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including the right to development**

Children and armed conflict

Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Summary

In her report, which covers the period from December 2017 to December 2018, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict explores challenges in ending and preventing grave violations and in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including with regard to the abduction of children by parties to conflict and children of or recruited as foreign fighters. She outlines the activities undertaken in discharging her mandate and the progress achieved in addressing grave violations against children. She also provides details about her increased efforts towards adequate, sustainable and reliably funded reintegration programmes. The Special Representative also lays out her awareness-raising and mainstreaming activities, including through her focus on lessons learned and best practices. In addition, the report provides information on her field visits and on her efforts to engage with regional organizations and international partners. It outlines a number of the challenges and priorities on her agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by conflict.



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I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from December 2017 to December 2018 and is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/245, in which the Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to submit a report to the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, on the progress achieved and the challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. In the report, the Special Representative also elaborates on the activities she has undertaken with regard to the request of the General Assembly in resolution 72/245 to increase her engagement with States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional organizations and especially subregional organizations, and to increase public awareness activities, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned, in accordance with her mandate.

II. Challenges and progress in ending and preventing grave violations

2. As the world celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the sixtieth anniversary of the Genocide Convention, and is about to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, rights contained in those milestone documents are under threat. Protracted and high-intensity conflicts, cyclical spikes in violence, operations to counter violent extremism and cross-border operations by armed forces and groups have continued to disproportionately affect children around the world. The dehumanization of civilian populations by parties to conflict has led to increased violations and blatant disregard for international law.

3. In a number of countries on the children and armed conflict agenda, continued fighting between parties to conflict over influence and territory had a devastating effect on children's lives during 2018. In Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, the United Nations documented large numbers of children killed and maimed, mainly through ground operations, airstrikes and crossfire between parties to conflict. The Special Representative is especially concerned about the use of airstrikes by Governments and international coalitions, leading to the indiscriminate killing and maiming of children. In South Sudan, in the first half of 2018, fighting continued at elevated levels between government armed forces and armed groups, with ensuing high levels of grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict, the most prevalent being the recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, and rape and other forms of sexual violence. In Israel and the State of Palestine, the spike in violations against children following protests in the first half of 2018 is deeply worrying.

4. In the Syrian Arab Republic, while reports of the recruitment and use of children by some armed groups, such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), decreased in 2018, largely in the context of a reduction in the territory under their control, the overall number of verified cases of recruitment and use remained high. It was reported that children frequently switched association after a new armed group gained control of an area. In Colombia, despite the decline in conflict intensity and the disarmament of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) and their transformation into a political party, the presence of non-State armed groups, such as FARC-EP dissident groups, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional and post-demobilization groups, continued to pose a protection risk for children, leading to a renewed spike in killing and maiming and recruitment and use in 2018.

5. Attacks on schools, including the recruitment and abduction of children from schools, and the military use of schools have significantly increased during the reporting period, with a devastating effect on the right to education of the affected children. In South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was listed for attacks on schools and hospitals in 2018, owing to a continuing trend of such attacks, combined with a spike in

incidents during 2017. Attacks on schools or threats of attacks on schools and generalized violence led to widespread school closures throughout 2018 in Afghanistan, depriving over 140,000 girls and boys of their right to education. Schools were targeted as reprisals against the Government and international action, and for their function as voter registration and polling centres for the parliamentary elections held in October 2018. Widespread school closures were also prevalent in Mali, in particular in the central and northern regions. The closures were due, among other reasons, to general insecurity, attacks on schools, attacks or threats of attack against protected personnel by armed groups, including demands that strict religious ideology be followed, and orders to close many secular educational facilities. Attacks and threats of attack on and intimidation of schools and protected personnel by armed groups aiming to impose religious ideology and practices on schools were also reported in Somalia and Nigeria. In both countries, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, respectively, continued to abduct children from schools, including for recruitment and use purposes. Cases of attacks on schools and of their military use were also verified by the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

6. Violations including a cross-border dimension remained a prevalent feature of the reporting period, thereby further increasing the complexity of both prevention and response efforts. Recruitment and use and abduction were the two grave violations against children with the most pronounced cross-border implications, as children were recruited or abducted by parties to conflict in one country and trafficked to other countries to be used in combat, or for rape and other forms of sexual exploitation.

7. In her report, the Special Representative provides details about two specific protection challenges that continued to affect children during the reporting period, including the question of ending and preventing child abduction by parties to conflict and the issue of children who accompanied or were recruited and used as foreign fighters in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Notwithstanding the high level of violations against children and continued protection challenges, important progress was achieved in protecting children through sustained engagement with parties to conflict. That progress can be leveraged by shedding light on and garnering support for other factors influencing the impact of armed conflict on children, such as reintegration support for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups.

