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Monday, 13 February 2023, 10 a.m.

New York

President: Mrs. Frazier (Malta)

Members:

Albania	Mr. Hoxha
Brazil	Mr. De Almeida Filho
China	Mr. Zhang Jun
Ecuador	Mr. Pérez Loose
France	Mr. De Rivière
Gabon	Mr. Biang
Ghana	Mr. Agyeman
Japan	Mr. Ishikane
Mozambique	Mr. Fernandes
Russian Federation	Mr. Kuzmin
Switzerland	Mrs. Baeriswyl
United Arab Emirates	Ms. Shaheen
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Kariuki
United States of America	Mr. Mills

Agenda

Children and armed conflict

Prevention

Letter dated 2 February 2023 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2023/80)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Children and armed conflict

Prevention

Letter dated 2 February 2023 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2023/80)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children; and Ms. Divina.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2023/80, which contains the text of a letter dated 2 February 2023 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, transmitting a concept note on the item under consideration.

I now give the floor to Ms. Gamba de Potgieter.

Ms. Gamba de Potgieter: I thank the Security Council for organizing this timely briefing on preventing violations against children in armed conflict. With 25 situations currently monitored through the United Nations children and armed conflict agenda, including one region, the prevention of conflict and sustaining peace, as envisaged in resolution 2427 (2018), has never been more pertinent or urgent. I commend Malta for providing a platform in which its implementation can be discussed.

In his address to the General Assembly last week, the Secretary-General expressed the need for a holistic view of the peace continuum that identifies the root causes of conflict and, in his words:

“invests in prevention to avoid conflicts in the first place, focuses on mediation, advances peacebuilding and includes much broader participation of women and young people”. (A/77/PV.58)

Each year in this Chamber, I present his annual report on children and armed conflict, with data collected through the monitoring and reporting mechanism denoting trends in violations, which remain at a shockingly high level. In 2021, the previous reporting year, the United Nations verified nearly 24,000 grave violations committed against children. The violations with the highest verified numbers involved the killing, maiming, recruitment and use of children, followed by denials of humanitarian access and abductions. As we are preparing our forthcoming report for 2022, the data already gathered show that those trends continue.

The documentation and verification of violations and abuses represent the first critical step to understanding the situation of children in armed conflict on the ground. However, in the face of continued cycles of violence and conflict that are only becoming more intense, frequent and complex, we are increasingly aware that understanding and identifying the pre-existing risks for children, and their vulnerabilities, will be critical to protecting them and preventing violations of their rights once a conflict occurs. Our partners' years of experience in delivering reintegration programming, and our own research, show that the children who are the most vulnerable to grave violations once a conflict or emergency emerges are those who lack education or livelihood opportunities, who are in situations of poverty and displacement or who have disabilities, among other risk factors. Such children are therefore more exposed to recruitment or re-recruitment by armed groups as well as to other risks, such as gender-based violence in time of war.

Similarly, as we document children being taken across borders and trafficked from or through conflict situations, we would be remiss in our account of such situations if we failed to track and respond to the particular risks those children face. The assessment of risks and vulnerabilities should include, for example, systematically applying an intersectional gender lens in analysing the data in order to establish a more complete and context-specific understanding of the factors that contribute to the risks and vulnerabilities facing boys as well as girls in terms of conflict-related sexual violence, including gender stereotyping and sociocultural norms. It should also include the consideration of other circumstances, such as age, disability and displacement, as factors that can put children at a higher risk of becoming targets of grave violations by the parties to a conflict. Every person under 18 years of age must be

recognized as a child, as children are entitled to special protection under international human rights law, particularly under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sustainably addressing the situation of children already facing other forms of violence and abuses, as well as adequately addressing the main drivers of recruitment, helps us break the cycle of the occurrence and recurrence of conflicts. That requires investment in a response that is long-term and tackles the root causes of conflict.

What can we do, going forward? The United Nations agenda for children and armed conflict possesses a multitude of robust tools and initiatives developed at various levels for protecting children from grave violations in situations monitored through that agenda. Its strength has been in ensuring dialogue with the parties to conflicts, with hundreds of commitments, including 41 action plans, put in place by warring parties to better protect children since the mandate's inception. Recently, the mandate has also sought to foster prevention, reinforced by the Security Council's adoption of resolution 2427 (2018), and has developed joint prevention plans with Governments in situations on our agenda, in addition to action plans and other concrete, time-bound agreements. Today the Security Council is giving us an opportunity to focus on resolution 2427 (2018) and the importance of providing support and capacity for its further and urgent implementation and operationalization. Prevention plans have been developed in the Philippines, and we are engaging with the Central African Republic, Colombia, Mali and the Sudan to develop more prevention commitments. I should note that our existing action plans in South Sudan and Yemen contain prevention elements, and I would also like to highlight the work we have done with regional organizations, such as the African Union and the League of Arab States, with which we have extensive cooperation. Such regional organizations work with their member States to promote child protection throughout their own processes and to further the prevention of grave violations against children.

It is worth mentioning that 172 State parties have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Paris Principles, the Vancouver Principles and the Safe Schools Declaration have each been endorsed by more than 100 Member States, representing another strong commitment to protecting children in armed conflict. Those instruments all contribute to child protection and the prevention of

grave violations. But more needs to be done. There are opportunities to develop national-level strategies, or common approaches to prevention, as well as at the subregional and regional levels, and Governments willing to engage in that direction should be provided with sufficient capacity to do so. That includes sharing best practices for information-sharing, capacity-building and follow-up with regard to existing protection and prevention commitments, including Security Council resolutions. It could also include a coordinated mapping of vulnerabilities on the ground in close collaboration with United Nations entities in countries or regions where such situations exist, possibly through deployable expertise. Ideally, the capacity and expertise of the United Nations in terms of child protection should be deployed to support that effort.

For those reasons, my Office and I have strengthened our partnership with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and with her Office to better address the continuum of violence and anticipate risks before, during and in the aftermath of conflicts in order to close the conflict loop. We commit to better understanding and externally communicating the integral linkages between the two agendas going forward, including between early warnings and incidents of violations and abuses against children, with children and their voices at the centre. The humanitarian-peace-development nexus straddles prevention, protection, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and should be better understood.

In conclusion, in October 2022, in presenting my annual report to the Third Committee, I called on it to gather together all existing tools and initiatives related to children and armed conflict into one comprehensive international framework for unifying the elements of this agenda with the goal of better protecting children and preventing violations against them. I hope that my call will be heeded, as it is clearer than ever that the best way to protect children is to prevent violations from occurring at all. That includes delivering on the improved reintegration of children and finding sustainable solutions for peace to which children themselves contribute. The Council stands poised to undertake that task, and we stand ready to support its members in their continued work.

The President: I thank Ms. Gamba de Potgieter for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Maalla M'jid.

Ms. Maalla M'jid: I thank you, Madam President, for inviting me today and for your country's commitment to promoting higher standards for the protection of all children. Malta's leadership in creating a better understanding of the continuum of violence before, during and after conflicts that millions of children face around the world, as well as the importance of a strengthened focus on prevention, could not be more timely, as my friend Ms. Gamba de Potgieter just highlighted.

Let us pause for a moment and look at all the multiple crises that affect the lives and well-being of children around the world, with and through their eyes. Globally, as members know, many millions of children live in conflict zones. Conflicts remain the biggest driver of protection challenges worldwide and a major threat to the lives, safety and well-being of children, and are therefore rightly everyone's concern. Conflicts often overlap with other crises, such as the climate and financial crises, and they amplify pre-existing social inequalities, poverty, hunger and discrimination, further exacerbating the risks and impacts of violence on children. Millions of children have been displaced from their homes as a result of conflict, violence and other crises.

Already vulnerable prior to conflict, children in conflict areas and children fleeing conflict within and across countries are on the front line. The range of their vulnerabilities is wide and, as highlighted by Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter, they include children living in poor and remote areas; girls; children deprived of family care; children in detention; children in institutions; children on the streets; children from minorities; children with disabilities; and migrant, refugee, asylum-seeker and stateless children. They often face a continuum of violence encompassing multiple forms that are often interlinked, such as abduction, sexual abuse and exploitation, gender-based violence, forced labour, trafficking, smuggling, child marriage, enrolment in armed and criminal groups, and deprivation of liberty.

