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Children and armed conflict in Afghanistan

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, is the sixth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan. It covers the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022.

The report contains information on the six grave violations committed against children in Afghanistan, namely the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,¹ the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access.

The report provides an overview of the trends of the six grave violations committed against children in Afghanistan and the context in which they took place, and identifies perpetrators, when possible. It also highlights progress and challenges in ending and preventing these violations.

Lastly, the report provides a series of recommendations to strengthen action for the protection of children affected by armed conflict in Afghanistan.

¹ For the purposes of the present report, the phrase “protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals”, used in Security Council resolutions [1998 \(2011\)](#), [2143 \(2014\)](#) and [2427 \(2018\)](#), as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 ([S/PRST/2013/8](#)) and 31 October 2017 ([S/PRST/2017/21](#)), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, covers the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022 and provides trends and patterns of the six grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, as well as progress made and challenges with regard to dialogue with parties since the previous report ([S/2021/662](#)).

2. Under section A of annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)) (“Listed parties that have not put in place measures during the reporting period to improve the protection of children”), Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin remained listed for recruitment and use of children and killing and maiming of children. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) remained listed under section A for recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming of children and attacks on schools and/or hospitals. Taliban forces and affiliated groups, including the Haqqani Network, remained listed under section A for recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and/or hospitals and abduction of children. The Haqqani Network has been listed jointly with the Taliban since the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/76/871-S/2022/493](#)), as the group is part of the leadership of the Taliban.

3. The country task force on monitoring and reporting, co-chaired by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), documented and verified the information contained in the present report. When possible, the parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations against children are identified, and the report highlights areas of action to strengthen the protection of children and prevent further violations, including through recommendations to the parties. Owing to monitoring and verification constraints, the information presented herein does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed against children in Afghanistan.

4. In the period surrounding the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on 15 August 2021, the related safety and security challenges and temporary relocation of most of the staff of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict had an impact on the work of the mechanism. While official reporting was suspended until the end of 2021, the mechanism remained active in Afghanistan, and the country task force continued its efforts to advocate the protection of children in Afghanistan.

5. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had negative impacts on the lives of children and increased children’s vulnerability to various harms, including but not limited to recruitment and use, sexual violence, child labour, domestic violence and early marriage. COVID-19-related preventive measures continued to disrupt children’s access to education, health care and social services while also placing new stress on parents, guardians and caregivers.

II. Political and security developments

6. The security situation deteriorated steadily as the Taliban initiated a large-scale offensive, resulting in the seizure of most provincial capitals within 10 days starting on 6 August 2021, including Kabul on 15 August 2021. During this period, many human rights violations were alleged to have been committed, including grave violations against children, most of which could not be verified.

7. Since their takeover, the Taliban as de facto authorities have focused on the transition from insurgency to governance. On 7 September 2021, the de facto authorities announced an all-male, predominantly Pashtun caretaker cabinet and other senior positions at the national, provincial and district levels. Appointees were Taliban affiliates, many of whom were on the sanctions list pursuant to Security Council resolution 1988 (2011). Professional civil servants with dedicated expertise, including women, have increasingly been replaced by Taliban affiliates, negatively affecting the provision of adequate services, including to children who are victims of grave violations.

8. The de facto authorities largely retained the existing governance structures, but dissolved independent oversight mechanisms and institutions, such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as well as all formal and informal councils in Afghanistan, including the national ulama (Muslim scholar) council and provincial councils. The former premises of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its provincial departments were replaced by offices of the de facto Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Juvenile courts and courts for the elimination of violence against women were also dissolved.

9. Notwithstanding efforts to establish relevant governing bodies, the de facto authorities were not able to provide an inclusive structure and a consistent governing vision, and alternated between a generally pragmatic approach to solving some pressing problems and a focus on decisions regulating the social lives of citizens and generally restricting freedoms and rights. Since mid-December 2021, provincial ulama shuras, comprising Islamic scholars and tribal elders, have been established in every province of Afghanistan. The shuras are reportedly mandated to implement sharia law, build trust between the de facto authorities and the people, resolve local disputes and oversee the activities of provincial de facto administrations.

