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Children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic**Report of the Secretary-General***Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fourth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic and covers the period from January 2016 to June 2019.

In the report, the Secretary-General addresses the effect of the cycles of violence on children in the country, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations committed against children, and presents information, where available, on the perpetrators. The progress made by parties to the conflict in terms of dialogue, action plans and other child protection commitments is also outlined. The Secretary-General provides a series of recommendations aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in the Central African Republic.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is my fourth report on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the Central African Republic and covers the period from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2019. In the report, I describe patterns of grave violations against children that have occurred since my previous report (S/2016/133) and outline challenges and progress in addressing the protection of children since the adoption of the conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council (S/AC.51/2016/3). Where feasible, parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations are identified. In the annexes to my most recent annual report on children and armed conflict (A/73/907-S/2019/509), the former Séléka coalition and associated armed groups, including the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC), the Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC) and the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), local militias known as anti-balaka, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are listed for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and rape and sexual violence. In addition, the former Séléka coalition and associated armed groups are listed for attacks against schools and hospitals, and LRA for abduction. The United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in the Central African Republic, co-chaired by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), documented and verified the information contained in the present report. Grave violations against children were mostly committed by armed groups. There were few cases attributed to Government forces. The monitoring and reporting of grave violations was hampered by security and logistical constraints that limited physical access throughout the reporting period. In addition, victims and witnesses were often prevented from seeking assistance or reporting incidents owing to insecurity and fear stemming from the continued presence of perpetrators within the communities. The information contained in the present report is therefore only a partial representation of grave violations against children committed during the reporting period.

II. Overview of political and security developments

2. Following elections at the end of 2015 and early 2016, the President of the Central African Republic, Faustin Archange Touadera, took over from the transitional government in March 2016, representing a new political era in the Central African Republic. However, the security situation remained fragile, particularly outside Bangui. In the east and south-east of the country, the intensification of LRA activities and the large number of abductions by LRA at the beginning of 2016 triggered population displacement. As of May 2016, a security gap had emerged owing to the end of the mandate of the African Union Regional Task Force in the Central African Republic to fight LRA.

3. In June 2016, the split between Arab and Fulani elements of UPC, and the refusal of UPC to join a reorganized ex-Séléka coalition under FPRC leadership, gradually led to a confrontation between the two groups. FPRC assumed a hard-line position towards the Government, attempting to reunite all ex-Séléka groups under a single chain of command. UPC opposed a united ex-Séléka, expanding itself eastward. Later in 2016, conflict erupted between the FPRC-led coalition (FPRC, MPC, the Rassemblement patriotique pour le renouveau de la Centrafrique (RPRC) and anti-balaka) and UPC. Resource-rich areas originally controlled by UPC were targeted by the FPRC-led coalition, leading to serious clashes during which grave violations against children occurred.

4. Violence associated with the seasonal movement of Fulani pastoralists and the presence of armed groups claiming to protect them resulted in human rights abuses against civilians in the central and western parts of the country during 2016. Some Fulani herders were often heavily armed and involved in violent clashes with farming communities. Fighting commonly took place between anti-balaka and FPRC along the transhumance corridors in Ouham prefecture. Fighting between anti-balaka and Retour, réclamation et réhabilitation (3R) resulted in the closure of schools and displacement in parts of Ouham-Pendé prefecture. Meanwhile the geographical expansion of MPC resulted in humanitarian workers becoming targets of attacks and temporarily pulling out of Batangafo and Bocaranga.

5. The year 2017 witnessed the establishment of a new Government in September, including a new ministry dedicated to women, family and children. FPRC and anti-balaka representatives received ministerial portfolios. The conflict, particularly in the east, was often presented by armed groups and some political leaders as being due to religious and ethnic differences, resulting in hate crimes, targeted attacks against communities and mass displacement. Conflict intensified between the FPRC-led coalition and UPC. In early 2017, local self-defence groups in Haute-Kotto and Mbomou prefectures began to organize and turn themselves into armed militias associated with anti-balaka determined to rid the country of Fulani, who were seen as being associated with UPC. Clashes between armed Fulani and UPC against anti-balaka spread to Haut-Mbomou prefecture. Sites for internally displaced persons established near hospitals and religious institutions were frequently targeted by armed groups.

6. In the central and western parts of the country, violence fuelled by cattle rustling erupted between MPC, Révolution et justice (RJ) and anti-balaka, affecting the delivery of humanitarian assistance to children. In September 2017, a new Fulani armed group named Siriri emerged in the western areas of Nana-Mambéré and Mambéré-Kadéï prefectures to reportedly protect the Fulani and their livestock. However, they attacked communities and were eventually assimilated by 3R in November 2018.

7. During 2017, MPC established a coalition with RJ and aggressively expanded farther west towards the borders of Cameroon and Chad. In October, Raymond Belanga, also known as “General” Ahmat Bahar, deserted MPC and created the Mouvement national pour la libération de la Centrafrique (MNL) to reportedly protect local communities from other armed groups. The intensity of the conflict grew around Paoua and Bocaranga, resulting in widespread population displacement.

