



# Security Council

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## Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

### Report of the Secretary-General

#### *Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and covers the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 September 2022.

The report documents the effects of conflict on children in the Syrian Arab Republic, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations against children, namely, the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,<sup>1</sup> the abduction of children and denial of humanitarian access. Where available, the report contains information on perpetrators. It also outlines information on the progress made in addressing grave violations against children, including through dialogue with parties.

The report provides a series of recommendations addressed to all parties to the conflict aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in the Syrian Arab Republic.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present report, the phrase “protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals”, used in Security Council resolutions [1998 \(2011\)](#), [2143 \(2014\)](#) and [2427 \(2018\)](#), as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 ([S/PRST/2013/8](#)) and 31 October 2017 ([S/PRST/2017/21](#)), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients.



## I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, covers the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 September 2022. It is the fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The report highlights trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and provides details of the progress made to end and prevent such violations since the previous report ([S/2021/398](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic ([S/AC.51/2019/1](#)). It also contains information on progress and challenges in the engagement with parties to the conflict. Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations are identified.

2. In annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)), under the list of listed parties that have put in place measures during the reporting period aimed at improving the protection of children, Syrian government forces, including the National Defence Forces (NDF) and pro-government militias, remained listed for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals. In addition, the Kurdish People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) remained listed for recruitment and use and the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA), including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam<sup>2</sup> remained listed for killing and maiming, respectively. In addition, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham remained listed for recruitment and use and killing and maiming under the list of listed parties that have not put in place measures during the reporting period to improve the protection of children. Under that same list, the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA), including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam, remained listed for recruitment and use, while Da'esh<sup>3</sup> remained listed for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and abduction.

3. The information contained in the present report was verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic. The protracted nature of the conflict and access restrictions continued to pose considerable challenges for the monitoring and verification of grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic. The consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and related response measures during the reporting period further exacerbated these challenges. Accordingly, the information contained herein does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed in the Syrian Arab Republic and the actual number of violations during the reporting period is likely to be greater. Where incidents were committed earlier but verified only during the reporting period, that information is qualified as relating to an incident that was verified at a later date.

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<sup>2</sup> In the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/76/871-S/2022/493](#)), the listing of the Syrian armed opposition groups (formerly known as the Free Syrian Army) was amended to "the opposition Syrian National Army, including Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam" to reflect the composition of these groups.

<sup>3</sup> Following the adoption of resolution [75/291](#) by the General Assembly in 2021, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been listed under the name of "Da'esh".

## II. Overview of political and security developments

4. The period under review was marked by ongoing hostilities and the long-term consequences of more than 11 years of conflict, including compounded economic and humanitarian crises, widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, explosive ordnance contamination and one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Civilians continued to suffer the direct and indirect consequences of armed conflict and violence. Civilians, including children, were killed and injured as a result of shelling and intermittent air strikes, fighting between and within armed groups, shootings, attacks carried out with improvised explosive devices and as a result of explosive ordnance, including explosive remnants of war. Children continued to suffer from a lack of access to life-saving humanitarian assistance, medical services and access to education.

5. The security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic remained volatile and prone to escalation, in particular along conflict lines between government and non-government-controlled areas in the northern part of the country, as well as in the south-west.

6. The beginning of the period under review was characterized by continued tensions between parties to the conflict. Clashes, air strikes and ground-based shelling were observed regularly, in particular near the contact lines in Raqqah, Aleppo and Hasakah Governorates, resulting in civilian casualties, the commission of grave violations against children and population displacement.

7. In addition, notwithstanding the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement between the Russian Federation and Türkiye regarding the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, tensions arose anew along the border of the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye with air strikes and kinetic activity between parties to the conflict, including between Syrian government forces, (including NDF and pro-government forces and pro-government air forces), on one side, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and other armed opposition groups, including factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition SNA, on the other side. Occasional raids and drone strikes by armed groups, as well as indiscriminate shelling, continued to impact children.

8. In the southern Syrian Arab Republic, the situation remained precarious. Heavy shelling and high-intensity ground operations by Syrian government forces, including NDF and pro-government forces, against armed opposition groups posed a constant security threat to children, in particular in Dar'a Governorate.

9. Attacks by Da'esh against Syrian government forces and pro-government forces occurred continuously throughout the reporting period with a notable resurgence of attacks with improvised explosive devices and targeted assassinations, including in Homs and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates, and sporadic attacks in Hasakah Governorate, including in the Hawl camp, where an appalling number of children continued to be deprived of liberty.

10. The overall human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic remained a cause for deep concern, with continued reports of systematic and egregious violations and abuses of human rights by all parties to the conflict.