10. The absence of child protection provisions in the agenda of the de facto authorities, of legal support, of accountability for grave violations against children and of systematic reintegration programmes, as well as the lack of regulations and policies concerning the protection of children, made it harder for child rights organizations to implement their child protection projects as required.

11. The de facto authorities made a series of policy decisions, which they declared to be in adherence to Islam and Afghan traditions, that violated the rights of children. They included the announcement on 23 March 2022 of the continued suspension of secondary education for girls and the indefinite suspension in December 2022 of access of Afghan girls and women to tertiary education. Another matter of concern was the de facto authorities' definition of a "child", in accordance with a March 2022 decree by the Taliban leader, which is not based on age but on physical signs of puberty, rather than defining a child as every human being below the age of 18 years. The definition has resulted in the detention of children in prisons, in addition to the recruitment and use of children.

12. There were also concerns regarding the interference of the de facto authorities in humanitarian activities. On 22 October 2022, a law on coordination and regulation of the activities of national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was implemented by the de facto Prime Minister, which hindered the efforts of national and international NGOs, curtailed the efficiency of NGOs and marginalized already vulnerable communities, in particular women and children. On 24 December 2022, the de facto authorities issued a decree banning Afghan women from working for national and international NGOs. The decision undermined the work of numerous organizations working across the country who were assisting the most vulnerable, in particular children and women. Some international NGOs announced the suspension of their services in Afghanistan, while others instructed their female employees to

work from home until further notice. Beyond the period covered by the present report, on 5 April 2023, the de facto authorities decided to impose severe restrictions on national female staff working for the United Nations, with immediate effect. Such decisions resulted in limited engagement of female personnel in the ongoing humanitarian response, directly and further contributing to the diminishing access of Afghan girls and women to life-saving services.

13. Owing to factors such as extreme poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities, natural disasters, displacement and conflict, the access of children to basic services has been disrupted, increasing their vulnerability to recruitment and use, sexual violence and exploitation, child labour, domestic violence, early marriage, harmful traditional practices, school dropout and unsafe migration. The indefinite suspension of secondary and tertiary education for girls affected their right to education and exposed many of them to heightened risks and harmful coping mechanisms, such as suicide and drug abuse, contributing to a deterioration of their mental health. The de facto authorities had limited capacity to respond to the protection needs of children. For example, on 8 October 2022, the Taliban leader ordered child beggars to be removed from the streets, but without a clear programme of support for such children.

14. Security dynamics changed significantly after the Taliban declared an end to their military offensive against the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces on 6 September 2021. After an initial period of significantly reduced conflict-related security incidents, security challenges related to armed opposition groups, ISIL-KP and border tensions with neighbouring States began to emerge. The Taliban continued to carry out operations against opposition groups in urban areas, as well as in Panjshir Province and parts of the north. Several incidents of intra-Taliban fighting were recorded, including in Badakhshan, Bamyán, Sar-e Pul and Takhar Provinces. In addition, border tensions and security incidents occurred along the borders of Afghanistan allegedly linked to trafficking activities and foreign terrorist groups active in border areas. There were several high-profile attacks against de facto security forces, as well as civilian and religious places, the majority of which were claimed by ISIL-KP. In some of the incidents, children were affected.

III. Update on main parties to the conflict

Afghan National Defence and Security Forces

15. Until the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces comprised all government security forces, including the Afghan National Army (and its subsidiaries, such as the Afghan Air Force, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, also referred to as the Afghan Territorial Army, the Afghan Border Force and the Afghan National Civil Order Force), the Afghan Special Forces, the National Directorate for Security and the Afghan National Police. They ceased to exist following the takeover.

International forces

16. The Resolute Support Mission led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and United States forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan by 31 August 2021. The United States Department of Defense formally ended its Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which was focused on counter-terrorism operations, on 1 October 2021.

Pro-government militias

17. Until 15 August 2021, pro-government militias, which were organized militias distinct from government forces, continued to operate against armed groups. They had been excluded from the *tashkil* (a Dari word meaning “structure” that refers to the official staffing table and equipment allocations authorized by the Government of Afghanistan), and operated outside the regular military command and control. They included the National Uprising Movements, a community-based defence initiative set up across Afghan provinces, and the Khost Protection Force, which carried out specialized operations in the south-east of Afghanistan from at least 2007 to August 2021.