8. Throughout 2018, sporadic attacks by armed groups against civilians continued, predominantly in the centre and the east. Clashes also continued between anti-balaka and FPRC and between anti-balaka and UPC, resulting in child casualties and displacement. Local cessation-of-hostility agreements were negotiated with the support of MINUSCA throughout the country. For example, the signing of the Bangassou agreement on 9 April resulted in more freedom of movement for humanitarian workers and the local population and the dismantling of checkpoints. The country task force on monitoring and reporting noted a significant decrease in reported grave violations against children in the area compared with 2017. In other places such as Batangafo and Ippy, however, local peace accords offered only a temporary improvement in security, and were subsequently broken by large-scale attacks on civilians, in particular internally displaced persons, by armed groups. Retaliatory attacks between anti-balaka and UPC remained a common pattern that had a serious impact on the protection of children.

9. The year 2018 also saw a temporary spike in violence in Bangui. On 8 April, MINUSCA, the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic and the national

internal security forces (comprising the national police and gendarmerie) launched Operation Sukula to arrest key criminal gang leaders in Bangui's third district. Rumours about the Operation and the incitement of hatred triggered violence between Christian and Muslim communities, affecting 16 children. Tension in the aftermath of Operation Sukula extended to Nana-Grébizi and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures.

10. With regard to LRA, after a surge in violence by the group in 2016, its activities decreased during the remainder of the period under review. The decrease could be the result of operations carried out by the African Union Regional Task Force before their departure, the arrest of key LRA leaders or the presence of other armed groups who took advantage of the vacuum left by the departure of the Task Force.

11. In a significant development, on 6 February 2019, as a result of the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation led by the African Union, the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic was signed between the Government and 14 armed groups. The Agreement, which prohibits, inter alia, grave violations against children, established a monitoring and verification system headed by the African Union and supported by the Agreement's guarantors and facilitators.¹ In contrast to past agreements, the presence of MINUSCA allows for greater support to implementation of the Agreement, including through the sanctioning of violations.² A new Government was subsequently established on 22 March with 13 ministerial posts allotted to members of nine armed groups. Representatives of armed groups were also appointed to posts in the Presidency and the Prime Minister's office. A decree on 24 March appointed, inter alia, Ali Darassa (UPC), Bi Sidi Souleymane (also known as Sidiki) (3R) and Mahamat Alkatim (MPC) as military advisers to the Prime Minister in charge of the Unités spéciales mixtes de sécurité, new temporary security units established by the Agreement that will bring together ex-combatants and members of the national defence and security forces.

12. Despite encouraging steps in the implementation process, armed groups generally continued their illegal activity in violation of the Agreement, and reports of killings, sexual violence and attacks against humanitarian workers were received. The President of the Central African Republic came under criticism for including in his Government as part of the peace deal leaders whose armed groups are accused of committing grave human rights violations. Moreover, the absence of State authority outside Bangui also nurtured an environment conducive to grave violations against children. While MINUSCA and its partners supported the redeployment of State authority throughout the country, those civil servants who resumed duty often did so only temporarily, owing to insecurity and the lack of infrastructure. That in turn prevented schools and other basic services from being fully operational.

13. In addition, though criminal courts were operational in Bouar and Bangui by June 2019, the criminal court in Bambari operated on an ad hoc basis. Few perpetrators were held accountable for grave violations against children and impunity continued to prevail.

14. The United Nations continued to work with international partners, in particular the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States, to ensure that the Agreement will lead to transformative change at the local level. In the past, the lack of a political agreement had hindered the implementation of the national disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation programme agreed

¹ Guarantors include the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States; facilitators include Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sudan, and MINUSCA.

² Refers to the enforcement role of MINUSCA as a facilitator of the Agreement. According to article 35 of the Agreement, guarantors and facilitators are committed to applying "punitive measures" if signatory parties violate the Agreement.

between the Government and the armed groups in 2015, which obstructed the unconditional release of all children associated with armed groups. The Agreement offers a powerful tool to advance those processes.

III. Grave violations against children

15. Between January 2016 and June 2019, the country task force on monitoring and reporting verified grave violations against 1,364 children (650 girls, 714 boys), 138 attacks on schools and hospitals and 342 incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children throughout the country.

16. Compared with the statistics presented in my previous report (S/2016/133), which covered a five-year period, there was a decrease in the killing and maiming of children, the recruitment and use of children as soldiers, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children and attacks against schools. However, the numbers of attacks against hospitals almost doubled and abductions of children increased by more than 7 per cent. Incidents of denial of humanitarian access also increased by 20 per cent, peaking in September 2017. The recruitment and use of children was the most prominent violation, and also reached a peak in 2017.

A. Recruitment and use

17. During the reporting period, 473 children (144 girls, 329 boys), some as young as 6 years old, were verified by the country task force as having been recruited and used by armed groups. The main perpetrators were ex-Séléka factions, which recruited and used 299 children (90 girls, 209 boys): 63 per cent of the total number of cases. Specifically, the ex-Séléka factions consisted of UPC (105 boys); FPRC (33 girls, 51 boys); MPC (27 girls, 28 boys); FPRC/MPC (16 girls, 7 boys); ex-Séléka rénovée (12 girls, 4 boys); MNLC (2 girls, 12 boys); and RPRC (2 boys). The remaining cases (174) were attributed to LRA (32 girls, 44 boys); anti-balaka (10 girls, 63 boys); the Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (FDPC) (11 girls, 4 boys); 3R (1 girl, 5 boys); PK5 groups (3 boys); and RJ (1 boy). In addition to being combatants, children were used as porters, informants and cooks. Most girls were also used for sexual purposes.