11. Humanitarian needs grew further because of the ongoing hostilities, the dire economic situation, which has been marked by currency depreciation, soaring prices for food, fuel and other basic goods, collapsing basic services as a result of a range of internal and external factors, including the effects of over a decade of conflict on, inter alia, infrastructure and human resources, the effects of war economies, global economic trends and the unintended effects of sanctions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance and access to essential services. Recurring uncertainty

regarding the reauthorization of cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa during the reporting period posed additional challenges in terms of humanitarian programming. Climatic shocks, such as droughts and heatwaves, and a water crisis exacerbated food insecurity and economic hardship, and increased the risk of waterborne diseases, including recurring cholera outbreaks. In the reporting period, 90 per cent of the Syrian population lived below the poverty line, with 6.5 million children facing significant humanitarian needs and 3.1 million children internally displaced. The 2022 humanitarian response plan for the Syrian Arab Republic was only 26.6 per cent funded as at end of the reporting period.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to negatively affect the population, exacerbated the dire humanitarian situation and placed additional strain on the already overburdened health-care system.

### III. Grave violations against children

13. The United Nations verified 5,219 grave violations against 5,073 children (4,153 boys, 713 girls, 207 sex unknown). Of these, 1,045 violations occurred between 1 July and 31 December 2020, 2,281 occurred in 2021 and 1,895 occurred between 1 January and 30 September 2022. Compared to the previous report (S/2021/398), the total number of verified grave violations increased by 10 per cent.

14. A total of 33 children (27 boys, 6 girls) were affected by multiple violations, including recruitment and use (30) and sexual violence (3).

15. Recruitment and use of children was the most prevalent verified violation (2,990), followed by killing and maiming of children (1,891) and the abduction of children (222).

16. Grave violations were attributed to at least 36 parties to the conflict, including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations. Violations amounting to 65 per cent of the overall verified violations were attributed to armed groups (3,420), including to factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition SNA (1,175) (including Ahrar al-Sham (84), Army of Islam (3) and unidentified factions (671)); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (1,075); the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (992), including the Kurdish People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) (896); Da'esh (65); the Internal Security Forces under the umbrella of the self-administration in the northern and eastern Syrian Arab Republic (the Internal Security Forces) (54); Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (48); Hurras al-Din (6); and Youth of Aleppo al-Shahba' Squadron for Special Tasks (1). Approximately 13 per cent of verified violations (679) were attributed to government forces (326), pro-government forces (133), pro-government air forces (174) and pro-government militias, including NDF (45). The remaining violations were attributed to international forces: the Turkish Armed Forces (12) and the international counter-Da'esh coalition (4). The remaining 21 per cent of violations (1,104), including by unidentified air forces (3), could not be attributed.

17. The majority of grave violations were verified in the Governorates of Idlib (1,988), Aleppo (1,292) and Hasakah (789). Approximately 65 per cent of violations were verified in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, 29 per cent in the north-east and about 6 per cent in areas controlled by the government.

18. In addition, the United Nations performed late verification of 460 grave violations against 437 children (306 boys, 78 girls, 53 sex unknown) that occurred prior to the reporting period, notably killing and maiming of children (261), recruitment and use of children (170) and attacks on schools and hospitals (18).

## A. Recruitment and use

19. The recruitment and use of 2,990 children (2,860 boys, 130 girls) was verified. Of those, 400 children were recruited and used in the second half of 2020, while 1,299 children were recruited and used in 2021 and 1,291 between January and September 2022. The children were between 9 and 17 years old.

20. Cases of recruitment and use more than doubled compared with the previous report. Incidents attributed to the opposition SNA increased by about 180 per cent, mainly perpetrated by the Faylaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Hamzah Division and Suqur al-Sham factions. Although SDF had committed to measures in the action plan signed in 2019 with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, verified cases attributed to SDF and the Internal Security Forces increased by 80 per cent.

21. Children were recruited and used by factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition SNA (1,094) (Faylaq al-Sham (121), Ahrar al-Sham (84), Hamzah Division (59), Suqur al-Sham (52), Sultan Murad Division (29), Jabhah al-Sharqiyah (29), Jabhah al-Shamiyah (24), Jaysh al-Sharqiyah (17), Jabhah al-Islamiyah (16), Jaysh al-Izzah (10), Jaysh al-Nusrah (8), Faylaq al-Majd (7), Samarqand Brigade (5), Dir' al-Furat (4), Army of Islam (3), Mu'tasim Brigade (2), Hizb al-Turkmani (2), Jaysh al-Thani (1), Ahrar al-Sharqiyah (1), Firqah al-Sahiliyah (1) and unidentified factions (619)); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (852); SDF (829) (YPG/YPJ (824), other SDF components (3) and Afrin Liberation Forces (2)) and the Internal Security Forces (45); Syrian government forces (115), pro-government forces (15) and pro-government militias, including NDF (44); Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (43); Hurras al-Din (6); and unidentified perpetrators (6).