Through it all, children lose access to critical health, education and protection services. Their developmental, mental health and psychosocial needs are often neglected, with consequences that can last a lifetime. Children who have no role in conflict suffer the most from its consequences, but that is not inevitable. Prevention of the six grave violations and their interlinked forms of violence is possible across the

conflict continuum if, first, children's pre-existing risks and vulnerabilities are identified and duly addressed before conflict erupts; secondly, the highest standards of protection, including the provision of access to humanitarian aid and support for children and their caregivers, are adhered to by all parties during conflict; and thirdly, support and investment in rebuilding their lives are consistently provided after conflict.

As demonstrated by today's briefing, I am confident that all Council members feel the urgency of addressing the risks and impacts of that continuum of violence prior to, during and after conflict, which is the door to prevention. Only through investment in integrated national child protection systems can we ensure effective and proactive preventive measures. That is why our solid cooperation and close coordination with my colleague, Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, and all United Nations agencies and programmes, including in humanitarian settings, are key. They continue to demonstrate that the complexities of the continuum of violence must be addressed, while looking at all drivers in close cooperation. Let me share some thoughts and concrete preventive measures.

First, it is critical to understand and identify who the vulnerable children are and where they live. That means ensuring the early detection of the most vulnerable children and caregivers by establishing centralized in-country information management systems to keep track of the exact number of children in vulnerable situations, as well as rapid emergency child-alert systems and awareness-raising. Also essential is the provision of information, in language that children can understand, on available support services such as helplines, safe corridors and spaces, and family reunification services.

Secondly, it is crucial to ensure the provision of easy access to humanitarian aid and support for all children, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable. Sustainable multisectoral humanitarian programming is needed to reduce risk factors and support protective factors that can make children, families and their communities more resilient to the adverse impacts of conflict. That means supporting the scaling-up of integrated services, including in the areas of education, health, mental and psychosocial support, social protection, safe sheltering, child protection mechanisms and justice.

Thirdly, forced displacement due to conflict heightens the risk of child abduction and trafficking and children going missing. To prevent those crimes, strengthening cross-border cooperation is critical, which means ensuring child-friendly border management, the rapid exchange of information and the proper registration, referral and tracking of children who are unaccompanied or have been separated. Pre-developed cross-border data systems that can be reactivated in crisis situations must be put in place. Such cooperation will enable greater accountability for perpetrators, including traffickers, through improved capabilities for criminal investigations and mutual legal assistance.

Fourthly, all actions to address child protection must be informed and shaped by children's experiences, as they know best where existing systems have failed them the most. Children affected by conflict have already taken action by providing peer support, promoting peace and peacebuilding, and preventing radicalization. In Yemen, children requested peace through a peace resolution. In Syria and in Ukraine, girls have shared their stories with the world to promote peace. In Afghanistan, they have promoted peace through art and writing. In Africa and Latin America, young leaders have been actively engaged in peacebuilding. Those are just a few examples.

Within the work of my mandate, I engage with all United Nations Member States by providing tools and supporting initiatives that help to ensure alerts of risks, as well as the early identification of drivers of violence. Over the past two years, we have engaged with more than 80 Member States through their processes to self-assess the progress made in achieving their commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in relation to all the Sustainable Development Goals in order to end violence against children in all settings, including conflict areas. That is a clear example of the three interrelated pillars of development, peace and security, and human rights as the essence of the Organization's work.

In all my country visits over the past year to Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, I identified, together with partners, varying levels of vulnerabilities and ways to ensure early detection and early action. Through my Office, we also provided guidance to the United Nations system and States on ensuring the engagement

and participation of children, including by sharing experiences of child-led initiatives and connecting children across countries and regions.

Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter and I are very pleased to have facilitated an exchange of experiences today with Ms. Divina from Cameroon. Enhancing the participation of children, boys and girls in decision-making and establishing long-term policies to address their aspirations and needs are fundamental to building a peace that can be sustained. Our recent joint advocacy brief on protecting the rights of children on the move in times of crisis with UNICEF, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was a recognized contribution to guidance in that direction.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm my commitment to continuing to work closely with Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter and all my United Nations counterparts to provide joint technical support and guidance, share practices, and conduct joint country missions and policy dialogues in order to assist Member States in their efforts to prevent violence against children and protect all children across the conflict continuum, leaving no child behind.

The President: I thank Ms. Maalla M'jid for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Divina.

Ms. Divina: Permit me to thank Almighty God for this wonderful moment and Malta for convening this important discussion at the Security Council and giving me the opportunity to represent civil society and children at this briefing. I also thank the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and on Violence against Children, respectively.

My name is Divina Maloum. I am 18 years old and an award-winning peacebuilding practitioner from Cameroon, focusing on prevention, children's rights and gender-related issues. I started my journey as a young activist at the age of 14 by creating an organization that then comprised 100 children as changemakers. Since then, the organization has mobilized at least 5,000 children per year in peacebuilding activities. Today we are still seeing wars and armed conflicts across the

world that could prevent the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In Africa and the Middle East, the sociopolitical context is characterized by an escalation of violence and insecurity perpetrated by armed groups, including some designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations. Many children have been forced to flee. In Africa they are used as combatants, mine testers and cooks.

My country, Cameroon, is in the grip of multiple conflicts and is being affected by increasing levels of violence and insecurity. Around the world today, conflicts have huge consequences on human rights, particularly for children, girls and women. As I just mentioned, in Africa, thousands of children and young people have been forced to serve as combatants, mine testers, messengers and cooks, and some of them have even been used as human shields. Girls and women, in particular, are targeted for horrendous purposes — to be used as sex slaves for military or armed-group leaders.

After living through this terrible situation, I decided to take the bull by the horns. Responding to the needs of those children, in 2015 I created Children for Peace, a child- and girl-led movement working across Cameroon and several African countries in complex cultural systems and affected areas by working to democratize the public sphere for inclusive governance and greater political and economic expression of children in public spheres.

Children for Peace works in various areas and regions in Cameroon, with more than 100 permanent members. Our strategy relies on art, capacity-building, the operationalization of gender peace clubs, documentaries, mentoring, advocacy, psychosocial assistance and even software design.

With Children for Peace, we have implemented several projects, among which Silence the Guns, launched in 2019, is one of the flagships. It is an integrated citizen-engagement project led by girls, aiming to realize a conflict-free Africa, thereby engaging all stakeholders and mobilizing them to contribute to children's rights and effective socioeconomic development, as well as peacebuilding. Through the project, children are taking positive actions to find better solutions to issues related to peacebuilding, violent extremism and human rights. Children, religious and traditional leaders and even local authorities are working together closely in order to combat hate, violent speech and the illicit proliferation of weapons.

My work with Children for Peace has been acknowledged and recognized because it yields results. Through community awareness and advocacy campaigns, the Silence the Guns project has helped to reach at least 5.5 million people. The project facilitated support for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of 5,000 children formerly enrolled in armed groups. I can concretely see that the stigmatization of disengaged children and ex-combatants has decreased by 45 per cent in the targeted areas — the far north and north-west of the country.

We also created over 270 peace clubs, which we have been operationalizing in schools, neighbourhoods, mosques and churches. These girl-led clubs seek to improve children's understanding on topics related to peacebuilding, children's rights, gender equity and build their capacity in conflict prevention and resolution. As part of that initiative, children have elaborated and implemented a children's declaration against violent extremism and radicalization.

To strengthen prevention within the children and armed conflict agenda and to fully leverage existing tools to prevent grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, I will focus on one specific recommendation that is close to the efforts of my organization: children's perspectives on peace.

In order to better integrate children's perspectives on peace and develop initiatives and sustainable solutions, States have to encourage the involvement of children and youth of diverse identities in the co-creation process from the start, so as to better understand their context and realities and, ultimately, design more relevant, effective and inclusive programmes. In projects and policy implementation, stakeholders should create an enabling environment in which young people can participate, so that everyone can make the most of the opportunities available. For example, before implementing projects, my organization makes field trips to administer questionnaires to make sure that children really understand a specific issue and issue a proposal to mitigate — or maybe end — the problem. We make sure that the beneficiaries are represented in the conceptualization, implementation and follow-up of the project in order for them to own it and to ensure the replicability and durability of the obtained results.