A. Abduction of children in situations of armed conflict

8. While child abduction is not a new feature of conflicts, it has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Abduction is often a precursor to or follows other grave violations against children. Children are taken by force from homes, schools and public spaces by parties to conflict for a range of purposes, including for recruitment and use as combatants or in support functions, to be subjected to rape or other forms of sexual violence, such as forced marriage and sexual slavery, and for ransom and indoctrination. The threat of abduction often forces children, especially girls, to stop attending school, disrupting their access to education. The Special Representative has reported through the years on how parties to conflict have used abduction in systematic campaigns of violence against civilian populations as a means of instilling fear and terror, in retaliation against Governments and as punishment for schoolchildren attending Western-style schools, or to exert control over or force the displacement of particular ethnic groups or religious communities. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Kamonia Territory, Kasai Province, Bana Mura militias abducted 49 girls and 15 boys between March and May 2017, forced them to work on farms, and raped and sexually abused the girls. The children abducted by those militias were allegedly targeted because of their ethnic affiliation. The militias reportedly changed the children's Luba/Lulua names to Chokwe names. The number of Yezidi children abducted in 2014, including in Sinjar, Iraq, is indicative of targeting by ISIL of minority communities, with Turkmen, Shabak and Christian children also reportedly abducted in large numbers. In that context, the Special Representative welcomes the call to end the abduction of children in conflict and crises, initiated by the Permanent Missions to

the United Nations of Qatar and the United States of America on the occasion of Universal Children's Day 2018.

9. Abducting or seizing children against their will or the will of their adult guardians, either temporarily or permanently and without due cause, is a violation under international human rights law. The abduction of a child violates the rights of the child and the family, as recognized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. European, American and African regional human rights instruments also proscribe the abduction of children. The obligation of States to prevent child abduction is expressly stipulated in international human rights law. The abduction of children is also implicitly prohibited under international humanitarian law. While not recognized as a distinct crime under international law, the commission of a number of international crimes may involve acts of abduction, such as enslavement, hostage-taking, sexual slavery, enforced disappearance and the forcible transfer of children from one group to another with the intention of destroying the group. Child abduction may also be conducted with the purpose of committing further violations that amount to crimes under international law, such as enlisting or conscripting children under 15 years of age, forced marriage or forced pregnancy. All such conduct may amount to genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

10. Cross-border abduction of children has been especially prevalent in recent years and used by a range of armed groups, including the Lord's Resistance Army, Boko Haram and ISIL. In some instances, children abducted in one country have been transported across borders to be trained, used as fighters, married, sold or enslaved in a neighbouring country. For example, boys and girls abducted in Iraq by ISIL have been taken over the border to the Syrian Arab Republic to be sold, trained and used by the group there; children in the Lake Chad Basin region have been abducted by Boko Haram in one country and brought to another to be forcibly married, to fight and for logistical support. Abductions, including a cross-border element, not only magnify the already severe protection concerns children face in conflict situations, but also further increase the complexity of monitoring and prevention and response efforts. For example, when children are abducted across borders and subsequently captured for their association with an armed group, cross-border standard operating procedures for the interim care, handover, repatriation and reintegration of those children are needed, but are absent in most cases.

11. In 2015, the Security Council acknowledged the gravity of that violation, adopting resolution 2225 (2015) which established that parties to armed conflict that engage in patterns of abduction of children should be listed in the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. Subsequently, in 2016, six parties to conflict were listed for that violation. In 2018, the number more than doubled with 14 parties listed. In 2017, the number of children verified as abducted under the monitoring and reporting mechanism increased by 70 per cent compared to 2016. In Somalia alone, over 1,600 children were abducted by Al-Shabaab in 2017 and subsequently sent to madrasas and trainings camps and used as soldiers or in various support roles. In Nigeria, Boko Haram often specifically abducted girls to use them as human bombs, tying improvised explosive devices to their bodies and forcing them to perpetrate suicide attacks, or for forcible marriage or as sex slaves. In February 2018, for instance, the group abducted 110 girls and 1 boy from a technical college in Dapchi, Yobe State, the majority of whom have, however, since been released.

12. Despite the large number of parties listed for child abduction, no action plan to date specifically addresses this violation, one of the reasons being that the United Nations has no engagement with several of the parties concerned. The revised and expanded action plan currently under elaboration with the Government of South Sudan will be the first to include concrete measures to address abduction. The Special Representative has further identified a need to provide more conceptual clarity to child protection practitioners in the field as to how better to differentiate abduction from other practices against a child's liberty, such as illegal and arbitrary detention. There also remain questions around the specific measures that could be included in an action plan to end and prevent abduction. While in many situations it is difficult to prevent abduction, apart from ending the conflict itself, it is important to provide the authorities, humanitarian actors and communities with measures

that can help to mitigate or reduce children's vulnerability. Considering a lack of accountability for child abduction, particularly in terms of investigation, arrests and prosecution by national authorities, there is also a need to provide guidance to practitioners for possible advocacy and policy initiatives in that regard. The Office of the Special Representative is thus working on developing a guidance note for practitioners in the field on monitoring, ending, preventing and responding to child abduction in situations of armed conflict. It is expected that it will be published in 2019 and will also shine a light on the protection challenges posed by cross-border abduction and the measures that can be taken at subregional levels to respond to and prevent them.

B. Children of or recruited as foreign fighters

13. The recruitment and use of children by parties to conflict is not a new phenomenon and non-State armed groups using violent extremist tactics are by no means the only ones committing such violations. However, child recruitment and use by those groups raises new challenges from a child protection perspective and the situation is compounded by the transnational nature of violent extremism, which has favoured the emergence of transnational recruitment and the involvement of children in the phenomenon of foreign fighters.

14. It is estimated that since 2011, between 30,000 and 42,000 foreign fighters from some 120 countries have travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic to join groups affiliated to ISIL or Al-Qaida. By November 2017, nearly 7,000 foreign fighters were believed to have died on the battlefield and at least 14,910 were reported to have left conflict zones, with some 6,800 returning to their home countries. Those numbers include a significant proportion of children. Given the expanding reach and propaganda of such groups, child recruitment and use have not been limited to conflict-ridden areas. Increasing numbers of children crossed borders either on their own or with their families to areas controlled by groups using extreme violence. Children were also abducted by those groups and forced to cross borders during their association. Data collected between 2015 and 2016 in the framework of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: the Role of the Justice System* showed that among 89 children who died in hostilities were nationals not only of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, but also of Australia, France, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Yemen. Those figures did not include children taken to ISIL territory by their families.

