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Briefing for UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict

June 2020

On June 23rd, the Security Council will hold its Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) which will present UN member states with an opportunity to call for increased compliance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law to uphold child protection standards during the current global emergency.

As the world faces an unprecedented challenge of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, boys and girls living in conflict affected countries are among those most exposed to the devastating consequences of this disease and of government's measures to combat it. While governments and international organisations develop and adapt their policies to this unprecedented global health, humanitarian, socio-economic and human rights crisis, they need to ensure responses to the gender-specific vulnerabilities of boys and girls living in countries affected by armed conflict are prioritised.

Countries affected by conflict have weakened health infrastructure and restricted humanitarian access which has been further challenged by efforts to contain and respond to the virus. Quarantine, curfews and other restrictions of movements are weakening protection mechanisms and heightening risks of sexual violence for women, girls, boys and men in crisis affected communities. Socio-economic stressors are serving to increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment and use by armed forces or armed groups, child labour and sexual exploitation and abuse.¹

Trends indicate that children's vulnerability to recruitment and abduction will increase due to reduced presence of child protection and humanitarian actors and weakened community structures. The economic impact of COVID-19 is expected to push children to armed forces and armed groups for the first time or cause them to return, in search for food, basic goods, or livelihood opportunities. Increased violence and tensions within the home or in the community, including increased gender-based violence and reduced access to support services will constitute other push factors.² It is well-established that boys and girls associated with armed forces and armed groups are highly vulnerable to psychological and physical violence including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).³

Children deprived of their liberty, including those detained on national security grounds, are at greater risk of contracting and spreading the disease.⁴ Children deprived of liberty are more likely to have or experience underlying physical, psychosocial, and mental health issues that are exacerbated by their placement in custody and face the absence of quality health services even before the emergency arises.⁵ Reduction of prison staff

due the disease potentially increases children's vulnerability to violence, abuse and neglect due to the lack of supervision and care, and a greater likelihood that they will be confined in smaller, overcrowded spaces that makes it easier to control or supervise them.⁶

The threat posed by the global pandemic to countries affected by armed conflict, and its disproportionate impact on girls and boys, calls for immediate and resolute action by the international community. It is vital that the UN Security Council, Member States, and the UN System take urgent and practical steps in a transparent and open manner to respond to the increasing challenges to improve protection of children's rights. All Survivors Project (ASP) highlights heightened vulnerabilities faced by boys to sexual and other forms of violence⁷ in situations of armed conflict in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in its focus⁸ countries.

Reduction of existing links with social networks has been accompanied with an increase in levels of violence within communities in **Central African Republic**. The impact of COVID-19 has been discernible with an increase in the number of cases of physical and sexual violence, limited access by children to recreational and educational opportunities and reduced access to child-friendly spaces due to increased confinement. Boys and girls are exposed to high risks of violence, including rape and sexual exploitation and abuse. Perpetration of sexual violence by community members, members of armed groups and peacekeepers continues to be reported during COVID-19.

Monitoring and documentation of grave violations of children's rights is severely challenged in the **Syrian Arab Republic**. Travel restrictions faced by field monitors has had an adverse impact on their ability to document information on sexual violence faced by boys and girls. There are continuing concerns about the detention of boys with adult men in various formal and informal detention sites in northeast Syria.⁹

A rapid assessment of vulnerabilities for boy survivors of sexual violence (*bacha bazi*) in **Afghanistan**¹⁰ demonstrates the adverse impact that COVID-19 is already beginning to have on the lives of vulnerable communities and the increased risks to sexual exploitation and abuse that men and boys including those with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression are currently facing. Male survivors of sexual violence including those who are engaged in the practice of *bacha bazi* continue to face ongoing violence, stigmatisation and abusive behaviour at the hands of the police and law enforcement officials. Monitoring of sexual violence against boys was already challenging due to high levels of stigma and the fear of COVID-19 has increased barriers to reporting of sexual violence to health and protection actors.

Key Recommendations

Release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAFAAG)

- All parties to conflict should end recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and release all associated girls and boys to child protection authorities immediately and without any preconditions. Children's release or disengagement should not be delayed due to fear of transmission of the virus.
- Physical health assessments of boys and girls during verification and release processes should be conducted to ensure responses for sexual violence and other grave violations are provided. Psychosocial support services should be provided at all stages of release and reintegration.

