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## Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: gender mainstreaming, situations and programmatic matters**

## **Release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts**

### **Report of the Secretary-General**

#### *Summary*

The present report has been prepared in response to the request contained in resolution 66/2 of the Commission on the Status of Women on the release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts. It includes information from Member States and provides an update on attention given to issues relating to the topic in intergovernmental processes as well as offering recommendations for the consideration of the Commission.

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\* E/CN.6/2024/1.



## I. Introduction

1. At its sixty-sixth session, held in 2022, the Commission on the Status of Women adopted resolution 66/2 (see [E/2022/27](#)) on the release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts. Recalling its previous resolutions on the topic, as well as related provisions in international legal instruments, standards and normative frameworks, the Commission expressed its grave concern about the growing number and increasingly protracted nature of armed conflicts in many regions throughout the world and the human suffering and humanitarian emergencies they caused. The Commission also expressed concern that, despite the efforts of the international community, acts of kidnapping and hostage-taking, in their different forms and manifestations, including those committed by terrorists and armed groups, continued to take place and had even increased in many regions of the world. The Commission also noted the particular impact that trafficking in persons in situations of armed conflict had on women and children, including their increased vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence. The Commission condemned all violent acts committed against the civilian population as such, in violation of international humanitarian law in situations of armed conflict, and urged States that are parties to an armed conflict to take all measures necessary, in a timely manner, to determine the identity, fate and whereabouts of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts, and called for their immediate release.

2. In resolution 66/2, the Commission requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission at its sixty-eighth session a comprehensive report covering all aspects of the resolution, including relevant practical recommendations to address issues relating to the release of women and children taken hostage in armed conflicts, taking into account the information provided by States and relevant international organizations. The present report has been prepared in response to that request. In the report, the Secretary-General includes information from Member States, provides an update on attention given by human rights treaty bodies and in intergovernmental processes to issues relating to the topic from the end of December 2021 until the time of writing and offers recommendations for the consideration of the Commission.

## II. Context and background

3. Resolution 66/2 is clear on the obligations of all parties to armed conflicts to respect fully the provisions of international humanitarian law regarding the protection of civilians, including in particular the prohibition on the taking of hostages. The apparent disregard of these obligations, including in the context of violent extremism and terrorism, across regions is of profound concern. Since the previous report on this topic ([E/CN.6/2022/8](#)), the global context has continued to deteriorate following the devastating increase and escalation in violence and conflict, repeated shocks and multiple overlapping crises that have rocked the world. These crises have placed many of the issues covered by resolution 66/2 in sharp focus.

4. The number of women and girls living in conflict-affected countries reached 614 million in 2022, 50 per cent higher than the number in 2017.<sup>1</sup> There has been a record increase in forced displacement. As of May 2023, the number of people forced to flee war, violence and persecution had reached over 110 million – more than ever before.<sup>2</sup> In terms of humanitarian needs, 2023 was an immensely challenging year.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.unrefugees.org/news/five-takeaways-from-the-2022-unhcr-global-trends-report/](https://www.unrefugees.org/news/five-takeaways-from-the-2022-unhcr-global-trends-report/).

By the year's end, almost 30 million more people needed humanitarian assistance than at the start.<sup>3</sup> Displacement, acute food insecurity and malnutrition continued to reach historically high levels.<sup>4</sup> According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, much of this increase was driven by nearly 200 armed conflicts and situations of organized violence<sup>5</sup> and conditions have worsened owing to environmental degradation and climate change.

5. The world is growing increasingly insecure and increasingly militarized. The reporting period saw a rise in geopolitical tensions, an acceleration of military build-ups and the continued occurrence of military coups and unconstitutional changes of government. The world remains at the highest level of nuclear risk in decades and military spending has continued to soar. World military expenditure increased in 2022 for the eighth consecutive year, reaching, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, an all-time high of \$2.24 trillion.<sup>6</sup> The illicit proliferation of arms continues to initiate, sustain and exacerbate armed conflict and pervasive crime globally, including conflict-related sexual violence, kidnappings, hostage-taking and trafficking in persons. Meanwhile, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, is in peril. Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the Goals is weak and insufficient; progress on 30 per cent has stalled or gone into reverse. These include key targets on poverty, hunger and climate.<sup>7</sup>