15. Children of or recruited as foreign fighters are not only victims of use, killing, maiming, enslavement, sexual exploitation, constant fear, indoctrination and psychological pressure, but also witnesses to and/or alleged perpetrators of violations. Violence has a severe impact on the physical and mental well-being of those children. That is not limited to children in areas of conflict, it also applies to children returning from those areas, whether they travelled on their own or were taken there by adults, either voluntarily or not.

16. Governments faced with armed groups whose strategies include inflicting maximum suffering on civilians may be tempted to apply different legal standards from those applying to such acts. Particularly in contexts where Governments are engaged in operations to counter violent extremism, it is more important than ever to ensure they are carried out in full compliance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. Failure to abide by those obligations only worsens the suffering of the civilian population and can have the unintended consequence of creating or adding to real or perceived grievances in the affected population. Moreover, when responding to extreme violence, Member States should ensure that their rules of engagement take into account the fact that a large number of children are associated with such groups and may have been placed on the front line, either to engage in combat or as human shields.

17. The Special Representative continues to remind Member States that all children associated with parties to conflict and encountered in security operations should be treated primarily as victims rather than as security threats. Children who have been abducted,

recruited, used and exposed to violence at an early age must not be doubly victimized. Rehabilitation and reintegration should be the primary objective for all children emerging from such traumatizing environments. If detention is warranted, it should always be as a last resort, for the shortest time possible and guided by the best interests of the child. If children are accused of a crime during their association with armed groups using violent extremist tactics, they should be processed by the juvenile justice system rather than military courts, which frequently fail to apply international juvenile justice standards and due process. The General Assembly, in its resolution 70/291 on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, reiterated that every child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the law should be treated in a manner consistent with his or her rights, dignity and needs, in accordance with applicable international law, in particular obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Bearing in mind the relevant international standards on human rights in the administration of justice in that regard, Member States are urged in the Convention to take the relevant measures to effectively reintegrate children.

18. However, increasingly, large numbers of children are being systematically arrested and detained in operations countering violent extremism for their alleged association with parties to conflict. Such children are commonly regarded as a security risk and subsequently exposed to further violations of their rights. For instance, as ISIL lost control over most of the territory it had previously held in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, 1,200 children of different foreign nationalities were being held at Rusafa prison in Baghdad. In the Syrian Arab Republic, by June 2018 it was reported that at least 1,175 children, of whom a majority were under the age of 12, were deprived of their liberty in three different sites across the north-eastern part of the country, managed by the Kurdish authorities and guarded by Asayish police forces, on the basis of suspected family ties with foreign ISIL fighters.

19. The Special Representative emphasizes that justice mechanisms, specifically for juvenile justice, have to be strengthened in affected countries to respond to those challenges. That requires, inter alia, the establishment of a minimum age of criminal responsibility that is applied without exception, regardless of the gravity of the offence or whether it is terrorism-related. The Special Representative recalls that the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends setting the minimum age of criminal responsibility no lower than 12 years and urges Member States to set it higher.¹ Children who exceed the minimum age of criminal responsibility but are under the age of 18 should be prosecuted and adjudicated in a specialized juvenile justice system, without exception, based on the gravity of the charges. The Special Representative also recalls that under international law, it is prohibited to impose the death penalty upon persons who were under 18 years of age at the time the offence was committed.

20. States whose citizens have travelled to conflict zones to join armed groups using violent extremist tactics should facilitate the return of all children holding their citizenship for the purposes of rehabilitation and/or reintegration, in full compliance with international law, including the right to a fair trial and the principle of non-refoulement. Attempts to separate out children who are deemed to constitute a potential security threat should be rejected. The goal is to rehabilitate all children and reintegrate them back into society, as they have been exposed to extreme violence and are in dire need of physical and mental health care and other services, to ensure that they can take their place as peaceful members of society. Particular attention must be given to the detrimental impact of stigma for children returning to their communities or other areas, the risk of secondary victimization and the increased protection concerns faced by unaccompanied children.

21. The Special Representative has actively promoted a rights-based approach to address the plight of children recruited or affected by violent extremist groups, in cooperation with relevant partners within and outside the United Nations. She co-led a group of United Nations counterparts working on the issue of violent extremism and terrorism to explore how child rights can be upheld in that context. Her Office also

¹ See general comment No. 10 (2007) on children's rights in juvenile justice.

contributed to meetings and reports on the issue by, inter alia, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNODC. In those forums and in her interactions with relevant Member States, the Special Representative has advocated for the application of human rights and international humanitarian and refugee law standards for every child, regardless of their alleged or actual association with armed groups using violent extremist tactics.

C. Progress in ending grave violations against children

22. Notwithstanding continued violations against children affected by armed conflict, the Special Representative and other child protection actors have also achieved important advances in strengthening their protection.

23. In Afghanistan, amendments to the Criminal Code criminalizing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and the use of boys for *bacha bazi*² purposes entered into force in February 2018. The establishment of all 34 provincial child protection units in Afghan National Police recruitment centres was finalized during the reporting period. The units are mandated to screen out children during the recruitment process and thereby give effect to the national legislation on child recruitment.