Continue and adapt the monitoring and reporting (MRM) of grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict

- With global guidelines for MRM reporting remaining unaltered, it is vital that monitoring staff are urgently trained to explore options for remote verification of incidents of violence. MRM activities should not expose victims and witnesses, including children and families, community members, or child protection actors, to the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus.
- Security, privacy and confidentiality of survivors and witnesses and ethical considerations should be prioritised in documenting and verifying information of child survivors of sexual violence. Development and remote roll-out of gender specific training tools to conduct safe and ethical documentation of cases of CRSV against girls and boys should be prioritised.

Release children deprived of their liberty whenever possible and ensure that children who cannot be released are protected from sexual violence and the risks related to COVID-19

- Detention of children must be the last resort and for the shortest period of time. Children should not be detained solely for their suspected association with armed forces or armed groups.
- Children suspected of having committed a recognisable criminal offence should be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards.
- Children who are deprived of their liberty must be protected against sexual violence and other abuses and provided with access to gender-specific services, including health care.
- Measures must be taken to address the risks of COVID-19 to child detainees while ensuring that their needs, including the need to maintain regular contact with their families, are comprehensively met.

Endnotes

- 1 UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children, May 2020.
- 2 Key Messages and Considerations for Programming for Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Version 1, May 2020.
- 3 Although less well documented, boys associated with armed forces and armed groups are also known to have been subjected to sexual abuse by members of such forces and groups, and/or forced to commit acts of sexual violence against others. In some cases boys are reported to have been specifically recruited for sexual purposes. See for example Aijazi, O., Amony, E. and Baines, E. (2019), *We Were Controlled, We Were Not Allowed to Express Our Sexuality, Our Intimacy Was Suppressed: Sexual Violence Experienced by Boys*, In: M. Drumbl and J. Barrett, ed., *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers*, Lexington, Virginia: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.1-12; Trenholm, J., Olsson, P., Blomqvist, M. and Ahlberg, B.M. (2013), *Constructing soldiers from boys in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Men and masculinities*, 16(2), pp. 203-227; Child Soldiers International, *Why 18 Matters: A Rights- Based Analysis of Child Recruitment*, 2018.
For specific country examples see **Afghanistan** (state security forces and NSAGs): UNAMA and OHCHR, Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Annual Report 2017, February 2018; UNAMA and OHCHR, Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Midyear Report 2016, July 2016, and Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, UN Doc. A/70/836–S/2016/360 (2016). **DRC** (NSAGs): Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN Doc. S/2018/502 (2018). **Nigeria** (NSAGs): Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, 2018. **Syria** (NSAGs): ASP, “Destroyed from within”, 2018. **Uganda** (NSAGs): ICC, Situation in Uganda in the Case of the Prosecutor V. Dominic Ongwen: Victims’ requests for leave to present evidence and to present victims’ views and concerns in person, 2 February 2018. **Yemen** (NSAGs): CRC, Concluding observations, UN Doc. CRC/C/OPAC/YEM/CO/1 (2014) and Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Yemen, UN Doc. S/2013/383 (2013).
- 4 WHO, Interim Guidance on the prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and places of detention, March 2020, p.1; See also Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Interim Guidance COVID-19: Focus on Persons Deprived of Their Liberty, March 2020; and Nowak, M., The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019, Chapter 6: Impacts on health of children deprived of liberty.
- 5 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action-UNICEF, Technical note: Covid 19 and children deprived of their liberty, 8 April 2020.
- 6 See WHO, Interim Guidance on the prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and places of detention, March 2020; Agency Standing Committee, Interim Guidance COVID-19: Focus on Persons Deprived of Their Liberty, March 2020; Human Rights Watch, US: COVID-19 Threatens People Behind Bars, 12 March 2020; and Human Rights Dimensions of COVID-19 Response, 19 March 2020, pp. 8-10.
- 7 See UN, Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Children, 15 April 2020, which cites [this](#) study: An Ebola recovery assessment conducted in Sierra Leone in mid-March 2015 showed that 55 per cent of children in focus groups said that they thought violence against children in their community had risen during or after the epidemic
- 8 This briefing was written following key informant interviews with select members of the UN Country Task Force for monitoring and reporting in Afghanistan, Central African Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic and a review of select grey literature.
While gender disaggregated data reflecting this increase is yet to be systematically collected, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of boys has been documented. Between 2015-2020, 13 % of cases of SEA received by UNICEF were of boys. This included SEA perpetrated by peacekeepers, UN and humanitarians and civilians including national NGOs.
- 9 Confidential phone discussions with international child protection agency in Syria, 13 May 2020. Also see, Human Rights Watch, Northeast Syria: Boys, Men Held in Inhumane Conditions, 8 October 2018.
- 10 All Survivors Project and Youth Health and Development Organisation, Rapid assessment of impact of Covid-19 on male survivors of sexual violence in Afghanistan, forthcoming.