6. In his previous report, the Secretary-General expressed concern about human rights and the rule of law being under attack and the worrying growth in xenophobia, racism and intolerance fuelled by hate speech. Sadly, this deeply concerning trend has persisted, and while there is greater attention paid to threats and violence faced by women human rights defenders, such violence remains on the rise. As seen in Afghanistan and the Sudan, these negative trends are setting back progress on both gender equality and global peace (see [S/2023/725](#)). Violations against children have also increased. In 2022, the United Nations verified 27,180 grave violations against children, of which killing and maiming, and the recruitment and use of children, followed by abduction and the denial of humanitarian access, continued to be the highest violations (see [A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)). Shockingly, compared with 2021, attacks on schools and hospitals and their personnel surged by 112 percent.<sup>8</sup> Armed conflict remains a driver of child, early and forced marriage, and war and conflict offer opportunities that traffickers can exploit (see [A/78/172](#)). Evidence shows that female victims are subjected to physical or extreme violence at the hands of traffickers at a rate three times higher than males, and children almost twice as often as adults.<sup>9</sup> State armed forces and non-State armed groups continued to target civilians with rape, gang rape and abductions. United Nations-designated terrorist groups, other non-State armed groups and transnational criminal networks use sexual violence as a tactic, destabilizing already fragile contexts (see [S/2023/413](#)). There

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137972>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2024>.

<sup>5</sup> See Uppsala Conflict Data Program, data for 2022. Available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2022>.

<sup>6</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges", 24 April 2023. Available at [www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges](http://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, "The Sustainable Development Goals report 2023: special edition". Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2023/10/statement-by-srsg-gamba-at-the-third-committee-of-the-general-assembly-discussion-of-the-promotion-and-protection-of-the-rights-of-children-2/>.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/January/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons-2022.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/January/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons-2022.html).

continues to be near-complete impunity for human trafficking, crimes of sexual violence and violations of women's and girls' rights perpetrated in the context of organized crime and terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

7. Figures from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) indicate that the number of people who go missing or whose bodies are unidentified continues to grow at an alarming rate around the world. By the end of 2022, more than 195,000 missing persons were registered with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency and its Family Links Network around the world, the majority of whom were related to armed conflict.<sup>11</sup>

8. This background underscores the urgency for Member States to fulfil their international human rights and humanitarian law obligations, and to realize global commitments on sustainable development and gender equality while increasing investment in human security and building and sustaining peace. Despite the efforts of the international community noted in resolution 66/2 and previous resolutions, acts of hostage-taking in different forms and manifestations, including those committed by terrorists and armed groups, continue to be perpetrated across regions, and have markedly increased in some settings.

9. As underlined in the previous report, States that are parties to an armed conflict have an obligation not to take hostage women and children in armed conflicts. States are required by law and by relevant international and national mechanisms and policies to protect women and children. The Commission on the Status of Women and other intergovernmental bodies, including the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council, have repeatedly emphasized the need for increased accountability, and the responsibility of all States, in accordance with international law, to prosecute or bring to justice those responsible for violations, including crimes involving hostage-taking and conflict-related sexual violence.

10. With regard to non-State actors, according to Israeli authorities, over 1,250 people were killed – including at least 281 women and 33 children – and thousands were injured in the abhorrent acts of terror by Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups on 7 October. In addition, some 250 people, including approximately 65 women and 34 children, were abducted and taken into Gaza, including Israelis and foreign nationals (see [S/2023/988](#)).<sup>12</sup> There are also numerous accounts of sexual violence that must be vigorously investigated and prosecuted.

11. On 20 and 23 October, Hamas released four women hostages for what it said were humanitarian and health reasons. The Israel Defense Forces rescued 1 Israeli soldier on 29 October, reported that it had subsequently retrieved 3 bodies of hostages during its ground operations and confirmed the deaths of 22 hostages in captivity. Starting on 24 November, as part of an arrangement between Israel and Hamas facilitated by Egypt, Qatar and the United States of America, during a seven-day humanitarian pause, Hamas released 78 hostages – 42 women, 33 children and 3 men ([S/2023/988](#), para. 13). As of early January, the Israeli authorities estimated that about 136 Israelis and foreign nationals remain captive in Gaza.<sup>13</sup> Repeated calls have been made by the Secretary-General and the Security Council for the immediate and

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, [S/2023/413](#) and [S/2023/725](#).

<sup>11</sup> ICRC, "Preventing separation, searching for the missing, and reuniting families since 1870", 30 August 2023. Available at <https://blogs.icrc.org/ir/en/2023/08/>.

<sup>12</sup> See also [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-11-29/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-middle-east-delivered](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-11-29/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-middle-east-delivered).