24. In Colombia, following the transformation of FARC-EP into a political party, the group ended all child recruitment, released 135 children and was delisted from the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for 2017 (see A/72/865-S/2018/465).

25. The situation of children and armed conflict in Myanmar remained concerning, with 1,166 grave violations against children reported as documented between 1 July 2017 and 31 August 2018 in the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Myanmar (S/2018/956), and the listing of the Tatmadaw (government armed forces) and integrated border guard forces for the killing and maiming of children and rape and other forms of sexual violence against children in the 2017 annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. However, progress was noted in the implementation by the Government of Myanmar of the joint action plan on the recruitment and use of children. In August 2018, 75 children and young people who had been recruited as children were released by the Tatmadaw within the framework of the joint action plan. The final agreement of the peace conference held in July 2018 between the Government and opposition armed groups included a specific commitment to eliminate the six grave violations against children. Advocacy and outreach by the Special Representative has resulted in greater willingness on the part of the Government to engage on the issue of the six grave violations and in December 2018, training on them was organized by the Office of the Special Representative in cooperation with the country task force on monitoring and reporting.

26. In Nigeria, the Civilian Joint Task Force advanced in the implementation of the action plan signed in September 2017, including through the promulgation of a standing order to refrain from recruiting or using children, the initiation of a process to identify and release children in their ranks, the creation of child protection units in Borno State to support the implementation of the action plan and joint awareness-raising sessions with the United Nations on recruitment and use at the community level. In October 2018, the Civilian Joint Task Force released 833 children to child protection actors, with more children expected to be released in 2019.

27. Following high-level engagement with the Government of South Sudan, the country agreed to revise and expand the current action plan on recruitment and use, signed in 2012 and recommitted to in 2014, to comprehensively address all grave violations against children for which its security forces are listed in the annexes of the 2017 annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. Engagement between the United

² The term *bacha bazi* (dancing boys) refers to the practice which includes the sexual exploitation of boys by men in power, including commanders of armed forces and groups.

Nations, religious leaders and armed groups resulted in the release of 955 children, including 265 girls, from armed groups in 2018. The releases took place in Yambio (Western Equatoria) and Pibor (Jonglei) in the context of the integration of armed groups into the government security forces. With support from the Government, the United Nations has provided the children with interim care, family tracing, reunification, psychosocial support, education and other services.

28. In the Sudan, the implementation of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Sudanese Armed Forces was finalized in 2018, following the completion of three outstanding measures, including the adoption of standard operating procedures on the release and handover of children associated with armed groups, the adoption of a community-based complaint mechanism to report child recruitment and the initiation of an awareness-raising campaign on all grave violations against children. During her visit to the Sudan in February 2018, the Special Representative advocated for the adoption of a national prevention plan to enhance the protection of children. The Government welcomed the idea at the open debate on children and armed conflict held in July 2018.

29. In Yemen, the establishment of protective measures in October 2017 (such as a child protection unit in the headquarters of the coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen) with the support of the Special Representative resulted in a decrease in attacks on schools and hospitals in 2018. The coalition remains listed for the killing and maiming of children and must continue strengthening its efforts to end and prevent child casualties. In that regard, the Special Representative is working with all coalition members to develop a memorandum of understanding for the enhanced protection of children affected by the armed conflict in Yemen. Steps were also taken by the Government of Yemen to put in place command orders on child protection and revitalize the action plan signed in 2014 with the United Nations to end and prevent child recruitment and use by its armed forces. In July 2018, a joint technical committee chaired by the Minister for Human Rights was established and tasked with developing a road map to implement the action plan. The Government is also engaged in developing standard operating procedures on the handover and release of children associated with parties to conflict to civilian child protection actors. The United Nations in Yemen has entered into dialogue with the Houthis in order to develop concrete measures to end and prevent the recruitment and use and killing and maiming of children and attacks on schools and hospitals, the three grave violations for which the group is listed in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for 2017.

D. Towards adequate, sustainable and reliably funded reintegration programmes

30. Further progress can be achieved by shedding light on and garnering support for other factors influencing the impact of armed conflict on children, such as reintegration support for children formerly associated with armed forces and groups. In 2017 alone, more than 10,000 children were released from the ranks of parties to conflict in the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan.

31. Providing adequate, sustainable and reliably funded reintegration programmes is essential to ensuring that children recruited and used by parties to conflict benefit from the necessary support to recover their lives and allow them to reintegrate into their communities. As highlighted in the United Nations Youth Strategy, children can become positive agents of change and ensuring that all children affected by conflict can access reintegration programmes for an appropriate amount of time contributes to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. As specified in Security Council resolution 2427 (2018) and the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (Paris Principles), reintegration programmes must be long-term and sustainable, gender- and age-sensitive, and provide children with access to health care, to psychosocial support and to education. Reintegration support must also be understood as

a crucial conflict prevention tool. It is vital to increase efforts to use reintegration to break cycles of violence and address the challenges of cross-border reintegration.

32. However, in a world facing multiple and complex crises, dependable and predictable funding to support children recovering from the trauma of war has been steadily decreasing, whereas the need for and the complexity of reintegration are significantly on the rise. Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups who have been released, self-demobilized or rescued face an uncertain future. If assistance is not forthcoming or is short-lived, those children run the risk of re-recruitment for a lack of alternatives, stigmatization for a lack of reconciliation and condemnation to a life in which survival takes precedence over aspirations for lack of an education. Increasingly, reintegration efforts are also slowed down by the cross-border nature of recruitment and use, as well as by the release of children in places far from their provenance.