Taliban

18. The Taliban leadership prioritized security and the functioning of line ministries and security entities in the months after taking control of the country in August 2021, including the de facto Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence and General Directorate of Intelligence. While the structure of the security institutions remained largely unchanged, recruitment, composition and funding have changed considerably.

Armed groups

19. Throughout 2021, attacks claimed by ISIL-KP increased and expanded beyond the group’s previous areas of focus in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan. The group announced its “return to Khorasan” on 22 February 2021, which was followed by attacks in Ghor, Baghlan, Kabul, Kunduz and Parwan Provinces in April and early May 2021. By May 2022, ISIL-KP had expanded its activities to 11 provinces. The group targeted not only de facto security forces but also civilians, in particular Shiite, Hindu and Sikh minorities in urban areas, and Sufi and Sunni mosques and madrasas.

20. Following the Taliban takeover of the country, at least three armed opposition groups claimed attacks against the de facto authorities, notably the National Resistance Front, the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the Afghanistan Liberation Movement.

IV. Grave violations against children

21. During the reporting period, the country task force verified 4,519 grave violations against 3,545 children (2,507 boys, 985 girls and 53 of sex unknown) aged from a few months to 17 years. Of these, 2,722 violations occurred in 2021 and 1,797 violations occurred in 2022. Killing and maiming remained the most prevalent violations, with a total of 3,248 children killed (879) and maimed (2,369) during the reporting period. Of concern was the fact that denial of humanitarian access increased sharply within the reporting period, with 718 incidents verified in 2022 compared with 31 in 2021. The number of recruitment and use of children also remained high (257), similar to the previous period (260), although the numbers decreased in 2022 (54) compared with 2021 (203). Concerns remained with regard to elevated numbers of attacks on schools (125), hospitals (86) and protected persons in relation to schools and hospitals.

22. In addition, the country task force verified at a later date 384 violations that had occurred in the previous reporting period. They included the recruitment and use of 349 children (all boys) by the Taliban, the abduction of 17 boys by the Taliban, the killing (7) and maiming (10) of 17 children (15 boys and 2 girls) by unidentified perpetrators (12) and pro-government forces (5) and one attack on a school.

23. Overall, the central region accounted for the highest number of verified violations (1,400), followed by the northern (744), southern (693), eastern (653), north-eastern (545) and western (484) regions. Most of the violations verified by the country task force were attributed to the Taliban (1,886), and while grave violations attributed to former government and pro-government forces (769) decreased markedly following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, those committed by unidentified perpetrators (1,605) increased. A total of 14 children were affected by multiple violations, notably recruitment and use and killing and maiming (4), abduction and sexual violence (4), sexual violence and killing and maiming (2), abduction, sexual violence and killing and maiming (1), abduction, recruitment and use and killing and maiming (1) and abduction and killing and maiming (1). Moreover, an additional 117 children were killed or maimed in the context of attacks on schools, and 1 boy was maimed in the context of attacks on hospitals in 2022.

24. The Taliban were responsible for 1,886 grave violations. Former government and pro-government forces were responsible for 769 violations (768 in 2021 and 1 in 2022). Other violations were attributed to armed groups, notably ISIL-KP (227), the National Resistance Front (15), self-proclaimed Da'esh (1) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (1). The remaining 1,605 violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators, including 346 that occurred in crossfire between pro-government forces and armed groups and one between the Taliban and ISIL-KP. Fifteen violations occurred during cross-border shelling from Pakistan.

A. Recruitment and use

25. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 257 children (256 boys and 1 girl), some as young as 12 years old, a similar trend compared with the previous reporting period. A decrease observed from 2021 (203) to 2022 (54) can be explained by sensitivities and concern that contributed to under-reporting. Violations occurred in the central (203), north-eastern (27), northern (15), southern (9), eastern (2) and western (1) regions. The Taliban were responsible for the recruitment and use of 217 children, or 84 per cent. Of those, the majority were recruited in 2021 (145), late-verified in 2022 and released to the country task force for reintegration into society. Government and pro-government forces were responsible for 24 violations, notably pro-government militia (16), the Afghan National Police (7) and the Afghan National Police jointly with the Afghan National Army (1). Other perpetrators were the National Resistance Front (15) and unidentified (1).