18. The number of children recruited in 2016 (74) almost doubled compared with 2015 (40) due to a surge in LRA activities in the east and south-east of the country (Haute-Kotto, Basse-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures). In 2017, the recruitment and use of children peaked dramatically, with ex-Séléka as the main perpetrator, responsible for 243 of the 299 children recruited. The division and erupting conflict between UPC and the FPRC-led coalition in 2016 and 2017 over the control of key mining locations in the Ouaka and Haute-Kotto prefectures, and clashes between anti-balaka and UPC in the Mbomou prefecture, became extremely violent. In that context, recruitment campaigns were conducted by the armed groups, including through the targeting of children, to reinforce their ranks. Consequently, most of the children were verified as associated with the armed groups in the Ouaka and Haute-Kotto prefectures, both of them ex-Séléka strongholds.

19. In 2018, a significant decrease was documented with regard to the number of children verified as having been recruited and used (75, mostly by anti-balaka (34) and ex-Séléka factions (27)). That downward trend could be partly attributed to efforts made to foster peace on the ground, in which MINUSCA supported the negotiation and development of local peace agreements resulting in the creation of greater humanitarian space and a significant reduction in violence. Nevertheless, Mbomou prefecture, where anti-balaka established a stronghold and recruited and used children

from within the community, was the area affected most. The country task force received testimonies of children claiming that anti-balaka commanders were using so called “vaccination” campaigns (symbolic scarring to protect from bullets) to attract children in territories under their control in Basse-Kotto and Mbomou prefectures. In Haute-Kotto prefecture, MINUSCA witnessed 20 children associated with anti-balaka at six checkpoints along the Pende, Kalanga, Gbama, Balenguere, Ouaga and Makili axis. All children were scarred, carried locally made weapons and wore amulets.

20. During the first half of 2019, a total of 25 children (3 girls, 22 boys) were verified as having been recruited and used by armed groups. However, the numbers are believed to be underreported as the country task force received credible reports of alleged mass recruitment of children up to June 2019.

21. Most armed groups recruited children from their own communities through false promises of integration into the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic or through abduction. The need for revenge and security, as well as the lack of access to education, were also common factors that attracted children to armed groups. With regard to LRA, the group carried out its recruitment mainly through the abduction of children during attacks against their communities.

22. During the reporting period, the protection of a 16-year-old boy who had escaped from a PK5 group was particularly challenging. The child was tortured and subjected to death threats because he had witnessed serious crimes. Following advocacy on the part of the country task force, the authorities placed the boy under special protection measures for nine months prior to his relocation outside the country

Detention of children for their alleged association with armed groups

23. During the reporting period, 16 children (2 girls, 14 boys) aged 13 to 17 years were arrested and detained by national authorities for their alleged association with anti-balaka (1 girl, 5 boys); UPC (4 boys); LRA (1 girl, 3 boys); 3R (1 boy); and FPRC (1 boy). They were detained for periods ranging from three weeks to two years. As of June 2019, 14 children had been released and handed over to child protection partners for reintegration. As of the time of writing, the cases of two boys arrested in 2017 and 2018 for their association with UPC were pending before the juvenile criminal courts.

24. MINUSCA, on behalf of the country task force, advocated for the release of detained children and for alternatives to detention through placement in host families. UNICEF partners provided psychosocial support and food while the children were detained.

B. Killing and maiming

25. During the period under review, the country task force verified 324 children as having been killed (187: 70 girls, 117 boys) or maimed (137: 42 girls, 95 boys), some as young as 4 months old. That represents a significant decrease compared with my previous report (922 child casualties). While my previous report covered a longer period, the overall decrease remains noteworthy.

26. However, child casualties increased gradually from 66 children in 2016 to 104 in 2017 to 114 in 2018. Forty children as young as 6 months old were killed or maimed in the first half of 2019. The majority of those casualties were attributed to ex-Séléka factions (148): 46 per cent of the total. Specifically, the factions included UPC (81), FPRC (20), FPRC/MPC (15), MPC (10), unidentified ex-Séléka (13), MNLC (5), RPRC (3) and FPRC/UPC (1). The remaining child casualties (176) were attributed to anti-balaka (66), 3R (15), PK5 groups (10), LRA (3), RJ (1), FDPC (1) and national

security forces (1), and unidentified armed elements (71). Casualties were also caused by unexploded ordnance that killed five children and injured three others.

27. Most children were killed or maimed by shootings, arson, machete wounds and stabbings during attacks against their communities, due to the community's ethnic and/or religious identity. For instance, in October 2018, anti-balaka-associated militias used machetes to kill 12 children from two Fulani families outside Zemio (Haut-Mbomou prefecture). On 13 June 2018, three armed UPC combatants opened fire on an internally displaced persons camp in Ippy (Ouaka prefecture) killing a 15-year-old boy and causing serious injury to a 17-year-old boy.

28. Children were also affected during retaliatory attacks between armed groups. For example, in October 2016 in Kaga Bandoro, such attacks between the ex-Séléka factions and anti-balaka resulted in the killing of six children, one attack on a clinic and the killing of two teachers and one medical worker. In 2017 in Ouaka prefecture, in spite of the Ippy agreement that created a new alliance between various armed groups, 15 people, including 2 children, were killed when UPC/MPC and FPRC attacked a hospital in which anti-balaka elements were hiding.

29. Ouaka, Nana-Grébizi, Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou prefectures were particularly affected by violent confrontations between the FPRC-led coalition and UPC around Bambari, and between FPRC and anti-balaka in Nana-Grébizi prefecture, as well as anti-balaka activities in the Mbomou prefecture.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

30. The country task force verified that 291 children, including 2 boys, had been victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence, a considerable decrease compared with my previous report (513), although the scale of sexual violence affecting children is believed to be underreported. The decrease is possibly explained by sexual violence not being reported for fear of stigmatization and marginalization; a lack of access to holistic services for victims or the absence of programmes for victims of rape and sexual violence in many areas; widespread impunity, with perpetrators continuing to live in the community; insecurity in areas controlled by armed groups; and logistical and access constraints for the country task force and partners.