22. Violations occurred in the Governorates of Idlib (1,220), Aleppo (641), Hasakah (626), Dayr al-Zawr (257), Raqqah (217), Damascus (11), Homs (8), Rif Dimashq (7) and Qunaytirah (3).

23. The majority of children were used in combat roles (2,977). The remaining children were used in support roles, including as cleaners or cooks (13). For example, in September 2022, two armed boys, aged 16 and 17, were used to stop and check vehicles at a checkpoint operated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib Governorate.

24. Moreover, factions of the opposition SNA trafficked 6 children to Libya to participate in hostilities in support of the forces of the Government of National Accord in exchange for a monthly stipend.

25. Reasons for the recruitment of children were primarily financial incentives, access to services and goods in the light of the dire economic situation, ideological allegiance and increasing tensions between parties operating in the north-east and north-west.

26. The total number of children released during the period under review could not be verified. The SDF indicated that 278 children (226 boys, 52 girls) were formally demobilized, of whom 54 received reintegration assistance.

27. In addition, the United Nations performed late verification of 170 cases of recruitment and use of children (157 boys, 13 girls) that occurred in 2015 (1), 2018 (1), 2019 (9) and the first half of 2020 (159). Cases were attributed to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (83); opposition SNA factions (31); YPG/YPJ (27); Syrian government forces (1) and pro-government militias (18); Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (6); and Da'esh (4). The majority of cases occurred in Idlib (91), Dayr al-Zawr (35) and Raqqah (19) Governorates.

### **Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups**

28. The United Nations verified the deprivation of liberty of 910 children for their (903) or their family members' (7) alleged association with armed forces or armed groups by SDF (758), including YPG/YPJ (5) and the Internal Security Forces (134); Syrian government forces (16), including NDF (3); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (1); and the opposition SNA (1). The child detained by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham died after being tortured in detention. Cases were verified in the Governorates of Hasakah (889), Rif Dimashq (7), Dar'a (5), Raqqah (4), Qunaytirah (3), Idlib (1) and Dayr al-Zawr (1). Children were deprived of liberty, inter alia, in Sina'ah military prison (also known as Panorama) (approximately 520), in detention facilities for short-term transit between Hawl and Rawj camps (around 260), at the Hury "rehabilitation" centre in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic (around 90) and in a prison operated by the government (approximately 10). Some 10 children were verified to be deprived of liberty with their mothers.

29. Owing to severe access restrictions to children deprived of liberty for alleged association with armed groups, no information is available on the current status and well-being of those children. There is, however, credible reporting of malnourishment and water scarcity, forced separation of boys from their mothers, harsh confinement conditions, denial of meaningful medical care and very limited access to education for children in the Hawl and Rawj camps. Incidents of violence, including murder, physical harm, intimidation and sexual violence occur with some regularity, with no investigation or measures in place to prevent reoccurrence.

30. During the reporting period, the United Nations verified the transfer of 202 Iraqi boys, who had been deprived of liberty by SDF at Sina'ah military prison, to Iraqi security authorities.

31. In addition, as at the end of the reporting period, more than 600 children, including foreigners, reportedly remained detained for alleged association with armed groups, mainly Da'esh in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, while more than 55,500 persons, including approximately 31,000 children, with suspected family ties to Da'esh continued to be deprived of liberty in Hawl and Rawj camps in the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic. Most have been deprived of liberty since the end of large-scale military operations against Da'esh in March 2019. The security situation was volatile in those camps, and availability of clean water, food, medical and basic services remained inadequate because access by humanitarian partners continued to be extremely limited.

32. While some progress has been made regarding the repatriation of children deprived of liberty in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, all concerned countries of origin and relevant authorities inside the Syrian Arab Republic should prioritize the voluntary repatriation of women and children who are currently in these camps, including those with suspected family ties to Da'esh, in line with international law and grounded in respect for the principles of non-refoulement, family unity and the best interests of the child, and with the support of the United Nations, upon request, in line with the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq Third Country National Returnees.

## **B. Killing and maiming**

33. The United Nations verified the killing (792) and maiming (1,099) of 1,891 children (1,245 boys, 439 girls, 207 sex unknown). Of those, 399 cases occurred in the second half of 2020, 905 cases occurred in 2021 and 587 cases in the period from

1 January to 30 September 2022. Compared with the previous report, child casualties increased by 30 per cent. At least 760 child casualties were aged 12 or younger.