26. Most children (167) were used in support roles, while 90 children were used in both combat and support roles. Methods of recruitment included persuasion by local leaders, relatives or parents (177), forcible removal (1) and unknown methods (79). For example, on 29 December 2022, in the central region, a 16-year-old girl was forcibly used by the Taliban to bring wood from the mountains. When she began to refuse their orders, she was held against her will at a security post and beaten severely.

27. Children associated with the Taliban were used in combat, including in suicide attack squads, and in support roles, such as making and transporting improvised explosive devices for the Taliban. In 2022, four boys who had been recruited and used were killed in crossfire, while a girl was abducted, recruited and used and then maimed by the Taliban.

28. During 2022, through provincial-level advocacy with the Taliban, the country task force facilitated the release of 494 children (all boys) who had been recruited and used in previous years in the north-eastern (252), central (145) and northern (97) regions. All the released boys benefited from the country task force-supported reintegration programme.

29. Boys were more likely to be recruited and used than girls owing in part to cultural norms and religious beliefs. Poverty was also a significant push-and-pull factor, with boys more likely to bear the responsibility for meeting the household's economic needs.

Children deprived of liberty for alleged association with armed groups and/or on the basis of charges related to national security

30. A total of 403 children (325 boys and 78 girls) were verified to have been deprived of liberty on national security-related charges and for alleged or actual affiliation with opposing forces or groups by both the former government and the Taliban. This represents a 30 per cent increase compared with the previous reporting period, when 311 children were detained. In 2021, 334 children as young as 12 years old were held by the previous government, detained in the juvenile rehabilitation centre (166 boys) and kept with their mothers in the Kabul female detention centre (168 children: 90 boys and 78 girls). In 2022, 69 boys aged 11 to 17 years were in the custody of the Taliban on security charges and alleged association with the National Resistance Front.

31. After August 2021, the Taliban announced the release of all prisoners from Pul-e Charkhi Prison, juvenile rehabilitation centres and the detention facilities of the National Directorate for Security, but the country task force confirmed the continued presence of unknown numbers of children detained with adults in prisons and juvenile rehabilitation centres.

B. Killing and maiming

32. The country task force verified the killing (879) and maiming (2,369) of 3,248 children (2,223 boys, 972 girls and 53 of sex unknown) aged from a few months to 17 years in 2021 (2,339) and 2022 (909). Of the total, 2,074 casualties occurred before 15 August 2021. Child casualties accounted for 72 per cent of all verified violations during the reporting period. Notwithstanding a 44 per cent decrease in child casualties compared with the previous period (5,770), a concerning observation was that the two leading causes of child casualties were victim-operated improvised explosive devices (1,678 children) and ground engagement (936). The central region remained the most affected (929), followed by the northern (575), eastern (519), southern (507), north-eastern (391) and western (327) regions. Most child casualties were unattributed (1,539). The main identified perpetrator remained the Taliban (788), followed by government and pro-government forces (698), ISIL-KP (206), cross-border shelling from Pakistan (15), self-proclaimed Da'esh (1) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (1).

33. In 2022, there was a 61 per cent decrease in verified child casualties compared with 2021, attributed to monitoring constraints and the cessation of hostilities, with the leading cause being explosive devices (92 per cent). However, concerns remained that the lack of funding for demining activities, as well as the withdrawal of donor support for the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination, as experienced during the year, may contribute to the trend of child casualties in the future. There were 313 demining teams, including 79 female teams banned from working since late December 2022. Funding for victim assistance was also lacking.

34. Government and pro-government forces were responsible for 698 child casualties, all of which happened in 2021. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were responsible for 582 child casualties. Other child casualties were attributed to both government and pro-government forces (72), pro-government militia (20) and unidentified pro-government forces (15), as well as international forces (9).