<sup>13</sup> See [www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-88](http://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-88).

unconditional release of all hostages.<sup>14</sup> Access to the hostages by ICRC must be provided to ensure their health and safety, in line with international humanitarian law.

12. As seen in Nigeria, the impacts of abductions can be long-term. New abductions of children have been reported and, nearly a decade after Boko Haram militants abducted 276 schoolgirls from their dormitory in Chibok, in north-eastern Nigeria, 96 remain in captivity.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Information from Member States

13. The Governments of Argentina, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Georgia, Guatemala, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Mexico and Ukraine provided information regarding the implementation of resolution 66/2. Several expressed concerns over deteriorating security and humanitarian situations and the immense suffering of people in conflict-affected settings. Member States underscored the principles of international humanitarian law, reaffirmed their commitment to the realization of global goals on gender equality and the protection of women and children in armed conflict and recognized the need for effective national policies and strategies for their implementation, which includes policies and mechanisms aimed at securing the release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts. They emphasized the need to protect the rights of the disappeared and their families and to ensure that the issues of missing persons, enforced disappearances and hostage-taking in all its forms remain priorities on the United Nations agenda. Some States, while noting that they currently were not experiencing armed conflict as defined by international humanitarian law, shared information on efforts made to promote and protect the rights of women and girls, including through legal reforms, dedicated policies and action plans.

14. Argentina highlighted efforts to implement international and regional normative frameworks and standards, noting initiatives to translate global commitments on women and peace and security into regional and national policies and programmes, including through the implementation of its second national action plan on women and peace and security, launched in 2022. Argentina emphasized its support for efforts to establish zero tolerance for conflict-related sexual violence, highlighting its adherence to the voluntary compact on preventing and addressing sexual abuse and exploitation and recognizing the work of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Justice Rapid Response initiative in helping international courts and national transitional justice mechanisms investigate and document conflict-related sexual violence. Argentina also described its efforts to address gender-based violence at the national level, adopt gender-sensitive policy measures and combat, prevent and eliminate trafficking in persons.

15. Azerbaijan, a sponsor of resolution 66/2, provided data and detailed the efforts taken by the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons, which is mandated to document and clarify the fate of all citizens registered as missing, including women and children, in relation to the conflict in the Karabagh region. Azerbaijan reported that, as of August 2023, the State Commission had registered 3,890 people as missing persons, including 719 civilians, of whom 269 were women, and 71 minors, 20 of whom were girls. Azerbaijan emphasized that the issue of missing persons, given its scale and adverse implications, should remain one of the priorities on the agenda of the United Nations. Azerbaijan has continued to

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Security Council resolution 2720 (2023).

<sup>15</sup> See [www.unicef.org/press-releases/devastating-reality-9-years-after-chibok-abductions-children-northeast-nigeria](https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/devastating-reality-9-years-after-chibok-abductions-children-northeast-nigeria).

share with intergovernmental bodies detailed accounts on the lasting impact of violence, including with respect to prisoners of war and civilian hostages.

16. Croatia emphasized the need to intensify conflict-prevention efforts and address conflict-related sexual violence, highlighting its role as one of the champion countries of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative. Croatia stressed that a climate of impunity for those committing crimes against women and children could not be accepted and underscored that justice was a precondition for peace and reconciliation. Croatia highlighted its Law on the Rights of Victims of Sexual Violence in the Homeland War and noted that it could serve as a model for similar situations. Croatia drew attention to and expressed its support for General Assembly resolution [75/277](#) on the responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and resolution [76/304](#) on international cooperation for access to justice, remedies and assistance for survivors of sexual violence. It also emphasized the importance of fighting against hate speech. Croatia described its efforts to implement its second national action plan on women and peace and security and emphasized the importance of women's meaningful engagement in peace and security processes at all levels. Croatia also underlined the importance of the implementation of its national programme on psychosocial and health assistance to participants and victims of the Homeland War, the Second World War and returnees from peacekeeping missions.

17. Georgia described how the security, humanitarian and human rights situation has deteriorated in both Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and its impact on the conflict-affected people, including women and children. The Government of Georgia underscored its commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia and the protection of the rights of women and girls. Highlighting its 2022–2024 national action plan on the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security, Georgia shared information on its efforts to strengthen women's participation in peace and security processes, prevent all forms of violence against conflict-affected women and girls and improve security and access to public services, including physical and mental health services. The Government described efforts by the Georgian delegation in the Geneva International Discussions and in the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism under the Geneva International Discussions to promote the women and peace and security agenda and raise issues related to the needs and priorities of internally displaced and conflict-affected women, including through regular dialogue with the women as well as with representatives from civil society organizations working on women's rights. The Government of Georgia also provided information about its new national strategy for the protection of human rights in Georgia for the period 2022–2030, stating that the strategy addressed all fundamental human rights and freedoms and put a special emphasis on the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, persons with disabilities, ethnic/religious minorities and others.