Facilitating the involvement of children in decision-making also means removing technical and financial barriers that stand in the way of youth

participation. From my experience, it has been difficult to identify and obtain the necessary funding in order to intensify my work and actions — either because Governments do not fund children's or girls' organizations or because the procedures of many funders are often generally complex. As an African, when it comes to working with Governments or major international organizations locally or internationally, my feeling is that most of them seem to not take children and young girls seriously. They do not always allow or give them space to make decisions. They prefer to work with adult-led organizations working on issues that concern children and girls. To close the cycle of conflict, there is a need to invest in children and facilitate their participation. Stakeholders should support the development of platforms that prioritize the perspectives of children, including their experiences, and allow for collaboration with peers, young people and youth leaders to work together for peace, human rights and initiatives that prioritize the inclusion of children in peace processes.

Education is also fundamental to help to include children's participation in decision-making. That means investing in education that includes critical thinking, mediation, communication and working with others. Education and advocacy must also target adults in order to encourage them to better understand the perspectives of children and their views on peace and security. Further efforts should be made to empower children to exercise and claim their rights by advocating for and facilitating their participation in national, regional and international human rights mechanisms and processes.

States too should strengthen the accountability to children by building synergies between the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other treaties and mechanisms — the Human Rights Council, the Sustainable Development Goals and the youth agenda. We need coalitions to influence international political discourse and agendas by setting and promoting innovative discussions and perspectives on children's rights in a changing global environment. Finally, States should ensure that the diversity of children's experiences in conflict, which can vary depending on factors such as gender, race, ability, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic background and other forms of exclusion and marginalization, are factored into the development of law, policy and practice.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that children can play a key role in peacebuilding and, specifically, in

protecting their human rights, with or without sufficient resources. I believe that children are key stakeholders and are capable of driving societal transformation.

There is one sentence that truly speaks to me — if you want to see change in your community or in the world, be that change — because change is the change until the change changes the changer.

The President: I thank Ms. Divina for her briefing.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Malta.

Let me first warmly welcome and thank Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter and Special Representative Maalla M'jid for their contributions. I also thank Ms. Divina for sharing her insights and for inspiring us to do better.

The Security Council's unanimous adoption in 2018 of resolution 2427 (2018), with 98 sponsors, established the centrality of children to United Nations conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Malta underlines that cycles of violence can be broken only by identifying and addressing the risks children face before a conflict erupts. Those risks include systemic factors that increase susceptibility, such as poverty, displacement and a lack of social protections. Resolution 2427 (2018) emphasizes that children who are accused of committing crimes during armed conflicts should be treated primarily as victims and insists that particular attention be given to children associated with terrorist groups.

The Human Rights Council also plays an important role through its inclusion of the protection of children in its resolutions and in the recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review process. A sustained, effective and coordinated response across the United Nations system is critical to preventing child trafficking and cross-border abduction and for protecting children who are unaccompanied or separated from their families or caregivers. In that regard, we believe that we should leverage existing mechanisms to strengthen cross-border monitoring and reporting and to repatriate and reintegrate children who are captured or released in countries other than those of their origin. Regional and subregional organizations also have a central role to play.

We would certainly welcome more systematic reporting by the Secretary-General on early-warning indicators of grave violations against children in armed conflict and the implications of such violations

for regional peace and stability. Survivor-centred approaches must also inform prevention and early warning, as conflict-related sexual violence is often preceded by discrimination, persecution, hate speech and incitement to violence based on gender or group identity. Although conflict-related sexual violence disproportionately affects girls, we also see sexual violence being used to target boys in order to torture, subjugate and emasculate them, particularly in situations of detention. It is important to note that boys account for more than 95 per cent of conflict-related detainees. Military training and standard operating procedures should also address the gender-specific needs of girls and boys.

Engaging children's participation in identifying pre-existing risks and vulnerabilities leading to grave violations is an important principle. Their perspectives are crucial to improving understanding about the context in which violations occur and the impact of conflict and peace processes on them. Malta further underscores the importance of equal access to literacy and quality education, which can help to prevent conflict and provide children with alternative pathways. Education is safeguarded under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as political frameworks such as the Safe Schools Declaration and the Paris Principles. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all States to endorse and implement those important instruments, as well as the Vancouver Principles.

In conclusion, Malta welcomes a coordinated approach between the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and the Office of the Special Representative on Violence Against Children to strengthen prevention, respond to violations and address risk factors in dealing with conflict-related sexual violence. We also welcome further coordination with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Gamba de Potgieter, Ms. Maalla M'jid and Ms. Divina for their briefings.

The protection of children in situations of armed conflict must remain a priority for the Council. France has been committed to this agenda since its beginnings, and the Maltese presidency of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict knows that it can count on us.

First and foremost, preventing violations means respecting our commitments. France underscores the importance of the existing normative framework. The Council's resolutions should be implemented. The blacklists in the report of the Secretary-General (S/2022/493) should condemn all who commit abuses against children. France commends the launch of a United Nations task force in Ukraine to monitor and report on grave violations against children. The perpetrators of violations must be held accountable. We welcome the role of the International Criminal Court in that regard. We must ensure that United Nations mandates contain robust provisions with sufficient capacity and resources to implement the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. Its personnel must be trained on child-protection-related issues. We commend the work of the Special Representative and of Malta's chairship in organizing a summer school on the subject.

National action plans have already led to the release of more than 180,000 children from armed groups and their reintegration into society, and the Council's work on that front is effective. Yet despite those tangible results, children continue to suffer in the impact of conflicts. It is our responsibility to continue our collective commitment to the prevention, release and reintegration of children who are victims of conflict. That protection is crucial to long-term peace. The recruitment of child soldiers draws young people away from education and the prospects for post-conflict reconstruction, which makes them vulnerable to being recruited once again by armed groups. We call for the universal ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and universal endorsement of the Paris Principles. France will play its full role in that effort. Let us protect and free children from war.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank you, Madam President, for presiding over today's meeting, and Special Representative of the Secretary-General Virginia Gamba de Potgieter and Special

Representative of the Secretary-General Najat Maalla M'jid for their briefings. I also listened carefully to Ms. Divina's statement.

In armed conflict, children are the most innocent group and the most vulnerable victims. The 2022 report of the Secretary-General (S/2022/493) alone documents nearly 24,000 verified grave violations against children. There is little doubt that in the real world, more children are paying dearly for conflicts. The international community must take action and shore up its defences to shield them from harm, so that at a minimum every child can grow up healthy in an environment of peace and calm. In that connection, I would like to make three points.

First, conflict prevention and conflict resolution must be the primary and ultimate means of protection. Prevention is the best protection, and the most definitive approach to prevention is eliminating armed conflict. Ms. Maalla M'jid mentioned in her briefing that it is conflict that has visited the greatest harm on children. According to a relevant agency's report released at the end of 2022, approximately 449 million children worldwide, or one in six, were living in a conflict zone in 2021. In conflict areas, millions of children wake up daily to the thunderous sound of guns and artillery. They are dogged by and languish in violence, displacement, poverty and hunger. As long as the flames of war continue to burn, children will forever remain in peril, terrified and exposed to danger. They need more than crisis response and humanitarian relief. What they really need is peace that is truly sustainable. In order to achieve that, it is imperative to continue to seek political solutions, which is the most conclusive way to resolve conflicts, and to invest more efforts in negotiation, good offices and mediation, instead of automatically resorting to sanctions and other enforcement measures, which add fuel to the fire and merely serve the self-interest of some parties by prolonging and spreading conflicts.

To achieve such peace, it is imperative to act in good faith in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which entails respecting other countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity, refraining from interfering in their internal affairs, opposing manoeuvres aimed at changing Governments and opposing the practice of creating chaos and exporting unrest in the name of counter-terrorism or democracy. To achieve such peace, it is imperative to uphold genuine multilateralism,

strengthen dialogue and cooperation, work together to build an architecture of common security and unequivocally reject and oppose unilateralism, the Cold War mentality, bloc politics and confrontations between "us and them". The choices we make are a matter of war and peace, with consequences for the well-being of the next generation. As the children of the world look on, history is being written.

Secondly, prevention must be guided by the spirit of the rule of law at all times. Both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict, of which there are more than 10, clearly define the responsibilities and obligations for the protection of children in conflict situations. To effectively prevent violations against children, we must enhance the spirit of the rule of law, act on the basis of law and put into practice the requirements of international law on the protection of children in armed conflict. We therefore call on the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child to act without delay, allowing that vital Convention to truly achieve universal coverage. The six grave violations, including the killing of children, sexual violence against children and attacks against schools, are explicitly prohibited by Council resolutions, yet despite being proscribed in international law, those red lines are repeatedly crossed. If the violations that have already occurred are not effectively addressed and punished, how can we deter and prevent new violations?