35. Child casualties resulted mainly from victim-operated improvised explosive devices (1,678), ground engagement (936), air strikes (249), targeted killings (105) and suicide attacks (65). For example, in the central region in April 2021, unidentified perpetrators detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device against a guest house, maiming 28 boys and 11 girls out of a total of 122 civilian casualties. The explosion also caused damage to a hospital. On 3 November 2021, in Kunduz Province, an incident occurred in which an explosive remnant of war, unknowingly brought home the previous day, detonated during a family gathering. The blast resulted in the death of three adults and injured seven children (2 boys and 5 girls) between the ages 9 and 16 years. On 4 March 2022, in Kharotay area, Dand Patan district, in the eastern region, 2 boys were killed and 23 boys were maimed after an improvised explosive device was placed in a mosque. The device detonated soon after the end of Friday prayers. In another incident, at the Kaaj Educational Centre in Kabul city, on 30 September 2022, a body-borne improvised explosive device detonated while students were taking a mock examination. At least three girls 16 to 17 years of age were killed, and five boys and five girls 15 to 17 years of age were maimed.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

36. The country task force verified the rape of and other forms of sexual violence against 21 children (9 boys and 12 girls), 8 of which occurred in 2021 and 13 in 2022, a slight decrease compared with 31 cases verified in the previous reporting period. Violations were attributed to the Taliban (8), former government and pro-government forces (8), including the Afghan National Police (6), the Afghan National Army (1) and pro-government militia (1 in 2022), and unidentified perpetrators (5). Violations occurred in the central (11), southern (7) and northern (3) regions. Verified cases included rape (11), *bacha bazi*² (7 boys) and forced marriage (3). It is worth noting that, before the reporting period, in November 2020, the then Ministry of Interior Affairs launched its internal child protection policy, which included provisions on the protection of children from recruitment and use and sexual violence, including *bacha bazi*.

37. As an example, in 2022, the country task force verified an incident of sexual violence in which a boy was used for the purpose of *bacha bazi* by a former pro-government militia. The survivor was released, and the alleged perpetrator was arrested.

38. Accountability for sexual violence remained low, with few perpetrators brought to justice. No significant measures have been taken by the de facto authorities to end and prevent sexual violence against children or to hold perpetrators accountable. During the reporting period, alleged perpetrators were arrested in 2 instances of sexual violence; however, in the remaining 19 cases, the perpetrators remained at large.

39. The scale of sexual violence affecting girls and boys is believed to be under-reported owing to fear of stigmatization and reprisals, weak rule of law and impunity, lack of accountability, absence of adequate support services for survivors and safety concerns. In only two cases were the victims provided with services ranging from psychosocial support to medical assistance, including post-exposure prophylaxis kits, as well as transportation to medical facilities. The under-reporting was also attributable to a culture of silence in which shame is associated with the survivors rather than the perpetrators, making it difficult for survivors to report violations and seek support. Lack of availability of specialized services for rape survivors was a

² *Bacha bazi* is a harmful practice whereby boys are used by men for entertainment. The boys are made to dance at parties and are often dressed in female clothes and subjected to sexual violence.

significant concern, affecting the ability of children to gain access to appropriate care and support.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

40. A total of 211 attacks on schools (125) and hospitals (86), including related protected persons, were verified.

Attacks on schools

41. The country task force verified 125 attacks on schools and education personnel, including schools being attacked and damaged, and threats and violence against education facilities and personnel. The attacks occurred in 2021 (53) and 2022 (72). The majority of violations occurred in the eastern (80), central (52) and north-eastern (44) regions. In addition, 326 students (209 in 2021 and 117 in 2022) were killed or maimed in the context of and as a result of attacks on schools. The access to education of 37,405 children was affected.

42. While there was a 5 per cent decrease in the number of attacks on schools compared with the previous reporting period (132), there was an increase in the number of attacks on schools from 2021 (53) to 2022 (72), following the Taliban takeover. Of 59 incidents attributed to the Taliban in 2022, 35 incidents involved damage to schools while they were in use.