31. Despite the overall decrease, the number of children subject to sexual violence increased from 55 in 2016 to 138 in 2017 owing to widespread violations and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, during which children were often exposed to sexual violence. In 2018, the number of cases dropped to 62, and 36 cases were verified during the first half of 2019.

32. Overall, ex-Séléka factions were the main perpetrator of sexual violence against children (138), accounting for 47 per cent of the total. Specifically, the factions included MPC (40), FPRC (37), FPRC/MPC (21), unidentified ex-Séléka (15), UPC (12), MPC/RJ (9) and MNL (4). The remaining cases (154) were attributed to anti-balaka (48), 3R (15), FDPC (12), LRA (9), PK5 groups (7), RJ (5), Uganda People's Defence Forces (3), Siriri (1) and unidentified armed elements (45), as well as Government forces (8), including the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic (5), police auxiliaries (2) and customs authorities (1).

33. Sexual violence against children was often in the context of other grave violations, such as recruitment and use, or abduction. For example, a total of 143 girls were sexually abused during their association with armed groups. In addition, though only two cases of rape against boys, perpetrated by UPC, were verified in 2017 and 2018, it is believed that the number of cases involving boys is much higher. Sexual

violence against boys is underreported owing to social stigma and inadequate services for male victims.

34. Of note, more than 9 per cent of the victims (29) were gang-raped, while others were targeted according to their religious and/or ethnic origin by elements belonging to ex-Séléka factions (13), namely UPC (5), MPC (3), FPRC (2), unidentified ex-Séléka (2) and FPRC/MPC coalition (1), as well as by 3R (2) and anti-balaka (1). In September 2017, in a village in Basse-Kotto prefecture, an undetermined number of UPC elements abducted a 17-year-old boy and gang-raped him over two days. The incident took place during an attack by UPC in which sexual violence was used against the community, including men and boys, as a form of punishment. On 2 October 2017, 3R elements armed with AK-47s gang-raped a 17-year-old girl during an attack on Bocaranga (Ouham-Pendé prefecture). Four elements of the group dressed in military attire stopped the victim on the road to Koundjouli village, dragged her into the bush, threw her baby on the ground and raped her in turn. The victim received medical assistance from an international non-governmental organization.

35. During the reporting period, only five perpetrators of sexual violence against children were arrested, including one member each of the armed groups anti-balaka, UPC and FPRC, a police auxiliary and a soldier of the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic. The UPC and anti-balaka members were sentenced to 6 months and 10 years of imprisonment, respectively. The police auxiliary and the FPRC member were in detention pending trial at the time of writing, while the soldier was released by the military prosecutor, reportedly for lack of evidence.

D. Abduction

36. The country task force verified the abduction of 276 children (105 girls, 171 boys), a 7 per cent increase compared with my previous report (257). Abductions increased from 98 in 2016 to 101 in 2017, before declining to 62 in 2018 and 15 in the first half of 2019. In addition, reports of the abduction of 11 children in 2016 and 12 children in January 2019 could not be verified. Abduction was used mostly as a means of recruitment (97 per cent of the cases), and in some instances for ransom (five girls) or sexual purposes (eight girls).

37. Overall, LRA was responsible for the highest number of abductions, affecting 114 children (39 girls, 75 boys), accounting for 42 per cent of the total number, followed by ex-Séléka factions (67: 34 girls, 33 boys). Specifically, the ex-Séléka factions consisted of MNLC (9 girls, 16 boys); FPRC (12 girls, 8 boys); MPC (8 girls, 4 boys); MPC/RJ (3 girls, 1 boy); FPRC/MPC (2 boys); UPC (2 girls); and unidentified ex-Séléka (2 boys). In addition, abductions were attributed to anti-balaka (55: 28 girls, 27 boys); FDPC (7 boys); PK5 groups (7 boys); 3R (3 boys); RJ (1 boy, 1 girl); and unidentified armed elements (1 girl, 20 boys).

38. In 2016, the intensification of LRA activities in the east and south-east of the country (Basse-Kotto, Mbomou, Haut-Mbomou and Haute-Kotto prefectures) led to the abduction of 84 children (29 girls, 55 boys), accounting for more than 85 per cent of abducted children that year. The children were used as porters, to loot goods and in other support roles. All 29 abducted girls endured sexual violence while in captivity. In April 2016, an LRA combatant defected with his “wife”, a 15-year-old girl. Upon presenting themselves to the authorities in Mbomou prefecture, they were arrested. The girl was released two weeks later. However, the male adult LRA escapee, who was himself abducted in Uganda when he was 12, died in 2018 during the lengthy extradition process that would have enabled him to return home.

39. In 2017, there was a peak in the number of abductions by anti-balaka (37), who accounted for the highest number of cases, followed by LRA (20). Forty-five percent of the children were abducted during the fourth quarter of 2017 in Haute-Kotto and Haut-Mbomou prefectures during attacks against communities by rival groups. For example, anti-balaka abducted 25 children during four offensives against UPC strongholds in Haute-Kotto prefecture in October 2017 and a Fulani settlement in Ouham prefecture in December 2017. The children have not returned.