34. Some 524 child casualties (27 per cent) were attributed to Syrian government forces (255) and pro-government forces and militias (268), including pro-government air forces (166) and NDF (1); SDF (145) (YPG/YPJ (70), other SDF components (58) and Afrin Liberation Forces (17)) and the Internal Security Forces (3)); factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition SNA (73) (Hamzah Division (9), Faylaq al-Sham (1), Hay'at al-Tha'irun lil-Tahrir (1), Jabhah al-Shamiyah (1), Jaysh al-Sharqiyah (1) and unidentified factions (60)); Da'esh (59); the Turkish Armed Forces (12); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (4); the international counter-Da'esh coalition (4); Youth of Aleppo al-Shahba' Squadron for Special Tasks (1); and unidentified perpetrators (1,067). Casualties attributed to Syrian government forces and pro-government forces decreased by 60 per cent, whereas cases of killing and maiming of children by SDF factions increased by 100 per cent compared with the previous report.

35. Verified child casualties occurred in the Governorates of Aleppo (627), Idlib (516), Dayr al-Zawr (156), Dar'a (149), Hasakah (129), Hama (117), Raqqah (77), Homs (50), Rif Dimashq (39), Qunaytirah (15), Damascus (8), Ladhqiyyah (4) and Suwayda' (3), as well as in Rukban (1).

36. Explosive ordnance was the primary cause of child casualties, killing and maiming 707 children (37 per cent). Incidents involving explosive ordnance often occurred in residential or agricultural areas. Governorates where intense hostilities had previously occurred, such as Aleppo (171), Dar'a (108), Dayr al-Zawr (105) and Hama (105), were particularly affected. Of the over 10 million Syrians living in contaminated areas, 50 per cent are children, putting them at risk of death and injury and impeding economic security for communities that depend on agriculture-based livelihoods.

37. For instance, in June 2022 an explosion at an ammunition depot belonging to the opposition SNA faction Faylaq al-Sham triggered several rockets that killed an 8-year-old girl and damaged civilian facilities, including two schools and dozens of shelters for internally displaced persons in Idlib.

38. Ground-based shelling was the second most prevalent cause of killing and maiming of children (516, or 27 per cent). Of these, 90 per cent of casualties occurred in the north-west, either during hostilities between Syrian government forces, pro-government forces and militias, on the one hand, and opposition SNA factions, on the other, or during clashes between SDF and opposition SNA factions. For instance, in January 2022, YPG/YPJ launched multiple rockets targeting the city of Afrin in Aleppo Governorate, killing two boys and two girls, aged 3 to 17, and maiming one girl and eight children of unknown sex. The maimed girl received medical assistance.

39. The third most prominent cause of child casualties were improvised explosive devices (331 or 18 per cent), followed by air strikes and drone attacks (201 or 11 per cent). Child casualties caused by air strikes from pro-government and unidentified air forces decreased compared with the previous report. That decline was likely caused by the relative paucity of major military operations during the reporting period, including as a result of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement between the Russian Federation and Türkiye regarding the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, the memorandum of understanding between the Russian Federation and Türkiye dated 22 October 2019 and the joint statement between Türkiye and the United States dated 17 October 2019 regarding the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic.

40. The remaining casualties were the result of gunshots (97), grenades and unidentified explosive ordnance (38), and torture during detention (1).

41. Moreover, the United Nations performed late verification of the killing (115) and maiming (146) of 261 children (148 boys, 60 girls, 53 sex unknown) that occurred prior to the period under review. Casualties were attributed to Syrian government forces (2) and pro-government forces and militias (146), including pro-government air forces (114); unidentified perpetrators (111); YPG/YPJ (1); and the Internal Security Forces (1). Cases were verified primarily in Idlib (137), Hama (59) and Aleppo (28) Governorates.

### **C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence**

42. The United Nations verified rape and other forms of sexual violence against three children (two boys, one girl), all attributed to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib Governorate in 2020. The cases involved three siblings, two boys and one girl, who were deprived of liberty in a so-called orphanage controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The boys, aged 11 and 12, were repeatedly raped, while their 14-year-old sister was forced to marry a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham element.

43. Conflict-related sexual violence remained dramatically underreported owing to a lack of access by monitors, gender discrimination, fear of reprisals, stigma suffered by victims and a lack of services available to them. It has been reported that victims are often blamed and alienated by their community after enduring sexual violence, especially if they became pregnant as a result, in which case they were often forced to marry the perpetrator. Displaced girls faced heightened risks of sexual violence.

44. The availability of comprehensive, survivor-centred assistance for child victims of sexual violence remains inadequate, coupled with limited funding for conflict-related sexual violence programming and a lack of trained health-care workers and post-rape treatment kits.