33. During the reporting period, the Special Representative's advocacy has contributed to an emerging global consensus that the response of the international community to today's conflicts must include paying more attention and providing resources to ensure that all released children can benefit from sustainable, long-term reintegration programmes. Events such as those organized on 7 March in Geneva by Belgium and Uruguay to highlight the specific reintegration needs of girls, on 6 June 2018 in New York by Belgium, France, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland and on 6 November 2018 in Geneva by Switzerland, have helped to promote an exchange of experiences among reintegration practitioners and supporters of the children and armed conflict agenda. In September 2018, in the margins of the high-level debate of the seventy-third session of the General Assembly, the Office of the Special Representative co-organized with Belgium a high-level event on the theme of "Funding the future: challenges and responses to the reintegration of child soldiers". During the event, which brought together Member States, civil society organizations and representatives of the United Nations, the Special Representative launched the Global Coalition for Reintegration to generate new ideas for addressing sustainable support for child reintegration programmes. The Coalition is co-led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and composed of child protection experts from the United Nations and civil society organizations, as well as the World Bank and Member States.

34. Over the next year, the Coalition will explore the scope, parameters and structure of a comprehensive and sustainable mechanism to support all children coming out of armed groups and forces. Such a mechanism would leverage existing knowledge and work, and explore current funding modalities, as well as possible new ones. That process will allow all stakeholders who can contribute to the general knowledge and understanding of reintegration programming to be brought together and share lessons learned and best practices. It will explore the role of reintegration in the broader peacebuilding and development agenda and shed a light on the current situation of reintegration programming, its successes and challenges, highlighting the vulnerability of children and their needs in terms of education, insertion into society and reintegration into resilient communities. It will further explore existing gaps and emerging needs for reintegration in terms of enhanced psychosocial support, education and training needs, and community support, taking into account the specific needs of girls and boys. The steering committee of the Global Coalition, which is co-chaired by the Special Representative and UNICEF and comprises representatives from Member States, civil society and United Nations entities, held its first meeting on 7 December 2018.

III. Awareness-raising and mobilizing global action

35. In line with General Assembly resolution 72/245, the Special Representative announced in her last report to the Human Rights Council that she was aiming to enhance her mandated activities, both in terms of raising public awareness, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned, and in terms of her engagement with States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional organizations and especially subregional organizations to mobilize global action.

A. Collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned

36. During the reporting period, the Special Representative started compiling comprehensive best practices derived from over 20 years of existence of the children and armed conflict mandate. She focused on the inclusion of child protection concerns in peace processes, the prevention of child recruitment and use and the role of action plans in ending and preventing grave violations against children in armed conflict.

37. Understanding how peace processes can best be leveraged to advance child protection issues is crucial to adequately addressing child protection concerns and securing commitments from parties to conflict. In that context, and as encouraged by the Security Council in a presidential statement (S/PRST/2017/21) and welcomed in resolution 2427 (2018), the Office of the Special Representative started a consultative process with child protection and mediation actors to develop practical guidance on the integration of child protection issues in peace processes. The documentation and analysis of experiences in integrating child protection issues in peace processes garnered by the Office of the Special Representative and other child protection and mediation actors over the course of the past years will be an important starting point for the development of such guidance. The first phase of the project, led in collaboration with the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and UNICEF, consisted of an assessment of needs and knowledge gaps within the mediation and child protection communities. Consultations were held at expert level to identify a list of key issues to be included in the guidance. The information collected through this initiative will be compiled and published by the end of 2019.

38. Child recruitment and use by parties to conflict contributes to fuelling conflicts. Children who are not adequately reintegrated, once separated from parties to conflict, are vulnerable to recruitment or re-recruitment by armed groups and forces or criminal gangs. Preventing recruitment and re-recruitment of children is critical for breaking cycles of violence and achieving sustainable peace. To foster an exchange of best practices and lessons learned in preventing child recruitment and use, the Office of the Special Representative co-organized with the Government of Colombia, the Office of the Resident Coordinator in Colombia, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration a conference in Colombia in May 2018. Child recruitment prevention strategies, the reintegration of children in post-conflict situations and child participation in transitional justice were discussed by a broad range of international experts sharing their experiences from Nepal, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone.

39. Action plans are the central tool of the Special Representative and other United Nations child protection actors for engaging with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations against children. In May 2018, the Office of the Special Representative supported the organization of an Arria formula meeting for Security Council members on the theme of “Ending and preventing grave violations against children through action plans: best practices from African States”. The meeting was spearheaded by the Permanent Mission of Poland to the United Nations, in partnership with the Permanent Missions of Côte d’Ivoire, France and Sweden. It provided a forum for a discussion of the role of action plans in ending and preventing violations against children affected by armed conflict, with a specific focus on African examples. Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan shared their respective experiences of implementing action plans and reflected on successes and challenges, as well as on lessons learned and best practices. Member States emphasized that action plans were not only a tool leading potentially to a delisting, if fully implemented, but also for inducing sustainable institutional and behavioural changes. They encouraged the Member States concerned to put in place measures that would contribute to the creation of child protection frameworks that would prevent future grave violations.