40. In 2018, and during the first half of 2019, there was a 42 per cent decrease in the number of verified abductions compared with 2017 and 2016, predominantly due to a decrease in LRA activities. Ex-Séléka factions were the main perpetrators, responsible for 38 abductions, and included MNLC (25), FPRC (9), MPC (2) and FPRC/MPC (2), while LRA abducted 11 and anti-balaka abducted 10. As an example, on 20 April 2018, near Paoua (Ouham-Pendé prefecture), suspected MNLC elements abducted 10 Fulani boys who were subsequently used in support roles. The boys escaped after four days in captivity.

E. Attacks on schools and hospitals

41. The already weak education and health systems remained deeply affected by continued fighting and intercommunal violence, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of their fundamental rights to education and basic health care. Schools and hospitals were attacked, destroyed, burned, looted by armed groups or used for military purposes, and education and health personnel were threatened and killed.

42. A total of 138 incidents of attacks against schools (74) and hospitals (64) were verified over the reporting period, representing a small increase compared with my previous report (131 attacks: 98 on schools and 33 on hospitals). Overall, while attacks against schools decreased, attacks against hospitals increased by 48 per cent.

Attacks against schools

43. Attacks against schools have steadily increased since 2016 (8), with a peak in verified incidents in 2018 (34). Most incidents of attacks on schools were attributed to ex-Séléka factions (51), accounting for 69 per cent of the total number. The ex-Séléka factions involved were UPC (19), FPRC (10), FPRC/MPC (10), MPC (7), unidentified ex-Séléka (4) and RPRC (1). Other perpetrators were anti-balaka (7), 3R (5), RJ (3), LRA (2), PK5 groups (1) and unidentified armed elements (5). The country task force documented a pattern of deliberate and systematic attacks on schools, used as a form of reprisal. Almost half of the attacks occurred in 2018, of which more than two thirds (26) were committed by ex-Séléka factions in the Ouaka prefecture during confrontations between armed groups. For instance, on 21 March 2018, during clashes between UPC and anti-balaka in Seko, UPC elements looted and removed the rooftops, windows and doors of six schools in Tagbara and Seko villages.

44. In addition, 35 incidents of use by armed groups of schools were verified, most of which were attributed to ex-Séléka factions (31). Armed groups generally established their bases in schools, used benches, roofing, windows and doors as firewood and destroyed teachers' materials before leaving. The country task force's continuous engagement with armed groups to vacate schools resulted in a decline in the practice from 2016 (22) to 2017 (3). For example, following advocacy by MINUSCA at the start of the school year in September 2017, six schools were vacated by MPC and FDPC in Ouham and Nana-Mambéré prefectures. Earlier advocacy enabled the evacuation of schools in Bakala and Mourouba by UPC, and in Mbrès by FPRC. Previously the schools had been looted and used during hostilities. The school in Bakala was reportedly used by UPC for the alleged summary execution of 27 men

and boys accused of being anti-balaka members. The number of schools used for military purposes increased to six in 2018, and three others were verified during the first half of 2019.

45. Decisive steps were taken by the MINUSCA Force to implement the Mission's directive to protect schools and universities, issued in December 2015. MINUSCA used the directive as a tool for advocating with armed groups to vacate schools in coordination with the Education Cluster.

Attacks against hospitals

46. Attacks against hospitals gradually increased throughout the reporting period, from 16 in 2016 to 19 in 2017, and to 22 in 2018. Seven incidents were verified in the first half of 2019. A total of 30 attacks were committed by ex-Séléka factions (47 per cent), including FPRC (9), FPRC/MPC (8), UPC (6), MNLC (2), unidentified ex-Séléka (2), MPC (1), RPRC (1) and MPC/RJ (1). The remaining attacks (34) were attributed to anti-balaka (18), LRA (3), a mixed unit consisting of gendarmerie and police unit (1), FDPC (1) and unidentified armed elements (11). The attacks included the killing of six medical personnel, an unknown number of patients and the looting of medicine and supplies. For instance, on 24 May 2017, anti-balaka entered Bangassou hospital looking for Muslim patients in retaliation for the death of one of their elements. They took two Fulani women, who were subsequently killed. On 20 June 2017, FPRC attacked Bria hospital and abducted two injured anti-balaka elements in retaliation for the death of an FPRC element.

47. On 14 July 2017, in Andjirocho, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bria, a male nurse who was returning from having evacuated an injured patient to Boungou (Haute-Kotto prefecture) was stopped by FPRC elements who slit his throat. In another instance, on 4 August, anti-balaka clashed with armed Fulani men in Gambo hospital (Mbomou prefecture), resulting in the killing of six medical personnel from a national organization and the looting of the medical centre.

48. More than one third (22) of the total number of attacks during the reporting period occurred in 2018. Armed groups targeted hospitals and medical personnel, sometimes killing them, to prevent the delivery of medical assistance to rival groups and communities. Of those incidents, 74 per cent (17) occurred in the east during fighting between the FPRC-led coalition and UPC in Ouaka and Haute-Kotto prefectures, and anti-balaka against UPC in Mbomou prefecture.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

49. During the reporting period, 342 incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children were verified, an increase compared with my previous report (284). Incidents increased steadily throughout the reporting period, from 72 in 2016 to 101 in 2017, and to 120 in 2018. Forty-nine incidents were verified in the first half of 2019. Incidents included the forceful entry and looting of humanitarian compounds, the harassment of humanitarian workers at checkpoints and physical assault, including the abduction and killing of humanitarian workers, which have had a significant impact on the delivery of assistance to hundreds of thousands of children.