With regard to Haiti, our UNICEF colleagues have told us that acts of gang violence against schools in the country, including shooting, ransacking, looting and kidnapping, have increased ninefold over the past year. In the face of such heinous, outrageous acts, fighting gang violence in accordance with the law is a matter of great urgency. In Afghanistan, what we find concerning is the fact that foreign troops have killed civilians indiscriminately and committed violations against children for the past 20 years, causing a series of horrific tragedies. Some people have told stories of their personal experiences, but to date there has been no full investigation into those incidents, no accountability has been established and no necessary compensation has been made pursuant to law. We are equally concerned to note that the report of the Secretary-General (S/2022/46) once again states that in Iraq, the killing and maiming of children have persisted, with explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive

devices being the leading cause of child casualties. There is no doubt that the countries that started that war have an inescapable legal and moral responsibility in that regard.

Thirdly, supporting children's development must be the overarching objective of our efforts. Preventing violations against children is admittedly an onerous job, but it is only a reactive goal. A proactive goal is the holistic development of children. People's childhoods often shape their destinies throughout their lives, and changing the childhood of a generation may also change the future of a nation. The United Nations must coordinate humanitarian and development resources in a way that prioritizes in its work the eradication of poverty, zero hunger, universal education, and physical and mental health in order to protect children. However, the harsh reality that confronts us is that unilateral sanctions have undermined the economic foundations and development capacity of the affected countries, depriving many children of the rights to survival and development, which are the most fundamental of all rights. At the largest children's hospital in Kabul, in which many children suffer from disease and severe malnutrition, we hear the distressed and indignant appeal of the hospital's President, Dr. Muhammad Haseeb Wardak, for the unfreezing of Afghanistan's overseas assets, which he said, "is our hope".

In the aftermath of the recent powerful earthquake in Turkey and Syria, we have seen that unlawful unilateral sanctions have led to a severe shortage of heavy equipment and search-and-rescue tools in Syria, leaving local people with no choice but to dig with their bare hands. How many children may have perished under the rubble as a result of untimely rescue operations or insufficient rescue capacity? Once again, we urge the countries concerned to immediately lift all their unlawful unilateral sanctions without conditions, not to become enablers of natural disasters or deprive Syrian children of their hope of survival, and to desist from their hypocritical political grandstanding.

The Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict is an important Council body for the protection of children in conflict areas. I congratulate Malta on its election as Chair of the Working Group and look forward to it further improving its methodology, including its planning, while monitoring all conflict situations on the Council's agenda and advancing its deliberations and consultations with a view to reaching country-specific conclusions in a balanced manner.

We support the efforts of Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter to protect children in conflict situations and highly commend her visit to Palestine and Israel last December. We look forward to her briefing the Working Group on her visit and providing advice and recommendations on strengthening child protection. Saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war is what the United Nations set out to achieve at the time of its founding, and protecting the next generation is the abiding moral responsibility of humankind. We should discharge the Council's responsibilities. It is not just about holding meetings. We must take concrete action on the ground. Let us tell every child in a conflict situation, "With our action, we are not failing you". The future is and should be something we can all look forward to.

Mr. Pérez Loose (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank you, Madam President, for convening this briefing. We take note of the information provided by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter; by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid; and by the young and courageous civil society speaker, Ms. Divina.

As almost five years have passed since the adoption of resolution 2427 (2018), which reaffirmed the importance of preventive diplomacy in building and sustaining peace, we must ask ourselves several key questions. What is the status of conflicts compared to 2018? And more importantly, what is the trend in the number of grave violations committed against children? The answers to those questions are disheartening. The global horizon note on the period from April to June 2022, as well as the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2022/493), show that children continue to be killed, maimed, tortured, displaced, forcibly recruited, abducted and targeted by sexual violence. In the context of our consideration of today's topic, my delegation would like to raise three points.

First, we must identify the root causes of conflicts, including inequality, social, gender and intergenerational injustice, a lack of opportunities and weak institutions, which, along with other factors, set the stage for confrontations and leave civilians, including children and young people, in situations of vulnerability. It is a demonstrable fact that societies

that achieve acceptable levels of political stability, democracy and governance are less likely to succumb to such conflicts.

Secondly, we should discuss the implementation of early-warning systems and the exchange of good practices on peace education at the national, bilateral, regional and global levels. Ecuador supports the Secretary-General's call on States to utilize existing mechanisms to protect the right to education for girls, boys and adolescents. We must strengthen the synergies and complementary work between the Security Council, the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and all other partners within the United Nations system to facilitate preventive diplomacy, in accordance with resolution 1612 (2005). Similarly, we should encourage States to join political and pragmatic international instruments such as the Safe Schools Declaration, to enable them to understand and address the problems that limit access to education in times of conflict.

Thirdly, my delegation believes that we must work to find long-term solutions to this issue, including by promoting the participation of minors, without discrimination and with a gendered and intercultural approach, in discussion processes, political transitions and peace negotiations. For example, it is vital that we listen to the needs and proposals of Afghan girls and young women, who have been banned from accessing secondary and university education and from participating in the public arena.

We should address the difficult situation of child soldiers, including by ensuring their physical and mental health, as well as their reintegration into society as victims and not as combatants. In addition, we must undertake demining activities to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of displaced minors and their families to their territories of origin.

Finally, I want to express Ecuador's commitment, as Vice-Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and a signatory to the Vancouver Principles, to the implementation of long-term solutions geared to conflict prevention and the protection of children and young people. In that connection, we have formally endorsed the Paris Principles and Commitments regarding children associated with

armed groups, because we believe in the power of global solidarity in ensuring transitions towards stable and peaceful societies.

Mrs. Baeriswyl (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Switzerland welcomes the convening of today's debate. We thank the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, Ms. Gamba de Potgieter and Ms. Maalla M'jid, for their briefings and above all for the invaluable work they do for children. Ms. Divina's welcome contribution underlines the importance of including the voices of young people in such work.

Every child has the right to a childhood. Every child has the right to grow up in a safe environment, develop his or her potential and be heard and taken seriously. That is what the General Assembly enshrined more than 30 years ago in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whose scope is nearly universal. And yet we are still reading testimonials such as this one, in a recent publication from Ms. Gamba de Potgieter's Office.

"[They] were using a school [...] to bury the bodies [...], children are being raped, several schools and health centres in the provinces are being used as bases for armed groups."

No child should witness such violence. As we meet today in this Chamber, grave violations continue to be committed against girls and boys in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and Ukraine, to name only a few theatres. We have a responsibility to do better. States have a solid framework to rely on in that regard, which includes the resolutions of the Security Council, in particular resolution 2427 (2018), as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and international humanitarian law. Against that backdrop, Switzerland would like to highlight three points.

First, the Council has developed a number of tools to prevent grave violations. For those tools — including the annexes to the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2022/493) — to maintain their deterrent effect, we must preserve their independence, impartiality and credibility. The United Nations must be able to continue to engage with all stakeholders to develop action plans to end and prevent violations against children. Besides that, resolution 1379 (2001) requests that the Secretary-General bring to our attention situations of concern that are not yet on the Council's agenda. The timely inclusion of such

situations in the annual report will further strengthen prevention, as it reminds all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law. Strengthening prevention also means working tirelessly to combat impunity.

Secondly, ensuring the right to education is a fundamental aspect of prevention, and our efforts in that regard are under severe strain, as demonstrated by the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, among other countries. Children who are not in school are more vulnerable to grave violations, and yet attacks on schools continue to increase in many conflict zones. An estimated 222 million children affected by crises are in need of educational support. That is why Switzerland and the United Nations fund Education Cannot Wait, in close collaboration with Colombia, Germany, the Niger, Norway and South Sudan, will be holding a high-level conference in Geneva this week dedicated to the promotion and financing of education in emergencies and protracted crises.

Thirdly, reintegrating children associated with armed groups or forces is critical to maintaining peace, preventing re-recruitment and ensuring that they have a future. Many of those children are girls. Reintegration programmes must therefore be sensitive to gender, age, and specific vulnerabilities. And children should be more involved in designing them. We welcome the work that the United Nations, Member States and civil society are doing on the ground. The development of a rapidly deployable child-protection capacity could further support those efforts.

The Security Council often falls short of expectations when it comes to fulfilling its prevention-related responsibilities. Strengthening the preventive aspect of the agenda for children in armed conflict will enable us to make concrete progress in that regard as well as to protect the rights of children, as the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for. That is how we can enable girls and boys to shape their own future and become actors for peace.