18. Guatemala condemned all forms of violence against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law and emphasized the need to combat crimes such as hostage-taking in armed conflict. Crimes such as kidnapping, torture and trafficking in persons are defined in the country's penal code. Guatemala noted that issues related to resolution 66/2 had been addressed in the 1996 Peace Accords and their implementation, including with regard to enforced or involuntary disappearances. Guatemala emphasized the importance of documenting and recovering information about past events and human rights violations, and highlighted in this regard the country's Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory and its National Police historical archive and their contribution to transitional justice. Guatemala recognized the work of ICRC and its own national Red Cross Society. It also provided

information on efforts to increase access to justice for various population groups and described national and regional efforts to address trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, and efforts to strengthen the investigation of these crimes and the care and protection of victims. Guatemala drew attention to its national plan for the prevention of crimes of sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons launched in 2022. Guatemala also highlighted the women and peace and security agenda and the role of the Inter-Agency Roundtable on Women, Peace and Security (MIMPAZ) in promoting and facilitating the country's implementation of the agenda.

19. The Islamic Republic of Iran described efforts to promote and teach international humanitarian law and noted that kidnapping, including hostage-taking, and various forms of violence against women and children had been criminalized. Laws on supporting children and young adults and on combating human trafficking, and a bill on the promotion of security and protection of women against harm, were provided as examples.

20. Mexico described efforts taken since the previous report to protect and promote the rights of women and children and to prevent and address gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. Those efforts included action to address the sexual torture of women as well as their forced disappearance. Mexico reiterated the importance of properly investigating violent crimes against women, including femicide, and trafficking in persons and of taking action to address impunity for these crimes. A range of advocacy and capacity-building tools and training sessions have been developed to promote and uphold international and regional standards, and relevant obligations have been incorporated into the national legal framework and policies such as the Comprehensive Program to Prevent, Address, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women 2021–2024. Mexico described services provided to victims of violence, shared available data on violations and provided updates on efforts made to guarantee access to justice for women, children and/or adolescents.

21. Ukraine described the impact of the invasion by the Russian Federation and has shared detailed allegations of violations of international law, including against women and children, with human rights mechanisms and other intergovernmental bodies. Ukraine reported on its efforts to address the impact of the war on children and to establish the whereabouts of children missing, forcibly relocated or illegally deported, and referenced the Pre-Trial Chamber II decision of the International Criminal Court in this regard. Ukraine described the implementation of child-friendly practices by the National Police and the establishment of Barnahus centres in Ukraine with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The centres allow a team of specialists, including psychologists, social workers and doctors, to provide protection and sociopsychological support in the justice process for children who have suffered or witnessed violence. Ukraine also detailed efforts to establish the status of persons affected by human trafficking and provide support services. In June 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the State Targeted Social Programme for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings until 2025. The Programme seeks to improve the mechanism for preventing human trafficking, increase the effectiveness of identifying persons committing crimes related to human trafficking, and ensure the protection of the rights of victims of human trafficking and provide them with assistance. Information was also provided on measures taken to strengthen specialized support services for victims of domestic violence and/or gender-based violence and persons who had been deprived of their personal freedom. Ukraine is implementing its second national action plan on women and peace and security, which was updated and revised in response to the invasion by the Russian Federation and localized through local action plans.

#### IV. Attention given to issues relating to the topic in human rights bodies and intergovernmental processes

22. Since the issuance of the previous report (E/CN.6/2022/8), human rights treaty bodies and special procedures, the Human Rights Council, the Security Council and the General Assembly have continued to receive information on and consider a range of issues relating to the topic, including enforced disappearances and missing persons, trafficking in persons in situations of armed conflict, abduction and kidnapping, unlawful detention and forced recruitment of children in armed conflict. While those issues are now more systematically considered across these bodies and related mechanisms, and normative and policy breakthroughs have been achieved, an unevenness remains in the quality of gender analysis and the disaggregation of data included in reports and briefings to inform recommendations and policy responses. Some reports continue to show a paucity of gender-specific information, and a disconnect persists between the available information and analysis provided and its translation into gender-specific recommendations in related resolutions and outcomes. Often that information is not translated into concerted action by stakeholders. The persistence of gaps in the implementation of international norms and standards is a grave matter of concern.