50. Incidents attributed to ex-Séléka factions (113) represented one third of the total, and included FPRC (33), unidentified ex-Séléka (26), UPC (23), MPC (17), MPC/RJ (6), FPRC/MPC (6) and MNLC (2). The remaining incidents were attributed to anti-balaka (95), LRA (9), FDPC (4), 3R (3), RJ (1) and unidentified armed individuals (112), while Government forces, namely the gendarmerie, were responsible for 5 incidents.

51. In 2016, most of the incidents occurred in the Nana-Grébizi, Haute-Kotto, Ouham-Pendé and Ouham prefectures, where there was active conflict and intense armed group activities. National and international non-governmental organizations temporarily suspended activities in Kaga Bandoro, Batangafo and Bocaranga for several weeks following the killing of and threats against their personnel. The country task force was unable to determine if the incidents were directly authorized by the commanders of the different armed groups. Incidents were generally perpetrated by members of armed groups and unidentified armed individuals in need of supplies to survive. However, LRA-related incidents targeted humanitarian workers for their communications equipment in order to strengthen its communications capacity, which weakened the early warning systems of concerned communities.

52. In 2017, there was a surge in incidents of denial of humanitarian access. Humanitarian workers were targeted by armed groups for financial gain in the north-west and to prevent the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilian populations from “rival” communities in the south-east. Fourteen humanitarian workers were killed. For example, on 7 September 2017, anti-balaka looted the bases of international non-governmental organizations and damaged vehicles, which resulted in the temporary suspension of humanitarian activities in Batangafo (Ouham prefecture), affecting 28,000 internally displaced persons. In Kabo (Ouham prefecture), the only two operational non-governmental organizations were forced to leave in December 2017 following attacks and the killing of a driver by MPC.

53. In 2018, incidents of denial of humanitarian access increased further (120), particularly in the prefectures of Ouham and Nana-Grébizi. Perpetrators included unidentified armed elements (57), ex-Séléka factions (33), anti-balaka (29) and LRA (1). Six humanitarian workers were killed, 23 were injured and 5 were abducted. Twenty-five non-governmental organizations and international organizations temporarily suspended their activities across the country during the year. In July 2018, there was a particularly stark rise in criminal activities targeting humanitarian workers in Kaga Bandoro. The majority of the incidents were perpetrated by unidentified armed individuals (20), who were suspected to be MPC elements expressing discontent over the redistribution of financial incentives received by the armed group leaders during a meeting held in August in Khartoum to address peace.

54. In early 2019, 49 incidents were verified, including the killing of two humanitarian workers by UPC and unidentified armed elements. Ex-Séléka factions were the main perpetrators (18) while 17 incidents were unattributed.

IV. Release of children and programmatic response

55. During the reporting period, a total of 8,651 children (2,596 girls, 6,055 boys) were released from armed groups, including 6,383 children (1,768 girls, 4,615 boys) separated as a result of the direct engagement by the country task force on monitoring and reporting with armed groups, except LRA. The number of children separated decreased from 3,897 in 2016 to 1,816 in 2017, and decreased again to 569 in 2018. The drastic drop in 2018 could be attributed to challenges in engaging with armed groups, as they were less focused on matters concerning children. Nevertheless, following the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic in 2019, ex-Séléka factions in Kaga Bandoro presented lists of identified children to the country task force for verification, which led to the separation of 101 children from FPRC (34), MPC (35) and ex-Séléka *renovée* (32).

56. Of a total 6,383 children, 66 per cent (4,263) were separated from anti-balaka, followed by RJ (934), FPRC (554), UPC (212), MPC (185), RPRC (159), ex-Séléka *renovée* (55), FPRC/MPC (19) and the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la

paix (2). In addition, 2,268 self-demobilized children (828 girls, 1,440 boys) from anti-balaka (1,803) and RJ (465) were identified by the country task force and entered reintegration programmes implemented by UNICEF partners.

57. Reintegration programmes were rolled out throughout much of the country, and consisted of medical screening, family tracing and reunification, psychosocial assistance and educational or vocational training. However, the reintegration of children faces enormous challenges, owing to insecurity in those locations where children associated with armed groups are identified and where they should receive immediate support or be reunified with their families. Other challenges also include the lack of functioning schools, persistent stigmatization, the refusal by communities to accept their children and the lack of funds and partners. As a result, one in four children released since 2014 have not been enrolled into reintegration programmes.

58. In order to increase opportunities for employment, vocational training activities in different sectors were identified, including manual water drilling, handheld water pump construction and baking, expanding the choices of training for boys and girls. According to testimonies from children who have benefited from them, the new opportunities allow them to look forward to the future. The existing job market remains the main challenge in relation to the employment of those young people.

59. Victims of sexual violence were cared for through referral systems set up within the context of child protection and gender-based violence assistance. UNICEF support for the reintegration into school of child victims of sexual violence has been done within the framework of emergency protection and education interventions. In 2018, UNICEF launched a protective learning environment initiative, through which 600 teachers from 182 schools were trained in the methodology of the initiative. Through the initiative, the targeted schools developed – together with the community – plans for the protection of 27,300 children. Teachers and communities are equipped to detect cases of sexual violence at school or in the community and to provide basic psychosocial support and refer cases to services when they are available.