Mr. Kariuki (United Kingdom): I would first like to thank Malta for convening this meeting today, and I congratulate you, Madam President, on taking up the Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. We look forward to working closely together. I also thank our briefers today for their powerful contributions.

The international community must do more to prevent grave violations against children. In countries such as Ukraine, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, children are experiencing the horrors of war and conflict. When violations occur, we must act robustly to ensure that children receive the support required. In that regard, I want to make the following three points.

First, we must ensure that the existing United Nations mechanisms are able to work effectively. The Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children are critical pillars of the Security Council's architecture for addressing such violations. We urge all Member States to engage constructively and collaboratively with them to that end.

Secondly, the United Kingdom is concerned by the dramatic rise in conflict-related sexual violence against children, with a 20 per cent increase recorded in the Secretary-General's 2022 report on children and armed conflict (S/2022/493). Last November, the United Kingdom launched the platform for action promoting the rights and well-being of children born of conflict-related sexual violence. Along with key partners and Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter, the United Kingdom has committed to taking action under the Platform. That includes the deployment of United Kingdom expertise to support the Democratic Republic of the Congo in conducting a national review of laws, policies and practices. We believe that such actions will help to change the lives of tens of thousands of children.

Thirdly, and finally, the United Kingdom is exploring all levers, including sanctions, to deter perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence. We have already announced a sanctions package, which includes six targets in Mali, Myanmar and South Sudan. Those countries were designated for their involvement in sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence.

The international community must send a clear message to all parties that violations against children are intolerable. The United Kingdom is committed to playing its part in that cause.

Mr. Hoxha (Albania): Let me also thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de

Potgieter and Special Representative of the Secretary-General Maalla M'jid, as well as the civil society organization briefer, for their insightful information.

Major progress has been made in the course of the past 25 years, since the General Assembly created a mandate to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict (see resolution 51/77). That once again shows that the measures that we take collectively matter and that they help to make a difference in the real world.

The figures exist. More than 170.000 children were released from armed groups and armed forces. Thirty-seven action plans were signed, 20 of which are under implementation. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was ratified by 171 States. It should become universal.

Nevertheless, as we heard, there is not much reason to rejoice, as the reality that millions of children face is still grim. The basic rights of children continue to be massively and systematically violated, especially in conflict situations.

In every situation of hardship, it is always the most vulnerable who suffer the most and are the first to see their basic rights denied. Armed conflicts only exacerbate such violations, especially for children. They are often deprived of their childhood, denied schooling and terrorized by weapons and fighting around them. Many of them will carry those scars for their entire lives.

We are appalled by the increase in extreme violence against children in conflict areas around the world, including Burkina Faso, Mali, the Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Myanmar, Afghanistan and many other places. Reports from Ukraine also remain deeply concerning, with grave violations of the fundamental principles of child protection in wartime. A total of 438 children have been killed and hundreds more injured, and millions of children have been forced out of their homes, including thousands of Ukrainian children having reportedly been forcibly deported and put up for adoption. That is a major concern raised, which was also raised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Grandi, only a few weeks ago.

We must do more to protect children and ensure their rights in all circumstances. Allow me to highlight some key areas for further action in that regard.

First, we need to invest more in prevention by intensifying our collective efforts to develop and implement concrete and time-bound action plans between parties in conflict and the United Nations. Prevention is also served by building on the existing mechanism and tools to enhance accountability. Effective accountability serves as a powerful deterrent against further breaches of basic rights. In that spirit, Albania supports the incorporation of the six grave violations against children in armed conflict as a stand-alone designation criterion for targeted sanctions.

Secondly, we need to make better use of the monitoring and reporting mechanism, the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict and the tools available to the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. But, to ensure both credibility and effectiveness in common efforts, we must incorporate measures against grave violations against children in mandate authorizations and the renewals of peace operations.

Thirdly, we must address obstacles to reintegrating and rehabilitating children, who today make up half of the refugees worldwide. Children everywhere need a safe home and a safe environment to grow into healthy adults.

Finally, signing, ratifying and endorsing the relevant international treaties and normative acts are crucial to better protecting children in armed conflict. But, for commitments to become actions, we need to ensure full implementation and accurate periodical reporting in order to serve as guardians of children's basic rights.

It is in that spirit that my country, Albania, repatriated children of Albanian origin from the hellish refugee camps in Syria and Iraq in order to give them a second chance at life. In accordance with pledges made at the high-level segment on statelessness, the new Albanian law on citizenship provides for an unrestricted safeguard to grant Albanian citizenship to all children born in Albania. In the same spirit, the guidelines of the Ministry of Education provide for the registration and support of children in situations of migration, refugee children, unaccompanied refugee children, children returned from migration, children from conflict zones and children who are victims of trafficking at public pre-university education institutions.

In conclusion, let us remind ourselves that the circumstances in which children are born, raised and educated will determine their behaviour later in

society. It is our individual and collective duty and responsibility to make sure that their rights are ensured, that they are protected from harm and that are provided with everything possible to become healthy adults and responsible citizens.

Mr. Biang (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter and Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid. I listened carefully to Ms. Divina, and we thank her for her contribution and commitment.

Wars are claiming an increasing number of victims among children. Thousands of girls are victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence and exploitation. The cross-border trafficking of children to and from conflict zones has been repeatedly documented. It is fuelled by complex international criminal networks, which trigger conflicts in order to better plunder natural resources in exchange for weapons and tools of war.

Such trafficking has led to an increased number of child victims and their greater involvement in conflict. The extent of the psychosocial damage, the disruption of socialization processes and the loss of traditional values affecting children are life sentences for most of them.

The landmark United Nations report by Graça Machel on the impact of armed conflict on children (see A/51/306) estimated that nearly 25 million children are displaced by conflict every decade.

Conflict exacerbates situations in which children are abused and increases the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Such abuses often persist in the post-conflict period in the form of domestic labour that becomes servitude, increased trafficking of children, increased sexual violence or sexual exploitation in refugee camps.

Beyond the principles set forth in the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), including the prohibition of the forced or compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 years for their use in armed conflict, the situations that lead to the recruitment of children and their experiences in armed forces or groups are part of a continuum that affects their well-being and development. In that regard, we must re-examine that phenomenon in the broader developmental perspective covering the time before, during and after the conflict. Our understanding of child soldiers must be as broad as possible in order to best protect those recruited and used in conflict

while they are in reintegration and rehabilitation programmes. Such an understanding must include all children associated with an armed force or group who are or were recruited or employed by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to boys or girls used as combatants, cooks, porters, messengers or spies or for sexual purposes.

We must continue to demonstrate fortitude in our response to the effects and persistence of the phenomenon of child exploitation in armed conflict. In addition to the resolutions on the issue of the exploitation of children in armed conflict adopted by the Council since 1999 and the annual reports of the Secretary-General, which include a list of entities recruiting or using children in armed conflict, we must position the efforts of the international community in a more robust and dissuasive posture in order to protect children more effectively. The perpetrators, leaders, commanders and other adults involved in the exploitation of children in conflict must be prosecuted and held accountable. The decision of the International Criminal Court in the case of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo sends an encouraging message in that regard.

At the legal level, the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the most comprehensive legal framework in terms of States parties' responsibilities for all children who live within their borders, in times of both peace and conflict. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child are particularly important in that they strengthen the protection of children in preventing their participation in armed conflict. The adoption of those legal instruments by all have proven to be of vital importance.

We must address the root causes of child recruitment, including the risk and vulnerability factors leading to their recruitment, including social, economic and ideological factors. It is clear that the majority of child soldiers in almost all conflicts come from the poorest, least educated and most marginalized segments of society. Those who live in areas in conflict, who have been separated from their families or whose family life has been disrupted, particularly within refugee and displaced populations, are particularly at risk. Poverty puts children's lives at risk. It increases their vulnerability to other dangers by increasing their exposure to violence and exploitation, including child labour in dangerous working conditions and

trafficking. Predators who sell children into slavery or for sexual exploitation recruit them from the starkest slums and most disadvantaged rural areas, in which extreme poverty makes children more vulnerable.