23. The Committee on Enforced Disappearances continued to call on State parties to ensure that gender perspectives and child-sensitive approaches are used in implementing the rights and obligations set out in the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. The fate of detained, disappeared and missing persons, including not just thousands of women, but the larger number of men, whose absence has a profound impact on the lives of the women and girls in their families, is a human rights issue often raised by women advocates in conflict-affected countries (S/2023/725, para. 40).

24. Other special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council have continued to address a range of issues relevant to resolution 66/2. For instance, in her report entitled “Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings” (A/78/131), the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders highlighted the integral part women human rights defenders play in building peace, the nature of the risks they face because of it, including threats and risks covered in resolution 66/2, and the type of support needed to allow them to continue their work, both in-country and when engaging at the international level. In her report submitted to the General Assembly (A/78/172), the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, noted with alarm that accountability for trafficking in persons in conflict situations remained limited, and that the consequences of such continued impunity included limited access to justice and remedies for trafficked persons and continuing failures with regard to prevention and protection. She further noted that the International Criminal Court had not, as yet, prosecuted the crime of trafficking in persons, whether under the crimes against humanity of enslavement or sexual slavery, or under other relevant and related crimes.<sup>16</sup>

25. Human Rights Council-mandated commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions and ad hoc investigations remain critical for promoting accountability for serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and for countering impunity, including for the violations covered under resolution 66/2, and other acts of sexual and gender-based violence. During the reporting period, investigations were ongoing, ending or initiated in Belarus, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Iran (Islamic

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, A/78/520.

Republic of), Israel, Libya, Myanmar, Nicaragua, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.<sup>17</sup> The report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (A/HRC/54/55) identified grave and systematic violations of international law and crimes committed in Tigray, as well as in the Amhara, Afar and Oromiya regions. Violations included mass killings, rape, starvation, forced displacement and arbitrary detention. The Commission stated that past and current human rights violations in these four regions demanded further investigation. In its report to the General Assembly in October 2023 (A/78/540), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine documented evidence of shocking and widespread human rights violations, including conflict-related sexual violence. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel has called on all parties to the conflict to comply fully with international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and to act to prevent the commission of and incitement to any crimes under international law, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide; the Independent International Commission also reminded parties that taking civilian hostages and using civilians as human shields are war crimes (see A/78/198). The Independent International Commission has called for submissions on gender-based crimes since 7 October 2023.<sup>18</sup> The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar reported a dramatic increase in violence in Myanmar. The Mechanism continues to receive credible evidence that numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity, including sexual and gender-based violence, are being committed in Myanmar.<sup>19</sup>

26. The issue of missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic received increased attention in intergovernmental bodies during the reporting period. In a dedicated report on the issue (A/76/890), the Secretary-General drew attention to the unique impact on the families, in particular women and children, of those subjected to enforced disappearance, arbitrarily detained or otherwise missing, as well as financial and legal challenges and stigma owing to persisting gender inequalities and discriminatory laws and practices. In June 2023, the General Assembly adopted resolution 77/301 establishing, under the auspices of the United Nations, the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, mandated to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and to provide adequate support to victims, survivors and the families of those missing, in close cooperation and complementarity with all relevant actors.

27. Since the previous report (E/CN.6/2022/8), there has been some noteworthy progress towards accountability for crimes and violations against women and girls in conflict-affected contexts, including crimes covered in resolution 66/2. In April 2022, the case of Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, an alleged Janjaweed militia leader accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, including a count of rape as a crime against humanity and a count of rape as a war crime, proceeded to trial before the International Criminal Court.<sup>20</sup> In October 2022, the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic delivered its first verdict, convicting a commander of the armed group Retour, réclamation et réhabilitation of rape perpetrated by his subordinates on the basis of command responsibility.<sup>21</sup> In June

<sup>17</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/list-hrc-mandat](http://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/list-hrc-mandat).

<sup>18</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-israel/call-submissions-gender-based-crimes-7-October-2023](http://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-israel/call-submissions-gender-based-crimes-7-October-2023).

<sup>19</sup> See [https://iimm.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/June\\_IIMM\\_Bulletin\\_English.pdf](https://iimm.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/June_IIMM_Bulletin_English.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See [www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/abd-al-rahman](http://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/abd-al-rahman).