40. To discuss trends, challenges and best practices in responding to grave violations against children affected by armed conflict, in cooperation with UNICEF the Special Representative launched a series of regional workshops bringing together members of different United Nations country task forces on monitoring and reporting. The workshops

aim more specifically at fostering exchanges and generating lessons learned on the monitoring and reporting mechanism of grave violations and United Nations engagement with listed parties. A first regional high-level meeting, followed by a technical-level meeting of the country task forces covering the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region was organized from 12 to 15 November 2018 in the presence of the Special Representative. The Special Representative and UNICEF agreed with the relevant funds and programmes that they would enhance and further formalize their participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanism. The Special Representative was encouraged that some, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization, had already developed mechanisms and guidance to systematize their monitoring of grave violations against children and their participation in country task forces. She encouraged other agencies, such as the United Nations Population Fund and the International Labour Organization, to do the same. Further regional meetings are planned for early 2019 in East and West Africa and in Asia.

B. Awareness-raising and field visits

41. The Special Representative and her Office continued to use visits to countries on the children and armed conflict agenda and international high-level events as a means of raising awareness and advocating for the protection of children affected by conflict.

42. As the leading United Nations advocate for the protection of conflict-affected children, the Special Representative travelled to Geneva in March 2018 to participate in the interactive dialogue on children and armed conflict held during the thirty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council. She also participated as a panel member in a side event on the Safe Schools Declaration. The same month, she was invited to speak at the tenth session of the Global Child Forum in Stockholm. In May 2018 in New York, she delivered a keynote speech at the launch of the report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education Under Attack 2018*. She also participated in several other events related to education in conflict, notably one organized in June 2018 by Qatar, Belgium and the Education Above all Foundation in New York to explore the use of education as a tool to prevent extremism.

43. The Special Representative visited the Sudan in February 2018 to assess the progress made by the Government in the implementation of its action plan addressing child recruitment and use, signed in March 2016. In that regard, she welcomed the significant advances made by the Government, while encouraging swift implementation of the remaining measures of the action plan. Strong advocacy work and sustained technical support has led to the completion of all pending requirements and as a result, the armed and security forces of the Sudan were delisted from the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for 2017. The visit of the Special Representative was also an opportunity for her to encourage the Sudan to become a regional model of child protection, including through transforming its action plan into a national plan for the prevention of violations against children.

44. In April and October 2018, the Special Representative participated in workshops in Buenos Aires and Medellin, Colombia, respectively, where she engaged with networks of Latin American associations providing health and other services to facilitate access to those services for children recovering from conflict in Colombia. As mentioned above, the Special Representative also travelled to Colombia in May 2018 to take part in an event on lessons learned and best practices in the prevention of child recruitment and the protection of children affected by armed conflict.

45. In May 2018, the Special Representative also travelled to Myanmar to ascertain the level of implementation of the action plan to end and prevent child recruitment and use by the Tatmadaw, signed in June 2012. She held constructive discussions with the Government, including on the progress made in the implementation of the action plan and the steps remaining, the expeditious passage of the draft child law and the inclusion of child protection issues in the ongoing peace dialogue. The authorities committed to implementing those measures by the end of 2018. The Special Representative also urged the Government

to ensure that the United Nations had immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access, in particular to Rakhine State, in order to document grave violations against children committed in the context of the widespread violence that has taken place there against the Rohingya population. She also held discussions with four armed groups that are part of the national ceasefire agreement. They agreed to continue to engage with the United Nations for the purpose of ending and preventing the recruitment and use and killing and maiming of children.

46. In September 2018, the Special Representative travelled to South Sudan to engage with the Government and its security forces on the large numbers of grave violations committed against children and to advocate for the strengthening of reintegration efforts. While she welcomed the release of almost 1,000 children from armed groups in 2018, in the context of the integration of armed groups into the national security forces, she urged the Government to take immediate and concrete actions to end grave violations against children and recalled the importance of ensuring accountability. She advocated with Government authorities for the expansion of the existing action plan, signed in 2012 and recommitted to in 2014, into a comprehensive action plan that would address all the grave violations for which the Government is currently listed. The Government agreed to work in the coming months with the United Nations on the development of such an action plan. The Special Representative also met with civil society representatives, religious leaders and the United Nations team in the country. In Yambio she met with affected children who had recently been released.

47. In October 2018, the Special Representative travelled to Addis Ababa. She engaged with the leadership of the United Nations Office to the African Union and with the African Union child protection adviser on enhancing strategic cooperation on child protection between her Office and the African Union.

48. In November 2018, the Special Representative chaired the opening event of Geneva Peace Week to explore how the children and armed conflict mandate can contribute to preventing grave violations and building peace.

C. Working with regional and subregional organizations

49. As announced in last year's report, developing and further advancing her existing cooperation with the African Union, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was a key priority for the Special Representative during the reporting period. She also held initial discussions with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the Economic Community of Central African States.

African Union

50. During the reporting period, the Special Representative continued to cooperate closely with the African Union. She welcomes the appointment of a child protection adviser by the African Union in February 2018 and her Office has cooperated with the adviser to define areas of priority and further cooperation. The Special Representative also continued to regularly engage with the African Union Permanent Observer to the United Nations in New York. Her Office participated in the ninth high-level retreat of the African Union on the promotion of peace, security and stability from 25 to 26 October 2018 in Accra. The retreat focused on the conflict prevention and peace-making efforts of the African Union. The Office of the Special Representative provided initial inputs for the development of an African Union-United Nations framework on human rights, which is currently under elaboration by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Special Representative will continue working to ensure that child protection considerations are reflected in the framework.