V. Progress and challenges addressing grave violations against children

A. Action plans and dialogue with armed groups

60. Different approaches to engage with parties to conflict were adopted by the country task force on monitoring and reporting. Given that the ex-Séléka factions maintain a strong chain of command, dialogue with FPRC, MPC, UPC and RPRC has taken place through their relevant commanders. However, the loose and localized command structures of anti-balaka resulted in having to manage a dialogue with local commanders across several locations. Therefore, while the country task force has been actively engaged with the ex-Séléka factions for the purpose of action plans, that has not taken place with anti-balaka, given their loose command and control.

61. In 2017, MINUSCA succeeded in advocating with FPRC and UPC to issue command orders to stop child recruitment and the use of child soldiers. On 13 May, FPRC issued a command order requesting its “generals”, officers and non-commissioned officers to identify all children within their ranks, separate them and hand them over to MINUSCA and UNICEF and grant unlimited access to the United Nations so it could verify the presence of children in their respective bases. On 27 May, FPRC appointed four child protection focal points, who have prepared lists of children for separation and sensitized FPRC elements on child protection. Similarly, UPC issued a command order on 25 September, facilitating the release of 212 children from the group during the period under review. Both command orders

were successfully used by the country task force as an advocacy tool to obtain the release of children. As a result of a four-year dialogue, FPRC and UPC each signed an action plan to end and prevent all grave violations against children in June and August 2019, respectively.

62. Similar engagement with MPC resulted in the signing of an action plan to prevent and end grave violations against children in May 2018. Following its signature, MPC appointed four zone commanders as child protection focal points, with whom the country task force continued to work to identify children for separation. On 14 May 2019, MPC issued a command order and nominated six additional MPC child protection focal points.

63. There were also challenges with regard to maintaining dialogue with armed groups to end and prevent grave violations, owing to the division, multiplication and dissolution of armed groups, as well as the spontaneous forming of coalitions, which hampered the identification of the chain of command and the attribution of violations to individual armed groups.

64. In order to strengthen its advocacy with armed groups, the country task force engaged with other stakeholders, such as representatives of local authorities. Furthermore, as recommended by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council (see [S/AC.51/2016/3](#)), the country task force worked with the representatives of the Central African Religious Platform, who recorded public messages for the 2016 International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, or “Red Hand Day”, campaign that targeted the leadership of armed groups, encouraging them to end child recruitment and use and release the children within their ranks. In 2017, religious leaders also played an important role in enabling the release of five abducted girls held hostage by an armed group in Bangassou (Mbomou prefecture).

B. Strengthening the legislative framework and accountability

65. In a positive development, following advocacy efforts by MINUSCA, the Government ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict on 21 September 2017. The Ministries of Justice and Human Rights, and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Family and Child Protection, held a workshop in June 2018 to operationalize the Optional Protocol, and consequently developed a handover protocol for the treatment and transfer of children associated with armed groups as a first step to protect those children. At the time of writing, the handover protocol was under revision to ensure that it reflected updated national legislation.

66. After strong advocacy conducted by civil society, with the support of UNICEF, in March 2019 the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Family and Child Protection submitted a draft law on the protection of children to a national commission on law and texts for review. The country task force and other child protection actors contributed to the elaboration of the draft and ensured the inclusion of provisions criminalizing the recruitment and use of children and strengthening their protection by considering them to be primarily victims. At the time of writing, the draft law was under consideration by the Government and submission to Parliament was pending.

67. In addition, child protection standards were integrated throughout the development of transitional justice processes. For example, all individuals entering the Central African defence and security forces were screened by MINUSCA, including for grave violations against children, to ensure that those responsible for such violations would not be allowed into the forces.

68. The Special Criminal Court was inaugurated in 2018, which will enable the prosecution of perpetrators of grave violations against children. Moreover, a commission on truth, justice, reconciliation and reparations, which has not yet been established, is expected to shed light on the patterns of grave violations against children and address the needs of victims while facilitating the reintegration of children into their home communities. The reintegration aspect is particularly important in instances where fear and/or suspicion exists towards children suspected of having committed crimes. Children aged 15 to 18 years are not expected to be brought before the Special Criminal Court for serious crimes.

69. The Government has made efforts to prosecute crimes committed against children through ordinary civilian courts. Twenty-four perpetrators, including civilians and members of parties to the conflict, were arrested, 23 were charged and 4 were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 18 months to life for rape and murder of children. Impunity, however, remains a concern in the Central African Republic.

70. In 2018, two anti-balaka leaders, Alfred Yekatom, also known as Rambo, and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona, were transferred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including for the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15. The latter was arrested on 12 December by French authorities in Paris, pursuant to an International Criminal Court arrest warrant, and subsequently transferred to The Hague.

C. Advocacy and mainstreaming of child protection

71. In November 2016, following an international conference on child disarmament, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration under the leadership of the President of the Central African Republic, UNICEF became a member of a national strategic committee for disarmament, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration. During negotiations that led to the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic in Bangui in 2019, my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and MINUSCA leadership advocated for the inclusion of child protection provisions in the peace process to better account for the needs of children affected by the armed conflict. In the Agreement, the signatory parties recognized that children and women have been the most affected by the conflict and committed to preventing and ending grave violations against them, including child recruitment and use, sexual violence, attacks against humanitarian actors and attacks against schools and hospitals. Violations of the Agreement, including violations affecting children, are monitored and reported through the monitoring mechanisms foreseen therein.