45. Accountability for sexual violence continued to be largely absent owing to lack of trust in the judicial system and the financial costs related to seeking accountability. Of note, in 2022, a former senior Syrian intelligence official was convicted of crimes against humanity, including rape and sexual assault, by the higher regional court of Koblenz, Germany, and sentenced to life in prison.

46. In addition, late verification was conducted for four cases of sexual slavery against Yazidi girls, aged 13 to 17 at the time of abduction, that occurred prior to the reporting period. The cases were attributed to Da'esh (4) in Dayr al-Zawr (3) and Hasakah (1) Governorates. The girls were abducted from Iraq in 2014, trafficked to the Syrian Arab Republic and liberated in June 2021.

### **D. Attacks on schools and hospitals**

47. The United Nations verified 63 attacks on schools (39) and hospitals (24), a decrease of about 80 per cent compared with the previous report. Of these, 11 attacks occurred in the second half of 2020, 45 occurred in 2021 and 8 in the period from 1 January to 30 September 2022.

48. Attacks were attributed to SDF (12) (other SDF components (10), Afrin Liberation Forces (1) and YPG/YPJ (1)) and the Internal Security Forces (4); unidentified perpetrators (10), including unidentified air forces (3); Syrian government forces (9), pro-government forces and militias (21), including pro-government air forces (5); opposition SNA factions (5); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (1); and Da'esh (1).

49. Schools and hospitals were attacked in Idlib (26), Aleppo (13), Dar'a (10), Hasakah (6), Dayr al-Zawr (5), Raqqah (2) and Qunaytirah (1) Governorates.

50. Incidents involved physical destruction or damage to schools (32) and hospitals (17), during which 81 children were killed or maimed, attacks and threats against protected persons and detention of protected persons (14). For example, in January 2022, a doctor working for a non-governmental organization at a field hospital in Hawl camp was assaulted with a bladed weapon by Da'esh elements living in the camp.

51. In another instance, in September 2021, an air strike launched by pro-government air forces hit a private educational institute in the city Ma'arratmisrin, Idlib Governorate. The strike destroyed the facility and injured four boys and two girls, who were 13 years or younger.

52. In addition, the United Nations verified incidents in which parties to the conflict interfered with education through such measures as the temporary suspension of schools under threat of attack by opposing parties, the imposition of a party-affiliated curriculum or language and the prevention of cross-line movement by children wishing to take official school examinations. Of further concern, the self-administration in the northern-eastern Syrian Arab Republic assumed the administration of most schools and introduced a local curriculum. As a result, thousands of children are deprived of an accredited education, which is needed to obtain a recognized diploma in order to pursue higher education opportunities.

53. In addition, the United Nations conducted late verification of 18 attacks on schools (11) and hospitals (7) by Syrian government forces (1), pro-government forces (15), including pro-government air forces (11), and unidentified perpetrators (2) in Idlib (13), Aleppo (3) and Dar'a (2) Governorates.

#### **Military use of schools and hospitals**

54. The United Nations verified 70 incidents of the military use of schools (63) and hospitals (7). The violations were attributed to YPG/YPJ (55) and the Internal Security Forces (3); Syrian government forces (6), including NDF (3), and pro-government forces (1); and opposition SNA factions (5). The violations occurred in Hasakah (53), Dayr al-Zawr (13), Aleppo (2), Raqqah (1) and Idlib (1) Governorates. Three schools were attacked while being used for military purposes.

55. Schools and hospitals were mostly used as military bases and command centres. In one example, in June 2022, it was verified that YPG/YPJ has been using Huwayj primary school in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate as a military base since June 2018. The facility, which has a YPG/YPJ flag on its rooftop, is currently fortified by walls and barbed wire.

56. At the time of reporting, it could not be verified whether the military use of schools and hospitals had ceased in any of the verified cases and in any cases for which late verification was conducted.

### **E. Abduction**

57. The abduction of 222 children (73 boys, 149 girls), aged between 3 and 16 years, was verified. Of these, 211 occurred in the second half of 2020, 8 in 2021 and 3 in the first three quarters of 2022.

58. Abductions were attributed to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (210), Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (5), unidentified perpetrators (5), YPG/YPJ (1) and

Syrian government forces (1) in Idlib (210), Hasakah (10), Rif Dimashq (1) and Aleppo (1) Governorates.

59. For example, 210 children (70 boys, 140 girls), aged 1 to 15 years, were abducted by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had taken over a so-called orphanage in Dana, Idlib Governorate. The initially civilian facility – an old poultry farm – was established in 2014 and was brought under the control of armed groups in 2018. While deprived of liberty, children were reportedly systematically subjected to rape and sexual violence, military training and indoctrination. Children who violated rules were beaten and placed in solitary confinement in small cells for three days. At least three instances of sexual violence and three instances of child recruitment were verified. Of these cases, one girl was sold and forcibly married to a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham element at the age of 14. Three boys, aged 9 to 12 years, participated in military training exercises. By receiving donations and humanitarian aid for this so-called orphanage, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is using the facility as a source of income, while diverting goods and services from the children deprived of liberty in the facility.