European Union

51. In October 2018, the Special Representative briefed the Working Party on Human Rights, ambassadors from the Political and Security Committee and the European External Action Service on the children and armed conflict mandate and current issues and

challenges. She also met with the Director-General of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations to discuss common areas of interest. The work of the European Union and its member States on human rights and peace and security issues, as well as the presence of the European Union in all countries on the children and armed conflict agenda, are important multipliers for the work of the Special Representative. The European Union guidelines on children and armed conflict, the implementation strategy for the guidelines and the checklist for integration of the protection of children affected by armed conflict into the Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations are crucial tools to integrate child protection in all European Union actions. In November 2018, the Special Representative opened the United Nations Liaison Office for Children and Armed Conflict – Europe in Brussels, which, inter alia, will enhance cooperation with the European Union institutions and member States. The Liaison Office also covers the Special Representative's relations with NATO, the Human Rights Council and other Geneva-based mechanisms, as well as Europe-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

52. The Special Representative has continued working with NATO to strengthen its child protection architecture. In October 2018 in Brunssum, Netherlands, her Office supported training on children and armed conflict for NATO child protection focal points. Her Office also worked with the NATO child protection adviser to take stock of the lessons learned and best practices of the NATO policy on children and armed conflict in Operation Resolute Support and contributed to the update of a policy document entitled "The protection of children in armed conflict - the way forward". From 23 to 24 October 2018, her Office participated in the United Nations-NATO staff talks, at which it was agreed that the United Nations and NATO would move forward on strengthening cooperation on children and armed conflict with a particular focus on capacity-building and awareness-raising.

D. Working with human rights entities and United Nations mechanisms

53. With a view to achieving universal ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Special Representative has continued to engage with Member States that have not yet ratified the instrument. She held bilateral meetings with Member States and actively engaged with regional and subregional organizations, civil society and regional groups on the matter. Following continued advocacy by the United Nations in South Sudan and the visit of the Special Representative in September 2018, the country deposited the accession instrument to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict at United Nations Headquarters in the margins of the high-level debate at the seventy-third session of the General Assembly. South Sudan became the 168th State party to the Optional Protocol. The Special Representative also used her engagement with Member States to push for the endorsement of other instruments that will improve the protection of the rights of children in situations of armed conflict, such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers.

54. The Special Representative continued to cooperate closely with international charter- and treaty-based human rights mechanisms, in particular the Human Rights Council, the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee. Regarding the Human Rights Council, her Office submitted one contribution in the previous reporting period to the universal periodic review of Colombia. During the ensuing interactive dialogue in May 2018, many Member States highlighted the protection needs of children in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, thus reiterating the points noted in the Special Representative's submission. Member States recommended that legal measures to prevent child recruitment by armed groups be strengthened and stressed the need to ensure that demobilized children are reintegrated and rehabilitated. Colombia has endorsed those recommendations and the Office of the Special Representative has been

supporting the country in their implementation. During the current reporting period, the Special Representative submitted contributions to the universal periodic reviews of Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Yemen.

55. The Special Representative pursued engagement with the special procedures of the Human Rights Council to exchange information and identify common areas of concern. In March 2018, she met with the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material and discussed the coordination of advocacy messages. In October 2018, she met with the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. They agreed to cooperate closely on the Special Rapporteur's upcoming report on children internally displaced by armed conflict and other situations of violence. The Special Representative also engaged with the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination. She is encouraged that the most recent report of the Working Group (A/HRC/39/49 and Corr.1) focused on the recruitment of children by non-State armed groups, including mercenaries and private military and security companies, and welcomes its important recommendations.

56. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee continued to raise the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the national implementation reviews of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, respectively. In that regard, the Special Representative took note of the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the report submitted by Saudi Arabia 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 (CRC/C/OPAC/SAU/CO/1). The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its observations urged Saudi Arabia, *inter alia*, to prioritize the protection of children in all military operations in Yemen, to take concrete and firm precautionary measures and to ensure observance of the core humanitarian law principles, including through a more effective child protection unit. Moving forward, the Special Representative will continue her cooperation with Saudi Arabia and all other members of the coalition to provide support for the swift implementation of the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In its concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Human Rights Committee reiterated its concerns about children and armed conflict, such as the importance of criminalizing child recruitment and use and facilitating birth registration (CCPR/C/COD/CO/4). The Office of the Special Representative will continue working with United Nations colleagues in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide support for the swift implementation of those recommendations.

57. Regarding the global study on children deprived of liberty, the Office of the Special Representative continued to provide data, information and recommendations through its participation in the thematic research group on children deprived of liberty related to armed conflict and children deprived of liberty related to national security.

58. Within the United Nations system, OHCHR continued to be an important partner for the Special Representative, including through its field level participation in the monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The Office of the Special Representative actively participated in the review group on the human rights due diligence policy on United Nations support to non-United Nations security forces, with children and armed conflict concerns being a key component of the policy. The Special Representative also cooperated with OHCHR to include strong child protection elements in the human rights and international law compliance framework of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel. Child protection provisions include the appointment of child protection focal points, the issuance of command orders and the adoption of protocols to hand over children to civilian child protection actors. The Special Representative pursued her advocacy, with the support of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, for the deployment of a child protection adviser to the headquarters of the Joint Force to advise the Force Commander on child protection issues, ensure the mainstreaming of child protection within

the Force and put in place child protection systems to mitigate the impact of its operations on children.³

59. The Special Representative continued her engagement and cooperation with other United Nations entities, including UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide. For instance, on 3 December 2018, the Special Representative joined forces with some of the above-mentioned entities to issue a press release condemning reports of 150 women and girls being brutally raped over a 10-day period from 19 to 29 November near Bentiu, South Sudan, while on their way to collect food for their families. She also initiated cooperation with the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth to ensure that the voice of children affected by conflict is heard and that children are able to fully realize their potential as agents of change for peace. The launch of Youth2030: the United Nations Youth Strategy on 24 September 2018 provides a strong basis for cooperation.