In implementing specific demobilization and reintegration programmes, we must ensure that they are tailored to children associated with armed forces or groups and children who have been victims of sexual violence, with a focus on community-based reintegration that is as inclusive as possible in order to prevent all forms of re-recruitment. In that regard, the decision of the children and the communities concerned on how such reintegration programmes are run is critical to ensuring their maximum effectiveness. When institutions are weakest, social networks are least effective, infrastructure has been destroyed on a large scale and social roles have been upended, then reintegration programmes must be put in place in order to provide real prospects and genuine alternatives for the children concerned in order to prevent their re-recruitment by the same forces and even other countries.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm the need to base our global strategies for conflict resolution — and above all the work we do on behalf of child victims of conflict — on the need for protection and prevention, in particular by establishing multifaceted partnerships and strengthening resilience, while addressing the root causes of armed conflict. Such a child-centred approach is an invaluable investment in our future and one of the best guarantees of ensuring that today's children will realize tomorrow our aspirations for security and dignity throughout the world.

Mr. Kuzmin (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to Malta for convening today's briefing. We would like to thank Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children; and the young civil society representative, Ms. Divina, for their comprehensive and useful briefings.

The Russian Federation condemns crimes against children in the strongest terms. The perpetrators of such crimes must be brought to justice and held accountable. Resolution 1612 (2005) laid the foundation for monitoring the protection of children in armed conflict. We would like to recall that the Security

Council agenda item "Children and armed conflict" is limited to six categories of grave violations against children — the recruitment and use of children; the killing and maiming of children; rape and other forms of sexual violence against children; the abduction of children; attacks on schools and hospitals; and the denial of humanitarian access. Resolution 2427 (2018) is also of importance, as it significantly expands the toolbox of measures for protecting children, including preventive measures. We believe that today's discussion will draw attention to the need for the increased use of the potential of resolution 2427 (2018), especially since it explicitly calls on United Nations Member States to prioritize the protection of children in efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts and in post-conflict reconstruction. In resolution 2427 (2018), the Security Council reaffirms the intention to use the full range of United Nations instruments to establish early warning of potential conflicts in order to protect children and ensure sustainable peace. It is important that such work be coordinated at the international, regional and national levels. Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Gamba de Potgieter is doing very useful work that deserves our full support. She and her Office and staff are doing a great deal of positive work in helping States to take practical measures. The Office of the Special Representative has prepared a number of very useful documents, in particular the publication *Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict* and other important tools.

The Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict also plays an important role. That unique mechanism contributes to better protecting children in conflict and preventing future violence. The Working Group is designed to deal primarily with the most acute and large-scale situations of armed conflict on the Council's agenda. Unfortunately, over the past two years the effectiveness of the Group's work has declined noticeably. It has become politicized, and instead of in-depth dialogue on the physical protection of children, there have been attempts to refocus its attention on addressing human rights issues, which comes under the purview of other United Nations bodies. As its Chair, Malta is facing the difficult but important task of establishing a constructive and mutually respectful dialogue within the Working Group, avoiding politicization and enhancing the effectiveness of its work. At the same time, it is important to remember that within the scope of their mandates, issues related

to children are also being addressed by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. It is essential to adhere carefully to the existing division of labour between the Organization's various organs, in line with the Charter of the United Nations and other instruments.

It is crucial to emphasize unconditional respect for the universal norms of international humanitarian law and the use of universally recognized international legal instruments, which do not include the Safe Schools Declaration and the Paris and Vancouver Principles. As political initiatives introduced by individual groups of countries, they do not enjoy universal support. The Safe Schools Declaration, which our former Western partners love to talk about, is completely ignored even by countries that have officially accepted obligations arising from it. Take the example of Ukraine, which subscribes to the Safe Schools Declaration. We are constantly seeing and recording attacks and shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine on schools and hospitals, which are also being used for military purposes to accommodate military contingents and store heavy weaponry. The United States, Britain and France are also violators of the Safe Schools Declaration, as Kyiv's militants are using the artillery systems and other weapons supplied by them are to inflict direct strikes on schools and hospitals. In the case of the American High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) multiple rocket launchers, those targets are first agreed on with Ukraine's United States sponsors. Meanwhile, Kyiv and its Western accomplices in those crimes do not so much as bat an eye when it comes to talking about their commitment to protecting schools and children.

Needless to say, I should not neglect the details of what is happening in Ukraine. Relying on their backers, the Kyiv authorities are continuing to wage war on their own people. Kyiv has been brutally suppressing anyone who disagrees with its inhumane policies in Donbas since 2014. Over the years, hundreds of children have died in the region, with ten times more injured. The Ukrainian armed forces have deliberately targeted civilian objects, including kindergartens, colleges, schools and children's hospitals. Let me cite just a few of the most recent examples.

On 21 January, Kindergarten No. 279 in Donetsk was damaged in Ukrainian troops' shelling of the city's Kirovskiy district. On 28 January, there was a targeted HIMARS attack on a hospital in the city of Novoaidar, killing 14 people and injuring 24. On the same day, a children's hospital in Nova Kakhovka was shelled. Early

in the morning of 3 February, Ukrainian forces shelled the village of Bulavynivka in the Luhansk people's republic using HIMARS rocket systems, damaging the school, the cultural centre and 10 residential buildings. Such inhumane methods of warfare endanger children's lives, deprive them of their right to education and destroy Ukraine's educational infrastructure. Last year alone 4,574 civilians were killed in Donbas, including 153 children, and 279 children were injured. We regularly provide the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict with information on the crimes committed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine against children, especially killings, injuries and attacks on schools and hospitals.

Russia has taken in hundreds of thousands of children and their families who have fled to our country to escape the Ukrainian forces' barbaric bombing. During that time, about 400,000 children have found shelter in the Russian Federation. Ms. Maria Lvova-Belova, the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights of the Russian Federation, is currently taking steps in close cooperation with the authorities of the Donetsk and Luhansk peoples' republics and other recently liberated regions to build a child protection system and restore social institutions. Programmes have been launched to prioritize keeping children in families and placing them in foster care in the event of the absence or death of parents and relatives. We are ready to share our experiences with Member States and experts from the Office of the Special Representative.

Finally, if we are speaking about the protection of children in conflict, we should not fail to mention the Syrian Arab Republic. We are extremely concerned about the situation of children in areas that are not under the control of Damascus, including the Idlib de-escalation zone and in the country's north-east. Years have gone by and the disastrous situation in the Al-Hol and Roj camps for internally displaced persons in the north-east has still not been resolved. The occupying Power controlling those camps, the United States, refuses to address the problem. We once again call on all countries to fulfil their obligations under international law and take steps to repatriate their citizens' children from conflict zones. For our part, we are consistently working to return Russian children to their homeland and are actively engaged in their rehabilitation. We stand ready to share our experiences in that area, too.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): I would like to start by thanking Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, for their comprehensive briefings. I have also taken note of the recommendations of Ms. Divina Maloum, our youth briefer. They have made us even more aware that conflicts have a negative impact on the whole of society, and that within it, children are the worst affected and the primary victims of armed conflict.

Mozambique is therefore deeply concerned about the trends in violations of children's rights, specifically those described by the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General. We consider them a warning of the need to intensify our individual and collective actions in order to prevent violations against children in conflict situations from recurring. In that connection, the adoption of resolution 1261 (1999) was a historic milestone for the Security Council, as it formally placed the issue of children and armed conflict on the Council's agenda.

In that connection, we would like to point to the important and tireless work done by Mozambique's former First Lady, Mrs. Graça Machel. The report she authored (A/51/306) was universal. Rather than merely reflecting Mozambique's own horrific experience in the conflict that the apartheid South African regime waged against our country and the southern African region until 1992, it synthesized the experience of children in war-ravaged countries around the world. It was an important step towards the General Assembly's establishment through its resolution 51/77 of the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and a mark of major progress in our collective action aimed at preventing violations against children. We must recognize that despite those efforts, there is still much to be done, considering the number of current conflicts with a profoundly negative impact on children.

Mozambique considers the protection of children vitally important. Children have always occupied a privileged position in our society. The Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique ensures that children's right to protection and care for their well-being are guaranteed and promoted nationwide.

Guided by that constitutional command, we have ratified or acceded to numerous regional and international legal instruments on the promotion and protection of children's rights. By embracing those instruments, we are committing to respect and ensure respect for the norms of international humanitarian law with regard to children's rights and to adopt all possible measures to prevent violations against children, including those in armed conflict situations.

In the context of our current counter-terrorism initiative, we set up measures aimed at defending our children, who represent our precious future. We also embarked on the development and strengthening of child-protection capacities within our national defence forces and other key institutions in order to ensure an adequate response to the needs of affected children.

Prevention is the key word in the efforts to protect children in situations of armed conflict. Our primary mission is to promote socioeconomic development and address some of the root causes of children's vulnerability in the region.