72. MINUSCA provided training on child rights and child protection to 2,263 members of the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic, the police and the gendarmerie, with a focus on juvenile justice and their responsibilities with regard to protecting children in the context of armed conflict. Similarly, 956 members of armed groups were trained on child protection and their obligation to protect children in territories under their control. More than 16,000 community members and leaders as well as members of civil society were sensitized on child rights to enable them to play a greater role in protecting children at the community level and facilitate early warning with regard to preventing child rights violations.

73. The country task force trained 956 child protection actors, including members of international and national non-governmental organizations and the United Nations country team, to strengthen their capacity to monitor, verify and document grave violations against children.

74. MINUSCA trained more than 5,000 MINUSCA military, police and civilian personnel on child protection. Particular emphasis was placed on reporting grave violations against children, the United Nations zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse, the prohibition against using child labour and the protection of educational institutions by United Nations peacekeepers.

75. In December 2018, the MINUSCA Force Commander issued a directive on child protection, which is currently being rolled out by the MINUSCA Force with the support of its Child Protection Section. At the time of writing, a police commissioner's directive on child protection was under preparation.

76. In May 2019, my Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict travelled to the Central African Republic, where she met with senior government officials, representatives of the armed groups that signed the Agreement, representatives of criminal groups in Bangui's PK5 neighbourhood, members of the diplomatic community, United Nations partners, religious leaders and civil society. At a meeting in Kaga Bandoro with MPC, FPRC, ex-Séléka rénovée and anti-balaka, the Special Representative encouraged armed groups to swiftly adopt and fully implement action plans to address grave violations against children. Two action plans were signed by FPRC and UPC in June and August 2019, respectively. She also advocated with the Government for the development of a national plan to prevent grave violations against children and launched her campaign, entitled "Act to Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict". On 20 May, my Special Representative briefed the Security Council on the outcomes of her visit.

VI. Sexual exploitation and abuse and response

77. Of the alleged and confirmed identified victims of sexual exploitation and abuse reported between January 2016 and June 2019 to MINUSCA concerning MINUSCA personnel, 149 were children at the time of the incident, and 125 alleged victims came forward in 2016 regarding alleged incidents which reportedly took place during 2014 and 2015. Of those 125 alleged victims, allegations of sexual abuse were substantiated for 15 children, were not substantiated for 48 children and 62 cases remain pending a determination from national investigations. A victim-centred approach was adopted, enabling most child victims to access services and education and vocational training. A post of Field Victims' Rights Advocate was appointed at MINUSCA to ensure that a victim-, gender- and child-sensitive approach was used to address the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.

VII. Observations and recommendations

78. I am concerned by the ongoing high levels of grave violations committed against children in the Central African Republic, in particular the recruitment and use of children and the increase in attacks against hospitals, the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access. I urge all parties to the conflict to immediately end and prevent all grave violations and abide by international humanitarian and human rights law.

79. I welcome the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic and urge all signatories to reinforce their efforts to implement its provisions, including its specific provisions to protect children and end and prevent grave violations against them.

80. I welcome the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and urge the

Government to rapidly integrate it into its national laws and swiftly adopt the draft law on the protection of children, which includes the criminalization of child recruitment and use. I also encourage the prompt adoption by the Government of the protocol for the handover of children associated with armed groups to civilian child protection actors.

81. I welcome the transfer of anti-balaka leaders Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona to the International Criminal Court. I remain concerned, however, by the prevalence of impunity for perpetrators of grave violations against children and urge the authorities to swiftly hold perpetrators accountable. I also call upon the Special Criminal Court to integrate all grave violations against children into its prosecution strategy.

82. I am alarmed by the increasing incidents of denial of humanitarian access to children, including attacks against humanitarian workers. I urge all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access by humanitarian actors to children in need to enable the provision of needed humanitarian assistance and basic social services.

83. Sexual violence against children must end. I urge the Government to redouble its efforts to prevent and respond to that crime, including by holding perpetrators accountable. Programming for survivors of sexual violence must take into consideration the specific needs of girls and boys.

84. I welcome the signing by MPC, FPRC and UPC of action plans to end and prevent grave violations against children and ask for their immediate and full implementation. I call upon other armed groups to also adopt and implement time-bound action plans with the support of the United Nations.

85. I welcome the release from armed groups of more than 8,600 boys and girls and urge all armed groups to immediately and unconditionally release all children still in their ranks. In particular, I urge those participating in the national disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation programme to share lists of associated children and facilitate their separation before and during the implementation of the programme. In that regard, I strongly encourage the Government to nominate a child protection focal point within the national disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation programme to ensure that the needs of those children are fully addressed. Furthermore, I call upon the Government and development actors to support innovative vocational trainings that match the needs of the country's labour market, particularly outside Bangui. I urge Member States and the donor community to invest in long-term community-based prevention and sustainable reintegration programming targeting the most affected and at-risk children.

86. I take note of the limited resources for child protection in the Central African Republic and I call upon the international and donor communities to support their work and efforts. I also encourage the Government to ensure that the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Family and Child Protection receives adequate resources and funding to address child protection concerns, and I appeal to donors to provide financial and technical support to the authorities in that regard.

87. I encourage the Government, parties to the conflict and civil society to develop a strategy at the national level, in line with Security Council resolution [2427 \(2018\)](#), to prevent all grave violations against children. I call upon the donor community to support resource mobilization for the implementation of that strategy.

88. I reiterate my commitment to preventing and addressing sexual exploitation and abuse by all United Nations personnel. In response to the allegations brought to my attention, I urge the Member States concerned to conduct thorough and prompt investigations, which the United Nations stands ready to support.