60. In addition, late verification was conducted in relation to the abduction of two children (one boy, one girl) by YPG/YPJ (1) and Da'esh (1) in Hasakah Governorate (2).

## **F. Denial of humanitarian access**

61. The United Nations verified 50 cases of denial of humanitarian access. Of these, 20 occurred in the second half of 2020, 24 occurred in 2021 and 6 in 2022.

62. Cases were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (16); Syrian government forces (5) and pro-government forces (5), including pro-government air forces (3); SDF (5), Afrin Liberation Forces (1), the self-administration in the northern and eastern Syrian Arab Republic in relation to humanitarian activities in Hawl camp (4) and Internal Security Forces (2); Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (5); Da'esh (5); and opposition SNA factions (3). Cases were verified in Hasakah (18), Idlib (12) and Aleppo (10) Governorates.

63. Verified incidents involved threats and violence against humanitarian personnel (24), as a result of which 34 humanitarian staff were killed, injured or detained; movement restrictions on humanitarian personnel and supplies (15); disruption of the operation of water facilities (10); and denial of humanitarian services resulting from attacks on shelters and camps for internally displaced persons (2).

64. For example, the water supply from Uluk water station in the town of Ra's al-Ayn, Hasakah Governorate, was regularly disrupted, affecting access to clean water of approximately 960,000 civilians in the Hasakah and Tall Tamr areas. The interruptions occurred as a result of hostilities, technical failings, energy supply disruptions and low pumping capacity.

65. In another example, in November 2020, government and pro-government forces and militias shelled a residential area in the town of Kafraya, Idlib Governorate, killing two boys and two humanitarian aid workers and damaging a nearby school.

66. Late verification was conducted in relation to five incidents of denial of humanitarian access that had occurred in the first half of 2020. The cases were attributed to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2), the self-administration in the northern and eastern Syrian Arab Republic (2) and government forces (1) in Idlib (2), Hasakah (1), Raqqah (1) and Hama (1) Governorates.

## **IV. Progress and challenges in ending and preventing grave violations against children**

### **A. Follow-up on dialogue and development of an action plan with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic**

67. Senior officials of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Nations held several meetings to discuss measures to end and prevent grave violations against children. The Government reactivated the interministerial committee on children and armed conflict at the senior level in the second half of 2021 to facilitate further engagement with the United Nations.

68. Moreover, senior Government officials participated in a workshop in March 2022 aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the children and armed conflict mandate. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic asserted that unilateral efforts are being undertaken to protect conflict-affected children.

69. In addition, in 2022, the Government and the United Nations agreed upon an action-oriented dialogue on ending, preventing and responding to grave violations committed by Syrian government and pro-government forces. As a result of that dialogue, the development of an action plan on ending and preventing the six grave violations has been initiated and remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

### **B. Follow-up on dialogue and implementation of the 2019 action plan with the Syrian Democratic Forces**

70. SDF and the civilian self-administration in northern and eastern Syrian Arab Republic progressed in implementing the 2019 action plan on the recruitment and use of children. In 2021, SDF adopted a resolution stipulating that their training curricula must include international humanitarian law and measures to enhance oversight of recruitment processes and the implementation of command orders, standard operating procedures and the action plan. The resolution also stipulates the establishment of a committee to strengthen internal regulations on child protection. In addition, SDF granted occasional access to detention facilities in which children were deprived of liberty, including sporadic health checks for children at risk of tuberculosis at Sina'ah detention facility. With assistance from the United Nations, the self-administration established nine regional offices for the protection of children in armed conflicts. Those offices were charged with raising awareness and establishing and managing a community-based complaint mechanism for recruitment and use of children. In addition, they supported reintegration services for children who were released and carried out prevention activities for community-level child protection actors. It was reported that SDF identified and released 278 children and prevented the recruitment of a further 1,025 children, including as a consequence of investigations conducted by the offices for the protection of children in armed conflict.

71. In 2022, the overall implementation of the action plan has faced notable setbacks. Engagement with SDF became increasingly challenging, not least because SDF reassigned child protection focal points without appoint new focal points. The operations of the offices for the protection of children in armed conflict were suspended in May 2022 until their scheduled reactivation in April 2023. SDF also suspended the children associated with armed forces and armed groups coordination mechanism of non-governmental organizations in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. However, after the end of the reporting period, cooperation between SDF, the United Nations and the coordination mechanism resumed, and SDF committed to holding a joint review of the action plan and to developing a road map for its

implementation. The United Nations and humanitarian partners continued their advocacy for SDF to urgently grant systematic access for child protection actors that allows for regular and service-oriented engagement with children in detention.