60. The Office of the Special Representative also increased its cooperation with UNODC, in particular with regard to trafficking as it relates to children affected by armed conflict and the protection of children affected by violent extremism.

E. Working with civil society

61. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are important enablers for and multipliers of the Special Representative's work and, as such, key partners. As announced in her previous report, strengthening relationships with civil society and NGOs working on the issue of children and armed conflict was a key priority for the Special Representative during the reporting period. To that end and to foster synergies regarding advocacy and the documentation of best practices, in 2018 the Special Representative launched a consultative process with NGOs. A two-fold increase compared to last year in the number of meetings and briefings held by the Special Representative with NGOs based in New York is reflective of this enhanced dialogue. At the same time, the Special Representative continued to interact regularly with NGOs in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and held meetings with civil society representatives during her field trips.

62. That proactive approach led to increased opportunities to join forces with civil society partners. For example, the Special Representative was a keynote speaker at an event on the theme of "Hidden victims: sexual violence against boys and men in conflict", organized by the All Survivors Project on 11 December 2017 in New York, and at the event "OPAC turns 18" on 21 February 2018, co-organized by Child Soldiers International. In February, the Special Representative was invited to Stockholm as a speaker for a Board meeting of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children. To promote child participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, she co-organized with World Vision the event "Hear our voices: listening to children affected by conflict" in the margins of the high-level debate at the seventy-third session of the General Assembly. In addition, the Special Representative voiced her support for initiatives promoting better protection for children through video messages, including the "Girls Get Equal" campaign by Plan International, launched on 11 October 2018. In Geneva, close collaboration has continued with the Child Rights Connect working group in order to mainstream the work on children and armed conflict in a number of Geneva-based processes.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

63. **The Special Representative remains deeply concerned at the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children in 2018 and calls upon the Human**

³ See conclusions on Mali (S/AC.51/2018/1/Rev.1).

Rights Council and Member States to take all available measures to prevent those violations from occurring. The Special Representative especially expresses concern with regard to the dehumanization of civilian populations, including children, and urges all parties to conflict to combat dehumanization and turn obligations contained in historic conventions and declarations into a reality. She reiterates her call to Member States and parties to conflict to enable unimpeded access to education for children affected by armed conflict by better protecting schools, schoolchildren and teachers, implementing concrete measures to deter the military use of schools and ensuring the continuation of education.

64. The Special Representative urges Member States and regional and subregional organizations to protect children from abduction, including across borders, by putting in place measures that help to mitigate or reduce children's vulnerability and to ensure accountability including through investigations, arrests and prosecution by national authorities. She also calls upon Member States and regional and subregional organizations to engage closely with the United Nations to ensure a coordinated response based on international law and on the best interests of the child with regard to cross-border repatriation and reintegration.

65. The Special Representative calls on Member States to prevent child recruitment and use by non-State armed groups, including those using violent extremist tactics, and hold the perpetrators accountable. She also calls anew upon all Member States to treat children allegedly associated with those groups primarily as victims entitled to the full protection of their rights. Regarding the children of or recruited as foreign fighters, she urges Member States to facilitate the return of those children holding their nationality, prioritize their rehabilitation and reintegration and address the especially detrimental impact of stigma on their reintegration. She further reminds Member States that if a child is accused of a crime during his or her association with armed groups, juvenile justice standards and standards of fair trial must be applied. The Special Representative calls upon the Human Rights Council, treaty bodies and the relevant special procedures mandate holders to focus closely on the impact of violent extremism on children, including the issue of children of or recruited as foreign fighters.

66. The Special Representative reminds Member States and regional and subregional organizations that the reintegration of children is crucial to ensuring sustainable peace and security and to break cycles of violence. The Special Representative calls upon them and on other reintegration actors to provide sustainable political, technical and financial support for such efforts and calls on all of them to join the Global Coalition for Reintegration.

67. The Special Representative encourages the Human Rights Council to maintain the practice of including recommendations on the protection of children affected by armed conflict when considering or adopting resolutions on country-specific situations or thematic issues, as well as in the universal periodic review process, with particular attention paid to the implementation of such recommendations. The Special Representative also encourages the Human Rights Council to continue to include child rights violations in its resolutions establishing or renewing the relevant mandates of special procedures.

68. The Special Representative welcomes the continued attention paid to the impact of armed conflict on children in State party reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee. In that regard, all relevant Member States are urged to include, as appropriate, specific references to information on grave violations against children, on gaps in their applicable legal and policy frameworks and on accountability initiatives in their submissions to those bodies. She encourages the relevant United Nations entities to use the recommendations of those bodies as advocacy tools with the Member States concerned.

69. The Special Representative urges Member States that have not done so to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to enact national legislation and policies to

criminalize the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups. She also calls on Member States to endorse other instruments that will improve the protection of the rights of children in situations of armed conflict, such as the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, the Safe Schools Declaration and the Vancouver Principles.