I wish to conclude by reiterating the unwavering commitment of Mozambique to continuing to implement preventive measures that are conducive to the creation of a brighter future for our children.

Mr. De Almeida Filho (Brazil): Brazil would like to congratulate Malta for organizing this briefing on such an important matter. Brazil is fully engaged in the children and armed conflict agenda. We, too, hosted a signature event on children and armed conflict during our presidency of the Council, in July 2022 (see S/PV.9096), at which we discussed the most recent annual report (S/2022/493) of the Secretary-General on the subject.

Let me thank Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, for their commitment and continued efforts in engaging with parties in conflict-affected countries to protect children. I would also like to thank Ms. Divina for her moving and inspirational testimony.

A world that abandons its children has no future. It is a world that inspires neither confidence nor hope. Children brutalized by armed conflicts lose their right to a future and the project of life, and they may lose faith

in peace. Let us not lose sight of our intergenerational responsibilities, and let us not forget the temporal dimension of human existence.

Despite our efforts to date, there is still a long road ahead of us. In many contexts, children remain subject to six grave violations as a result of failures of compliance with international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law.

Brazil believes that children could bring the members of the United Nations together. While we have recently seen deep divisions between members of the Council on a range of issues, protecting children from war should be a unifying force capable of bringing Member States to common ethical and political grounds.

I would like to share some key ideas on the prevention of grave violations against children in armed conflicts.

First, a crucial part of prevention is ensuring accountability at the earliest stages possible. Impunity stimulates further violations. Accountability plays an essential role in curbing impunity and, therefore, preventing violations. Brazil not only calls for the adoption of national accountability measures, but also urges relevant international mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court, to complement domestic efforts. There can be no protection of children with impunity for crimes committed against them, and domestic and international jurisdiction must be complementary in the realization of justice.

Greater attention must be paid to children who have been forcibly displaced, regardless of their legal status. Stateless, refugee, migrant and internally displaced children are at a higher risk of facing grave violations and other serious abuses, including recruitment and use by parties to conflict, sexual exploitation, trafficking and detention. Experience of physical and psychological trauma and the lack of access to services to fulfil children's basic needs can have lasting consequences for them and their families.

Secondly, there can be no dignity for children without social and economic development. The Council has already recognized that security and development are mutually reinforcing and key to attaining sustainable peace. In order to prevent and respond to violations against children, Brazil believes that there is a need

for a comprehensive approach involving mutually reinforcing political, security, economic, social and human rights considerations.

In that context, we call for increased cooperation between the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Peacebuilding Commission in order to make the integration of efforts more effective. Brazil also encourages the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to make full use of the expertise of the Peacebuilding Commission, which is uniquely positioned to bridge cross-pillar discussions.

Thirdly, education is an important pillar of prevention. In countries facing security and humanitarian crises, education is at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts. Schools must be protected from attack, as every girl and boy has the right to education without fear of violence. It is particularly important to prevent the undermining of girls' education by targeted attacks on girls' schools and the denial of schooling in certain countries. We need to integrate a solid gender perspective in the monitoring and reporting of violations against children, as boys and girls are likely to suffer in different ways.

Education for peace is key to breaking the cycle of violence in situations of conflict. If I may rephrase the famous preamble of the UNESCO Constitution, it is in the minds of girls and boys that the defences of peace must be constructed.

Fourthly, if counter-terrorism takes place at the expense of our children, it will have defeated its purpose. Any counter-terrorism action must abide by international law. Children should always be treated primarily as victims, including those associated with groups designated as terrorists, and they should be detained only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time.

Brazil calls for preventive action to be taken at national, regional and international levels. States, United Nations entities and regional bodies play a complementary role in preventing abuses against children. In that context, Brazil reiterates the importance of ensuring that child-protection provisions and capacities are included in all relevant mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions.

In conclusion, while children do not initiate wars, they are among those who suffer their consequences the most. Hence, the most effective way to protect children from the inevitable suffering caused by war is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Investments in the peaceful settlement of disputes, education and economic and social development are always the best choice, as they also provide children with a telling example of how to resolve disputes through dialogue, not violence or coercion.

Mr. Agyeman (Ghana): I would like to begin by borrowing the words of Maya Angelou, who in recognition of the direct implication of our actions on the lives and future of our children, stated, “each child belongs to all of us, and they will bring us a tomorrow in direct relation to the responsibility we have shown to them”. As we meet in the Chamber, therefore, we should be united by a common aspiration to protect the children of our world and ensure their well-being through enhanced protection measures and the pursuit of a rigorous culture of prevention, as envisaged by resolution 2427 (2018) and other relevant Security Council resolutions.

In that context, Ghana welcomes Malta’s convening of today’s timely briefing on children and armed conflict. We share in the objective of strengthening the regime for the prevention of grave violations against children, especially in the context of armed conflict, and we assure you, Madam President, of our utmost cooperation and commitment to the work of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, which you now chair. I would also like to thank Special Representatives Virginia Gamba de Potgieter and Najat Maalla M’jid for their briefings, as well as the youth representative, Ms. Divina, for her unique perspective, which has placed yet another challenge before the Council with regard to the need to be more proactive in preventing grave violations against children.

Ghana is encouraged by the outcomes that the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF and other partners managed to achieve in 2022. We encourage the continuing engagement of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General with parties to conflict, regional organizations, civil society organizations and United Nations actors, which last year led to successful outcomes, including the development and implementation of relevant protocols and action plans in Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Yemen.

Past outcomes inspire hope in existing capabilities to ensure child safety, although existing needs also mean that more should be done. We remain deeply concerned about the fact that the children growing up in communities ravaged by armed conflict continue to witness and experience unimaginable horrors of great proportions and frequency. The incessant refusals by parties to conflict to lay down their arms often means that children are caught up in the line of fire and used as weapons of war. Violations such as killing and maiming as a direct or indirect result of hostilities, including through explosive remnants of war, improvised explosive devices and the excessive use of force, should not continue to deprive our children of their future. The plethora of actors operating with impunity or even in power vacuums should be stopped and we must not relent in our efforts to prevent conflicts if we are to assure the full protection of children. We would like to share four key messages on how we can strengthen prevention within the children and armed conflict agenda.

First, we believe that United Nations early warning and violence-monitoring efforts should employ relevant child-sensitive indicators. Prevention can be truly successful if risk factors that lead to grave violations against children are identified, understood and thoroughly addressed before the eruption of a conflict — and if not, then proactively while a conflict is still in full force. An example of a major risk area that can be focused on and addressed is the impact of socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and the lack of educational opportunities, which increase the susceptibility of children to recruitment and re-recruitment by armed groups and sexual violence. Peacekeeping missions by the United Nations and regional organizations should also seek to integrate child-protection obligations into mission planning, policies, decisions and activities, and must endeavour to include child-protection focal points in their field operations.

Secondly, given the cross-border nature of some violations against children in armed conflict, there is a need for synergies among the United Nations, regional organizations and member States, through the development and implementation of joint strategies and coordination mechanisms that enhance information-exchange and cooperation to prevent cross-border recruitments and use, as well as trafficking.

Thirdly, we urge regional organizations to deepen their collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) in the areas of early warning and early response, with a tailored focus on child protection. Platforms such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Peace and Security-CSO Platform, if strengthened, could help to better detect and predict threats to peace and security in West Africa and their effects on children. For that reason, we encourage ECOWAS, in its partnership with West Africa's network of CSOs, to foster the sharing of information and experiences towards more effective conflict prevention and child protection.

Fourthly, an indication of the level of importance we attach to the children and armed conflict agenda is reflected by the resources we devote in support of its implementation. We therefore encourage the Council's full support for the allocation of targeted, practical and rapid resources to facilitating responses to threats against children or avert the potential dangers they may face. Moreover, there is an urgent need for targeted resources to be provided and collaborative efforts to be made by the international community and Member States to sensitize communities on explosive ordnance risks, as well as to ensure the identification, fencing-off and eventual destruction of all types of explosive ordnance that could endanger the lives of children. We also urge continuing support for schools as hubs of peace, including through enlightened education and sustained support for school-feeding programmes.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that while significant strides have been made globally in raising awareness and preventing grave violations against children in armed conflict, the distance left to travel is greater. Ghana is committed to travelling the extra mile for the cause of protecting children and securing their safe and sustainable future.