### **C. Follow-up on dialogue and development of an action plan with factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition Syrian National Army**

72. In mid-2021, the United Nations and humanitarian partners facilitated virtual meetings with the senior leadership of five factions operating under the umbrella of the opposition SNA to resume engagement on ending, preventing and responding to grave violations.

73. In September 2021, the opposition SNA issued a statement on possible measures to comply with international humanitarian law and to protect children, including the prohibition of child recruitment and use.

74. During the reporting period, the United Nations engaged with the opposition SNA, including Army of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Following meetings over the course of 2022, the opposition Syrian interim government formally requested the development of an action plan for the opposition SNA. A similar request from Army of Islam was also received. At the end of the reporting period, constructive engagement continued, including on holding workshops to develop an action plan.

### **D. Progress in the administrative and policy frameworks**

75. In August 2021, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic adopted a child rights law (No. 21/2021) that expands the rights and protections afforded to children. The law covers a variety of aspects, including nationality, age of consent for marriage, child exploitation, protection against violence and all forms of recruitment and use of children. The Government also established a national child rights committee. Copies of the child rights law were distributed to civil society to raise awareness of the law and the national committee.

76. In 2021, SDF adopted new guidelines for the release and exclusion of children from their ranks, as well as procedures for protecting children detained for alleged association with Da'esh. In addition, SDF took disciplinary measures against some personnel who violated the commitments under the action plan.

### **E. Programmatic responses, advocacy and outreach on child protection**

77. In 2020, the United Nations and humanitarian partners provided training to 14 civilian heads of offices for the protection of children in armed conflict in the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic on key priorities for the prevention of and response to the recruitment and use of children. Humanitarian partners also provided capacity-building to several of those offices, including on the management of the community-based complaint mechanism and case management for victims of grave violations.

78. The United Nations and humanitarian partners provided technical support to SDF in the implementation of the 2019 action plan and for the follow-up actions agreed upon under the 2019 road map. Training was provided to 550 officers, namely, on child protection provisions in existing military command orders and standard operating procedures, including on the release of children from SDF. In addition, virtual training sessions were provided in the second half of 2020 and into 2021 on effective screening, including appropriate age assessment procedures, military-

civilian demobilization and separation procedures for SDF members working in recruitment centres. Capacity-building support also included the development of identification, demobilization and separation procedures.

79. In the north-west, humanitarian partners supported over 100 informally released children. As engagement with armed groups in the north-west proceeds, the United Nations and humanitarian partners aim to strengthen humanitarian service provision, bearing in mind, however, that the complex situation, including the continued lack of systematic and regular access coupled with prevailing insecurity, continued to make these efforts very challenging.

## V. Observations and recommendations

80. I am appalled by the devastatingly high number of grave violations, in particular the increase in recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and abduction of children, and by widespread impunity. I urge all parties, including groups designated as terrorist by the United Nations, to end and prevent grave violations. I urge all parties to the conflict to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, and international human rights law. I call upon them and those with influence on them to immediately take all actions necessary to better protect and uphold the rights of children in the Syrian Arab Republic.

81. I call on Syrian government and pro-government forces and militias, including pro-government air forces, to end and prevent grave violations against children, in particular the recruitment and use, killing and maiming of children, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access.

82. Moreover, I call on all parties to the conflict, in particular the opposition SNA, SDF and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as the main perpetrators, to end and prevent grave violations against children, in particular the recruitment and use, killing and maiming of children, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access.

83. I reiterate my call upon all parties to prioritize efforts to end and prevent child recruitment and use through the adoption and dissemination of command orders prohibiting the practice, and the strengthening of complaints and age assessment systems during recruitment, including through renewed training on age assessment procedures. I further call on all parties to unconditionally and immediately release all children from their ranks.

84. I urge all parties to immediately take all preventive and mitigating actions necessary to avoid and minimize harm and to better protect children during hostilities and from the risks and effects of explosive remnants of war. I urge all parties to refrain from the use of explosive weapons that cause death or injury to children and destroy the vital infrastructure that they rely on, in particular in populated areas. I call upon all parties to ensure the safety of and access for explosive ordnance clearance personnel and provide explosive ordnance risk education, and I call upon the international community to step up support for such operations.

85. I further urge all parties to stop attacks on schools, hospitals and related protected persons, as well as on humanitarian facilities and personnel and objects used for humanitarian relief. I recall that the Security Council, in its resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#), urged all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian character of schools in accordance with international humanitarian law.

86. All parties must end and prevent the military use of schools and hospitals. I urge all relevant parties to vacate all schools and hospitals used for military purposes.