43. Nearly 65 per cent of attacks on schools and related protected persons were attributed to the Taliban (81). The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and pro-government forces were responsible for 14 incidents, namely the Afghan National Army (6), the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (2), the National Directorate for Security (2), pro-government militia (2), unidentified components of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (1) and unidentified pro-government forces (1). Four attacks were attributed to ISIL-KP, and 26 attacks were unattributed, including 12 in crossfire between armed groups and pro-government forces.

Attacks on hospitals

44. The country task force verified 86 attacks on hospitals and related personnel in 2021 (63) and in 2022 (23), representing a 48 per cent decrease compared with the previous reporting period (165). Attacks included threats and violence against health personnel and facilities, as well as destruction of facilities, with attacks occurring in the central (22), northern (23), eastern (14), north-eastern (12), southern (8) and western (7) regions.

45. Nearly half the verified attacks on hospitals and related protected persons were attributed to the Taliban (42). The former government and pro-government forces and militia were responsible for 24 attacks, attributed to the Afghan National Army (14), pro-government militias (4), unidentified components of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (3), the Afghan National Police (2) and the National Directorate for Security (1). A total of 8 attacks were attributed to ISIL-KP, and 12 attacks were unattributed.

Military use of schools and hospitals

46. The country task force verified the military use of 80 schools and 12 hospitals attributed to the Taliban (24), former government and pro-government forces (11) and unidentified perpetrators (57). A total of 80 schools were militarily used in 2021 (26) and 2022 (54), representing a 371 per cent increase compared with the previous

reporting period (17). The military use of schools occurred in the central (56), southern (10), eastern (9), northern (4) and western (1) regions, contributing to the deprivation of girls' and boys' access to education. For example, in 2022, owing to military use, 35 schools were damaged. Twelve hospitals were used by the military in 2021 (9) and 2022 (3) in the southern (4), north-eastern (4), northern (2), central (1) and western (1) regions. This represents a 200 per cent increase compared with the previous reporting period (4).

E. Abduction

47. The country task force verified the abduction of 33 children (30 boys and 3 girls) as young as 5 years of age in 2021 (25) and 2022 (8), with violations occurring in the northern (14), central (8), north-eastern (7), eastern (3) and western (1) regions. This represents a 52 per cent decrease compared with the previous reporting period, when 69 children were abducted. In seven verified cases, abduction was followed by other grave violations. For example, four girls were abducted and subjected to sexual violence.

48. Most abductions were attributed to the Taliban (28) in 2021 (25) and 2022 (3) and to unidentified perpetrators (5) in 2022. For instance, in November 2022, a 5-year-old girl was abducted by unidentified perpetrators, and her deceased body was later found.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

49. The country task force verified 749 incidents of denial of humanitarian access in 2021 (31) and 2022 (718) attributed to the Taliban (722), unidentified perpetrators (17), ISIL-KP (9) and pro-government militia (1) in the central (181), southern (155), western (141), northern (95), eastern (101) and north-eastern (76) regions. Such denial of humanitarian access impeded children's access to life-saving assistance. Incidents involved interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities, restriction of movements, and threats and violence against humanitarian assets and personnel, including assault, detention and killing of humanitarian personnel. This is a sharp increase compared with the previous reporting period, when the country task force verified 46 incidents. The increase is attributed to the de facto authorities' implementation of provisions constraining humanitarian operations, restricting the work of NGOs that deliver humanitarian assistance.

50. For example, on 5 October 2022, an international NGO staff member was arrested by the Taliban national intelligence when he left the office. The aid worker was beaten and interrogated about his work for five hours before he was released. In another incident, in April 2021 in the eastern region, ISIL-KP attached a magnetic improvised explosive device to a minibus transporting five female NGO staff and three children to clinics. The improvised explosive device was defused by the Afghan National Police.

51. On 22 October 2022, the law on coordination and regulation of the activities of national and international NGOs was signed by the de facto Prime Minister. As a result, many national and international NGOs engaged in humanitarian response faced obstacles. These included insecure work environments, mistreatment, arrest and detention, extortion, excessive registration requirements, uninformed visits, and restrictions on female humanitarian workers, including imposition of the hijab and accompaniment by a *mahram* (a male family member acting as a chaperone) whenever they stepped outside their home.

