A ‘child soldier’ is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity. This includes combatants, cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage.

The Situation

Thousands of children continue to be recruited as ‘child soldiers’ despite commitments by countries to eradicate the practice. Children are used in armed conflicts in numerous countries and regions around the world by both armed government forces and rebel groups. These children are themselves targeted – and may be forced to witness or commit acts of violence against their own families and communities. They suffer from abuse, exploitation, injury and sometimes death. Failing to protect children from recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups harms not only these boys and girls as individuals but also impacts their families and communities.

Many of the children have been recruited by force, although some may have been driven to join armed forces and groups as a result of economic, social or security pressures. Regardless of how they joined, their association deprives them of their rights and their childhood. The physical and psychological impact on children and their communities across generations cannot be underestimated. When families are displaced, whether across international borders or within a country, children are exposed to exploitation, abuse and violence, including recruitment by armed forces and armed groups.

UNICEF Strategy

The protection of children is a universal imperative. UNICEF works to protect all children, particularly the most vulnerable, from recruitment and the impact of armed conflict. Its strategy is to reinforce the legal and normative framework, enhance knowledge and understanding, and strengthen programme development and implementation at the field level. In working to protect children from recruitment and help those who have been recruited, UNICEF works both locally and nationally, concentrating on the following objectives:

Local objectives
- Prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups;
- Gain the release of children who are associated with armed forces and armed groups;
- Provide support for reintegration of children released or escaped from armed forces or armed groups so they can recover and contribute as productive and peaceful citizens;
• Promote community-based reintegration by ensuring that other vulnerable children are included in reintegration programmes. This promotes inclusivity and reduces the risk that children who have been associated with armed forces or groups will face stigma or reprisals.

National objectives
• Promote adherence to international legal and normative standards, including through implementation of national legislation that prohibits and criminalizes recruitment and use of children under age 18 by armed forces and armed groups in hostilities;
• Address social, political and economic factors that lead to recruitment, regardless of whether children are forcibly recruited, join to escape poverty, hunger or violence, or enlist to support a cause or ideology;
• Promote effective monitoring and reporting to help reveal the extent and severity of the violations and to ensure greater accountability for those who target, abuse or exploit children;
• Safeguard the rights of child victims and witnesses associated with armed forces and armed groups.

Normative frameworks

UNICEF’s actions are guided by normative frameworks set up internationally over the past two decades, in particular the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles (2007), which are the core standard used in prevention and response to child recruitment.

• Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which addresses the issue in several articles and calls on governments to take all feasible measures to ensure that children under age 15 do not take a direct part in hostilities;

• Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000), which raises the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities from 15 to 18 (art. 1) and prohibits conscription or forced recruitment below age 18 (art. 2);

• Paris Commitments and Paris Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups (2007), which seek to reinforce the international consensus that recruitment contrary to law is not acceptable and reiterate measures that States can take to protect children who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in hostilities and help them reintegrate into their families and communities. The Paris Principles and Guidelines is a set of operational guidelines for all actors implementing programmes in support of affected children. They are based on global experience in working to prevent recruitment, protect children, support their release from armed forces or groups, and reintegrate them into civilian life.

Upon their release or escape, children associated with armed forces and armed groups may receive the following services, depending on the context: (1) transitional care with medical and psychosocial support, peace education and life skills in a transit centre or foster family; (2) family tracing and reunification, with family mediation and follow-up; (3) community reintegration including a return to school, either formal or informal, and catch-up classes; (4) vocational training and/or support to start a small income-generating activity, sometimes together with other vulnerable children from
the same community who are also affected by armed conflict, and with support from child/youth clubs or child welfare committees that work on behalf of the broader community.

It is important to provide support to other vulnerable children in the broader community to promote inclusivity and avoid stigmatizing the children who were associated with armed forces or groups. If only the latter children are helped, the result can be further divisions, and many other children in the community have been affected by armed conflict in varying ways even if they avoided recruitment. Broad inclusion is particularly important for girls, who may have ‘self-demobilized’, bypassing formal or informal release programmes and therefore failing to receive assistance and services.

Progress and Results

Since the mid-1980s, together with its partners, UNICEF has played a major role in advocating for and securing the release of children from armed forces and armed groups in conflict-affected countries across the world. These include Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. In particular:

- More than 130,000 children have been released and reintegrated into their communities since 1998, and have benefitted from community-based reintegration support programmes. Last year alone, more than 10,000 children were released by armed forces or armed groups, and benefitted from reintegration assistance, including psychosocial support, access to education, skills training and livelihoods.

- In 2015, more than 1,700 children were released from the South Sudan Democratic Army-Cobra Faction (SSDA-CF). The children – all released are boys – range in age from 11 to 19. Many have been recruited into the faction for as long as four years. UNICEF and partners have supported the children with immediate interim care – food, shelter, clothing and basic health care – as well tracing the families of these children so that they can be assisted to return to their families and communities. UNICEF is also providing counseling and psychosocial support, as well as education and skills training programmes. Girls and boys in the communities of return are also receiving support to prevent vulnerability of recruitment and other protection risks.