87. I urgently call on parties to the conflict to facilitate and allow secure passage for personnel and objects used for humanitarian relief and life-saving operations.

88. I remain alarmed by the persistently high number of children deprived of liberty for their actual or alleged association with opposing parties to the conflict or on national security grounds. I reiterate my call to treat children primarily as victims, and that deprivation of liberty should be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time, in line with international juvenile justice standards and the best interests of the child. I urge all parties and relevant authorities detaining and/or depriving children of liberty to provide the United Nations and child protection actors with systematic and meaningful access to those children and to include children sentenced for association and/or related crimes in amnesties.

89. I remain seriously concerned by the appalling humanitarian situation and violence affecting women and children in Hawl and Rawj camps and in places of detention in the north-east. I urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the local authorities in the north-east to actively support coordination across sectors between the United Nations and other humanitarian actors in camps to enable systematic and timely humanitarian assistance and to allow children deprived of liberty to have access to education.

90. I reiterate my call upon all concerned countries of origin and relevant authorities inside the Syrian Arab Republic to facilitate and expedite humanitarian access to these children and the voluntary repatriation of women and children who are currently deprived of liberty in Hawl and Rawj camps, including those with suspected family ties to Da'esh, in line with international law and grounded in respect for the principles of non-refoulement, family unity and the best interests of the child, and with the support of the United Nations, upon request, including through the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq Third Country National Returnees. I note the facilitation of the return of some women and children to their countries of origin.

91. I welcome the ongoing dialogue between the Government and the United Nations on commitments to ending and preventing grave violations against children, including taking steps to organize a joint workshop with the United Nations to develop and adopt a comprehensive action plan. I call on the Government to continue its engagement with the United Nations, including through the development, adoption and implementation of a comprehensive action plan.

92. I call on the Government to promote accountability by investigating and prosecuting individuals accused of grave violations in line with international standards, by ensuring disciplinary measures for grave violations against children, and to ensure that all victims have access to justice and are provided with comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive protection services.

93. I further call on all parties to the conflict to hold their members to account for perpetrating grave violations.

94. I call on the Government to endorse the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles), the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and the Safe Schools Declaration.

95. I welcome the issuance by SDF of a military directive on protecting schools. I urge SDF to vacate the remaining schools that it occupies and to refrain from using schools for military purposes in the future. I note the ongoing implementation of the

2019 action plan by SDF and its renewed cooperation with United Nations focal points and the Task Force on Children and Armed Conflict in the north-east, and the commitment of SDF to holding a joint review of the action plan and developing a road map for its implementation. However, I am deeply concerned by the increase in verified cases of child recruitment and use by SDF. I urge SDF to immediately end all violations and to recommit to the 2019 action plan, including by conducting further training on the action plan and on standard operating procedures on age assessment and exit procedures, and by cooperating and regularly facilitating access for the United Nations to monitor implementation of the action plan.

96. I note the constructive engagement between factions of the opposition SNA, including opposition SNA leadership, Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam, on the one hand, and the United Nations, on the other, including the organization of workshops on child protection to develop an action plan. I urge the opposition SNA to prioritize the adoption and implementation of an action plan.

97. I am concerned that children in some areas controlled by parties to the conflict do not have access to a recognized curriculum in schools, which obstructs their right to an accredited education. I urge all parties to remove practical obstacles to education in territories under their control so that children can enjoy their right to pursue their future education, in accordance with the best interests of the child.

98. I am alarmed at the recurrent attacks on and interference with the operation of water facilities, including the Uluk water station, which are further exacerbating the dire humanitarian situation for children that is compounded by cholera outbreaks, perpetuating displacement and conflict. All parties should immediately stop attacking, destroying, removing or misusing objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including drinking water installations. Where such facilities are out of service, cooperation among parties to the conflict, humanitarian actors and Member States is paramount in reinstating them.

99. In view of the growing humanitarian needs throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, humanitarian access and donor support remain paramount in ensuring that vast numbers of people in need receive life-saving assistance. I wish to emphasize that the consent and support of key stakeholders is of utmost importance for United Nations humanitarian agencies and implementing partners to carry out cross-border humanitarian operations into the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, through all modalities, including cross-border and cross-line. I also urge donors to continue providing the necessary financial support in order to ensure that all humanitarian operations have the resources necessary to assist the growing number of people in need.

100. The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has had long-lasting devastating effects on children that are bound to affect generations to come. I urge all stakeholders, including those involved in the ongoing United Nations-facilitated political process in line with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), to prioritize the protection of children.

101. I regret that the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, for the first time since its creation, did not adopt conclusions after it considered my previous report on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. It is my hope that Security Council members can swiftly adopt conclusions on the present report.