiting children as soldiers, the scope of these instruments is mostly limited to States, leaving out non-State actors which are the major offenders. The signing of action plans and commitments with armed non-State actors therefore plays a very critical role in establishing common standards for the protection of children from recruitment and use in armed conflicts by all parties concerned.

As important as preventive measures is, for member States to ensure the existence of a proper framework for the rehabilitation and reintegration into society of children associated with armed groups, including through the provision of education. This will be particularly essential to minimise the chances of re-recruitment in addition to preventing the creation of a generation of ex-child soldiers with no bright future, who will be easy and primary targets of radicalisation

by extremist groups.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a Communiqué. Council may express grave concern over the growing trend of recruitment and use of child soldiers in the continent. It may call on States parties to the ACRWC to take all necessary measures to ensure implementation of Article 22(2) of the Charter, including criminalising recruitment and use of child soldiers under their national laws; establishing proper and stringent screening mechanisms in their conscription and force generation processes; and taking disciplinary and criminal actions against members of their forces found to have engaged in the conscription of child soldiers. It may urge all AU member States that have not yet done so, to sign, ratify and implement relevant instruments that ban the recruitment and use of children in hostilities, particularly the OPAC. Equally important is for the PSC to remind conflict parties of their obligations to observe the rules of international human rights and humanitarian law at all times and that they will not escape responsibility for the international crime of recruitment and use of children in conflicts. Council may request that addressing the scourge of recruitment and use of children in conflicts is made a key component of AU's efforts on silencing the guns as this is critical to breaking the vicious cycle of conflict that the use of children in armed conflicts sustains. The PSC may request the AU Commission to engage countries experiencing high level incidents of the recruitment and use of children in conflicts with a view to work with them in developing and implementing measures for addressing the scourge. The PSC may also request the AU Commission to monitor and document the recruitment and use of children in conflicts in Africa and include a dedicated segment of its report or briefing to the PSC on specific conflict situations.