V. Progress and challenges in addressing grave violations against children

A. Update on action plans, dialogue with parties to the conflict and advocacy

52. Before August 2021, the country task force regularly supported the former Government in the development of policies in line with the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. This included the endorsement by the National Commission on the Protection of Child Rights on 15 February 2021 of a national child protection policy in line with the Law on the Protection of Child Rights of 5 March 2019, and a policy on protection of children and armed conflict launched on 20 June 2021 by the Office of the National Security Council for implementation by the security sector, aimed at preventing all six grave violations against children in Afghanistan.

53. The former Government signed an action plan in 2011 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by its national security forces, and an accompanying road map for compliance was formalized in 2014. The action plan was implemented until August 2021. In the 2021 annual report of the Secretary-General ([A/75/873-S/2021/437](#)), the Afghan National Police was delisted for the violation of recruitment and use of children owing to sustained progress in the implementation of its action plan and to the significant continued decrease in cases under this violation.

54. The Afghan National Army, previously listed in section B of annex I as one of the parties responsible for the killing and maiming of children in Afghanistan, was removed from the list in the 2022 annual report of the Secretary-General ([A/76/871-S/2022/493](#)), as it ceased to exist following the Taliban takeover.

55. Since August 2021, the Taliban has not made any reference to previous domestic law, such as the Law on the Protection of Child Rights, and/or policies, such as the national child protection policy, to help to guide their efforts on child protection measures. Similarly, no action has been taken by the Taliban to ensure compliance with international standards pertaining to children, such as compliance with the definition of a child in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

56. The Taliban leader issued a decree in March 2022 banning the recruitment of underage children to security institutions, and authorized security officials to take serious measures to prevent the recruitment of minors, specifically “children who do not show physical signs of puberty”. In line with the above-mentioned decree, in May 2022, the de facto Minister of Defence issued a decree prohibiting the recruitment and presence of minors within the de facto army and instructed the de facto Inspector General to follow up and ensure implementation. In October 2022, the de facto Ministry of Interior announced the establishment of a reform commission tasked with demobilizing minors from the ranks of the de facto armed forces. As a result, a total of 635 children formerly associated with the Taliban were demobilized in 2022. No measures have been taken by the de facto authorities to hold accountable perpetrators of recruitment and use.

57. The dire economic situation, absence of birth registration and falsification of *tazkira* (national identity document) put children at risk of recruitment and use. With no oversight mechanism, boys became more vulnerable to other violations, including sexual abuse and exploitation. The de facto authorities denied their use of minors, whom they defined as persons with no sign of puberty, reporting that it was prohibited in their code of conduct, but there was no formalized age assessment mechanism in place.

58. The de facto authorities formally granted the country task force access to juvenile rehabilitation centres and prisons. Despite limited capacity and challenges in engaging with de facto authorities, the country task force monitored conditions in juvenile rehabilitation centres and prisons and advocated the establishment of a consistent and coherent system of dealing with children deprived of liberty in a child-friendly way, in line with international juvenile justice standards. However, with the abolishment of specialized juvenile courts and courts for the elimination of violence against women, there was no formal justice mechanism in place to specifically address children in conflict with the law and child victims of domestic and sexual violence. Detained juveniles were frequently received with little to no respect for their due process rights, in particular without the presumption of innocence and without knowing the charges against them. While the 2019 Law on the Protection of Child Rights prescribed the minimum age of criminal responsibility as 12 years, the country task force continued to observe the detention of minors as young as 11 years of age in detention facilities. The absence of a standardized age assessment guideline is a contributing factor.

59. In July 2022, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict met with a Taliban representative in Doha and discussed the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Afghanistan. Engagement is continuing.

B. Advocacy and mainstreaming of child protection

60. Between April and December 2022, the country task force raised the awareness of 226 interlocutors, including 38 women, of the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including knowledge of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict, national and international standards, ethical considerations, minimum verification standards and risk avoidance. The regional task forces of the mechanism in five regions/zones were revitalized and operationalized, including in the central, eastern, western, southern and northern regions.

61. Other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes that are members of the country task force have been vital in reactivating the task force of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict at the regional level, increasing the effectiveness of a United Nations-wide effort to protect children in conflict zones. This resulted in increased reporting and verification of incidents relevant to the thematic mandate of respective United Nations entities.