- In the Central African Republic, in 2014, more than 2,800 children, including 646 girls, were released from armed groups and provided with community-based reintegration support. In May 2015, following the signing of an agreement by 10 armed groups to release all children associated and to immediately end any new child recruitment, an initial 357 children age 8 to 17 years – including 21 girls – were released from anti-Balaka an ex-Seleka forces (UPC and RPRC). UNICEF and partners are providing interim care, as well as family tracing support and psychosocial counselling. Children will also receive life skill training, including conflict resolution and civic responsibility, and will benefit from schooling, vocational skills training and livelihood opportunities. The armed groups are negotiating a schedule for the further release of all children associated, which will take place in the coming months, together with support for reunification with their families and communities, and for the provision of protection and support to help them to rebuild their lives.
Children, Not Soldiers Campaign
In March 2014 the ‘Children, Not Soldiers Campaign’ was launched jointly by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and UNICEF. ‘Children No Soldiers’ seeks to put an end the recruitment and use of children by government security forces by 2016. A year later, Chad had been delisted and six of the remaining seven governments listed in the annexes of the Secretary-General’s Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict as recruiting and using of children in armed conflict have signed and are implementing Action Plans to end and prevent child recruitment and use so that all government security forces become and remain “child free”: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. The UN is negotiating with the Government of Sudan the signature of an Action Plan.

Progress to date:
- Number of new reports of child recruitment and use by national security forces have declined significantly in in some countries and in particular in Afghanistan, DRC, and Myanmar.
- Afghanistan endorsed a 15-point road map to implement the action plan;
- Chad’s Armed Forces were delisted from the annexes of the 2014 report;
- DRC appointed a Presidential Adviser on Sexual Violence and Child Recruitment;
- In Myanmar, 376 children were released: 70 per cent of the total 593 under-age recruits released from the Tatmadaw to date;
- South Sudan re-committed to implement the action plan;
- Signing of an action plan by the Government of Yemen and the UN.

Resources
- **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, 2000.** The protocol sets 18 as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities, for recruitment into armed groups, and for compulsory recruitment by governments. States may accept volunteers from the age of 16 but must deposit a binding declaration at the time of ratification or accession, setting out their minimum voluntary recruitment age and outlining certain safeguards for such recruitment. [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict](https://www.unicef.orgЮ)

- **Guidelines regarding initial reports of States Parties under article 8(1) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, 2001.** Reports should provide information on the measures adopted by the State Party to give effect to the rights set forth in the Optional Protocol and on the progress made in the enjoyment of those rights and should indicate the factors and difficulties, if any, affecting the degree of fulfilment of the obligations under the Optional Protocol. [Guidelines regarding initial reports of States Parties under article 8(1) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](https://www.unicef.orgЮ)

• Children and Armed Conflict - International Standards for Action, The Human Security Network, UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2003. This compendium brings together relevant treaties and instruments on the protection of children affected by armed conflict rendering easier dissemination as well as providing the reference point for a more systematic monitoring and reporting. Children and Armed Conflict - International Standards for Action [pdf].

• Security Council Resolutions relating to children affected by armed conflict:

• Report of Graca Machel: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, UNICEF, 1996. This study was undertaken with the support of the United Nations Centre for Human Rights and UNICEF, and is the fruit of extensive and wide-ranging consultations. In the study, the expert proposes the elements of a comprehensive agenda for action by Member States and the international community to improve the protection and care of children in conflict situations, and to prevent these conflicts from occurring. Report of Graca Machel: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children [pdf]

• The International Conference on War-Affected Children: From Words to Action (Winnipeg Conference), 2000. The International Conference on War-Affected Children was hosted by the Government of Canada from September 10 to 17, 2000, in Winnipeg, Canada. It was the first truly global meeting on war-affected children and brought together a critical mass of individuals and organizations working on the issue of children and armed conflict to create an international plan of action. The International Conference on War-Affected Children: From Words to Action [pdf]
• Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, UNICEF, 1997. As part of the effort to deal with the tragic and growing problem of children serving in armed forces, the NGO working group on the Convention of the Rights of the Child and UNICEF conducted a symposium in Cape Town (South Africa) from 27 to 30 April 1997. The purpose of the symposium was to bring together experts and partners to develop strategies for preventing recruitment of children, in particular, for establishing 18 as the minimum age of recruitment, and for demobilizing child soldiers and helping them reintegrate into society. The Cape Town Principles and Best Practices are the result of that symposium. They recommend actions to be taken by governments and communities in affected countries to end this violation of children’s rights. Cape Town Principles and Best Practices [pdf]


• Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General, 2005. This report provides information on compliance and progress in ending the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, including information on other grave violations and abuses; the action plan for a systematic and comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism; incorporation of best practices for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes; and measures to control illicit subregional and cross-border activities that are harmful to children. A/59/695-S/2005/72, 2005 [pdf]

• Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly, 2005. The present report gives an overview of the agenda for war-affected children, highlights the progress that has been achieved and identifies the principal elements of the “era of application” campaign for the enforcement of existing international child protection norms and standards on the ground. A/60/150, 2005 [pdf]

• Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Israel and the State of Palestine, May 2013. During the first quarter of 2013, four Palestinian children were killed (all boys) and 270 were injured (263 boys and 7 girls). No Israeli children were killed and four were injured. CAAC Bulletin – May 2013