Mr. Mills (United States of America): I want to thank very much Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative Maalla M'jid and Ms. Davina for their thoughtful and useful briefings today. I thank you, Madam President, for hosting today's important briefing. We look forward to Malta's tenure as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

The most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2022/493) provided a sobering snapshot of how conflict continues to affect

children. For all of us, it was surely heartbreaking to read of the nearly 24,000 verified violations in the report. The United States remains firmly committed to the children and armed conflict agenda item and is keen to see it integrated into all the work of the Security Council. When we take preventive steps to protect children, we protect and safeguard our collective future. To prevent future violations and abuses against children, we must make clear to those who commit those acts that they will be held accountable.

The Russian delegation attempted to spin its war in Ukraine as somehow a positive for the children of Ukraine. Let me be clear. In Ukraine, Russia's brutal full-scale invasion is having a devastating impact on children. We commend the Secretary-General for including Ukraine as a country of concern in his recent report, which highlights the ongoing unconscionable violations and abuses by Russia against Ukrainian children. During his recent visit to Ukraine, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Grandi, highlighted a tragic aspect of Russia's war — the impact on children and in particular the issuance of Russian Federation passports to unaccompanied children from Ukraine during wartime. It has been widely reported that Russia is engaged in the extensive relocation of Ukraine's children within Russian-controlled and Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, as well as the transfer of children to Russia itself, and in some cases the deportation of children from Ukraine for the purposes of Russification and adoption by or placement with families in Russia.

Another indispensable tool in preventing those kinds of violations is the expertise provided by the United Nations country task forces on monitoring and reporting, and by other United Nations missions' child protection specialists around the world. Without their tireless efforts and vital work, countless more children would suffer. And it is our responsibility as Member States to help ensure that adequate resources and dedicated child-protection personnel are deployed where needed in United Nations peace operations, special political missions, and country teams to deliver on their mandates. When we leave those positions vacant or understaffed, we leave children at risk.

Children, especially girls, have been subjected to alarming rates of gender-based violence. We are especially distressed by the 41 per cent increase worldwide in the abduction of girls, who are then commonly subjected to gender-based violence, such

as forced marriages, rape and other forms of sexual violence. We are encouraged by the positive outcomes of efforts to engage with parties to conflicts, which did result in the release of 12,214 children from armed groups and armed forces. Still, more should be done to promote justice and accountability for those child survivors and to urgently address the long-term effects on their mental and physical health.

Children in conflict zones face acute protection challenges. In Ethiopia, thousands of children have been forced from their homes, separated from their families and subjected to sexual violence. We are encouraged by the cessation of hostilities agreement in northern Ethiopia and hope that the Government and the Tigrayan authorities will build on that momentum. We also underscore that any lasting solution to the conflict must involve comprehensive solutions, including transitional justice for victims and survivors and accountability for those responsible for atrocities.

In Afghanistan, patterns of child, early and forced marriage and recruitment have been crippling to the physical and emotional well-being of children and youth. Girls have been particularly affected, as there have been instances amounting to early and unsafe pregnancies. Survivors of gender-based violence and demobilized child soldiers, including those who are trafficking survivors, need access to shelter and long-term care. The United States condemns and calls on the Taliban to eliminate the harmful practice of *bacha bazi* and expand protection and rehabilitative services for the children affected. The United States also condemns the 24 December 2022 edict barring women from working for non-governmental organizations, which will disproportionately harm women and children as recipients of humanitarian assistance, including medical services.

In conclusion, it is important, as I think we all agree, that the Council speak with one voice for increased compliance with international humanitarian law, respect for human rights and strengthened accountability for all violations and abuses against children. The Council can and should do more to protect children worldwide, and we can start by strengthening existing accountability mechanisms and dedicating more resources to United Nations child-protection specialists.

Ms. Shaheen (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like at the outset to thank you, Madam President, for keeping the children and armed conflict

agenda a priority for the Security Council, and for choosing prevention for our discussion today. We look forward to working with you as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. I also would like to thank Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, for their valuable briefings and tireless efforts to strengthen the protection of children. And we are grateful to Ms. Divina for joining us today and sharing her perspective.

I will focus today on the unacceptable reality of children's suffering in our region as a result of conflict situations. I want to emphasize that every child in conflict, and every conflict situation affecting children, warrants the Council's full attention. According to UNICEF reports, in 2022 in the Middle East and North Africa alone, 580 children were killed as a result of conflicts or acts of violence. In the region overall, some 50 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than 13 million are displaced. Resolution 2427 (2018) was a milestone in the work of laying out a preventive approach to the agenda for the protection of children, including through partnerships across the United Nations system. As today's meeting is an opportunity to refocus our efforts on that issue, I would like to highlight three elements that should guide our partnerships in the area of prevention.

First, we need to prioritize and invest in education as a tool for prevention. Education empowers future generations and promotes mutual understanding and dialogue among them. It also protects against child recruitment and the hatred and intolerance that fuel conflicts. Investing in education requires us to be explicit, in our national capacity or as members of the Council, about the need for equal access to education and the protection of places of learning, as guaranteed by international law.

In Afghanistan, girls have tragically been deprived of their fundamental right to education. In Yemen, the Houthis continue to use summer camps to teach children their extremist principles and to recruit them, in violation of their obligations under international law and the action plan they signed with the United Nations. Schools and other teaching institutions should never be used to promote radicalization and should always be sanctuaries for learning, nurturing and providing children with opportunities. The United Arab Emirates

calls on the parties to conflicts to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and to safeguard, protect, respect and promote the right to education.

Secondly, Member States should exchange experiences and best practices on the rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation of children, and provide the necessary technical and financial assistance. Wars inflict severe, long-term harm on the physical and mental well-being of boys and girls. That demands comprehensive reintegration programmes that take into account differences in children's ages, abilities and other needs. For instance, in Iraq, the authorities and the broader community continue to grapple with the traumatic legacy of crimes perpetrated by Da'esh against girls, with an alarmingly increasing trend in suicide among members of the Yazidi community. Similarly, the dire situation of children in Al-Hol camp in Syria, which has become a breeding ground for radicalization, urgently requires the international community's attention. In that regard, we welcome that efforts that have been leading to the repatriation of some children, and encourage the countries that have undertaken such steps to share best practices so that others can take similar initiatives.

Thirdly and finally, coordinated mine action should be a core part of our partnership for ensuring a preventive approach. Even in times of truce or post-conflict, children continue to be killed and maimed by landmines. Regrettably, that is especially true in our region. Throughout the years, the United Arab Emirates has participated in funding clearance projects for mines and explosive remnants of war, including in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Yemen, and we will continue to support mine clearance and awareness efforts.

Mr. Ishikane (Japan): I thank Ms. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid and Ms. Divina for their insightful briefings. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the adoption of resolution 2427 (2018), which underscores the protection of children as a key to preventing conflict and sustaining peace. Japan highly values the efforts and achievements made to date in that regard. However, it is regrettable that children in armed conflict continue to experience grave and large-scale violations of their most basic rights. Japan urges all parties to armed conflict to fully comply

with their obligations under international law and implement all the resolutions of the Security Council on children and armed conflict. We need to recall that resolution 2427 (2018), which the Council adopted unanimously, strongly condemns attacks against schools, and we urge all Member States to ensure that such attacks are investigated and those responsible duly prosecuted.

One of the concrete tools for protecting children in armed conflict that is highlighted in resolution 2427 (2018) is ensuring access to quality education. Ms. Divina also pointed out the importance of education in promoting children's participation in decision-making. Access to quality education is a fundamental human right and a powerful tool for preventing and mitigating conflict. It helps stop the recruitment of child soldiers and also provides the necessary skills for the reintegration and rehabilitation of children affected by conflict.

From that viewpoint, Japan has supported a number of education programmes in conflict-affected countries. For instance, the Japan International Cooperation Agency has for many years provided non-formal literacy programmes for girls and women and teacher training in Afghanistan. Also, with Japan's funding assistance, UNICEF supported the Government of Burkina Faso in constructing secondary schools and developing specific learning modules for promoting peace and social cohesion. Building on the outcomes of last year's Transforming Education Summit, Japan is ready to accelerate its efforts towards ensuring inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all children and young people, including those affected by conflict.

Children must not fall victim to armed conflict; they must instead be the seeds of hope to build peace and sustainable development. We should spare no effort to improve learning environments, ensure access to safe and quality education and guarantee human security for all children. Japan will continue to work closely with other Member States, the United Nations system, international humanitarian organizations and civil society organizations in that endeavour.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

The meeting rose at 12.15 p.m.