VI. Release of children and programmatic response

62. The former Ministry of Interior, in the framework of the 2011 action plan and through its child protection units, prevented 113 underage applicants (all boys) from enlisting in the Afghan National Police from 1 January to 15 August 2021.

63. The de facto Ministry of Defence, in accordance with its Code of Practice, demobilized 141 underage boys from the military academy and the ranks of the military corps in May 2022. An additional 494 children formerly associated with the Taliban were released. All released children received support through reintegration programmes, including interim care, family tracing and reunification, access to education and vocational training opportunities.

VII. Observations and recommendations

64. I remain extremely concerned by the recurrence of grave violations against children in Afghanistan. I condemn these grave violations against children committed by parties to the conflict and urge all parties to immediately take all actions necessary to better protect and uphold the rights of children in Afghanistan and to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

65. I continue to be extremely concerned by the high number of children killed and maimed, including by explosive ordnance, such as landmines, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war. I urge all parties to immediately take all preventive and mitigating actions necessary to avoid and minimize harm and better protect children during hostilities and from the risks and effects of explosive ordnance. I urge parties to refrain from the use of explosive weapons that cause death or injury to children. I call upon parties to the conflict to abide by Protocol V to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, to which Afghanistan is a State party and which includes measures to ensure the protection of civilians, explosive ordnance clearance and explosive ordnance risk education, and I call upon the international community to step up support for such operations.

66. The number of attacks and threats of attacks against schools and hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals, as well as the military use of these facilities, remains a concern. I call upon all parties to the conflict to immediately end and prevent such attacks and in particular to end the military use of such facilities and restore such facilities for civilian use. The Security Council, in its resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#), urged all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian character of schools and educational facilities in accordance with international humanitarian law.

67. I call upon the Taliban to swiftly take all measures to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, to actively prevent child casualties and attacks on schools and hospitals, and to take the steps necessary to ensure that those who commit grave violations against children are held accountable in accordance with international law. I further urge the Taliban to engage with the United Nations, pursuant to Security Council resolution [1460 \(2003\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, to adopt concrete measures to prohibit and prevent grave violations against children.

68. I note the adoption by the Taliban of a decree and a code of practice prohibiting and preventing the recruitment and use of boys without signs of puberty within security ranks, and the demobilization of 635 children during the reporting period. However, I reiterate my call upon the de facto authorities to define a child as every human being below the age of 18 years, develop standardized age assessment guidelines, establish child protection units at recruitment centres and respect the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

69. I am concerned about the deprivation of liberty of children owing to their actual or alleged association with opposing parties to the conflict. I call upon the de facto authorities to treat children primarily as victims. Deprivation of liberty should be a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time, in line with international juvenile justice standards and the best interests of the child. I also call upon the de facto authorities to re-establish the specialized juvenile justice system to ensure children's rights to due process and their access to justice.

70. I urge the de facto authorities to lift the suspension of girls' secondary education and women's access to university education, and urge the immediate reopening of schools beyond the sixth grade for all girls. I urge the de facto authorities to ensure that all children, boys and girls, can gain access to all levels of education that is free from violence, threats, closures and attacks.

71. I am concerned by the increasing restrictions on humanitarian access, and call upon the Taliban and all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access to children. The severe restrictions imposed on Afghan women from working for international and national NGOs and the United Nations negatively affects the provision of life-saving assistance to the population, including children and girls in particular. I urge the Taliban to revoke their decision.

72. I urge donors to enhance their financial support to programmes that address humanitarian and basic human needs, especially those that help children affected by conflict and that facilitate access to education and health services. I call upon the international community to support the interim care, long-term psychosocial recovery, and community-based social and economic reintegration of children who have been recruited and used. I also call upon the international community to support humanitarian mine clearance action and to provide victim assistance, including life-saving medical interventions, and robust support for girls who are victims of conflict-related sexual violence.

73. I regret that the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, for the first time since its creation, did not adopt conclusions on my previous report, and express hope that Security Council members can swiftly adopt conclusions on the present report.