<sup>21</sup> S/2023/769, para. 47, and [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/11/central-african-republic-un-human-rights-chief-welcomes-convictions-over](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/11/central-african-republic-un-human-rights-chief-welcomes-convictions-over).

2023, a court in Germany delivered the third verdict of genocide against a member of Da'esh for the enslavement and abuse of Yazidi women in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>22</sup> In Guinea, the national trial of individuals responsible for the massacre and mass sexual violence of September 2009 opened.<sup>23</sup> In Colombia, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace included gender persecution in indictments for the first time, and formally opened Case No. 11 on gender-based violence, sexual violence, reproductive violence and other crimes committed out of prejudice on the basis of diverse sexual orientation, gender expression and/or identity within the Colombian armed conflict.<sup>24</sup> At the international level, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Court confirmed the conviction and the sentence of Dominic Ongwen, a former member of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, for 61 crimes characterized as crimes against humanity and war crimes, including forced pregnancy and other gender-based crimes.<sup>25</sup>

28. During the reporting period, the Security Council addressed several issues relevant to resolution 66/2 in both country-specific and thematic meetings, as well as in Arria-formula meetings<sup>26</sup> and meetings of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security. The Council received information about concerns linked to hostage-taking, abductions, kidnapping and/or trafficking in many settings, including but not limited to settings such as Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In many of these cases, the information referred to mass abductions of women and girls by non-State armed groups, targeted kidnappings or the enforced disappearance of women protesters, human rights defenders, journalists and others.

29. Attention was also given to the escalation in tensions and in hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the impact of the latest escalation in 2023 on the fragile humanitarian situation and allegations of hostage-taking in the past. The Secretary-General has urged all concerned to strictly observe the ceasefire in accordance with the 9 November 2020 Trilateral Statement and principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. The Security Council has met several times following the acts of terror committed by Hamas in Israel on 7 October and the commencement of military operations by Israel in Gaza. The unfolding humanitarian catastrophe has had a disproportionate impact on women and children.<sup>27</sup> More than two thirds of those killed are reported to be women and children.<sup>28</sup> On 15 November 2023, the Security Council adopted resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#) addressing the humanitarian situation in Gaza, calling for urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors and the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups, especially children. The majority of the hostages that were released as of December 2023 were women and children. In its resolution

<sup>22</sup> See [www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-delivers-third-genocide-verdict-against-isis-member-enslavement-and-abuse-yazidi](http://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-delivers-third-genocide-verdict-against-isis-member-enslavement-and-abuse-yazidi).

<sup>23</sup> See [www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/guineas-landmark-2009-stadium-massacre-trial-back](http://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/guineas-landmark-2009-stadium-massacre-trial-back).

<sup>24</sup> See [www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/la-jep-atribuye-responsabilidad-por-crimenes-de-guerra-y-crimenes-de-lesa-humanidad-a-15-exintegrantes-de-las-farc-ep-por-h.aspx](http://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/la-jep-atribuye-responsabilidad-por-crimenes-de-guerra-y-crimenes-de-lesa-humanidad-a-15-exintegrantes-de-las-farc-ep-por-h.aspx) and [www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimenes.aspx](http://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimenes.aspx) (in Spanish).

<sup>25</sup> See [www.icc-cpi.int/news/ongwen-case-icc-appeals-chamber-confirms-conviction-and-sentencing-decisions](http://www.icc-cpi.int/news/ongwen-case-icc-appeals-chamber-confirms-conviction-and-sentencing-decisions).

<sup>26</sup> See also [www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/repertoire/research-tools/Arria-formula](http://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/repertoire/research-tools/Arria-formula).

<sup>27</sup> See <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15503.doc.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> See [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-11-29/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-middle-east-delivered](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-11-29/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-middle-east-delivered).

2720 (2023), adopted on 22 December 2023, the Council demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and the assurance of humanitarian access to address their medical needs. The Council called on all parties to the conflict to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.<sup>29</sup> The Council received information about issues related to resolution 66/2 across many other items on its agenda, either from the United Nations or from women representing the civil society organizations invited to these meetings. For example, in Lebanon, the number of women and girls reported missing increased by more than 50 per cent in 2022 compared with the previous year. In Yemen, the founder and president of the Abductees' Mothers Association told the Security Council that her organization had documented the abduction of 130 women by the Houthis since 2016. Several Yazidi survivors reminded the Council that almost half of the Yazidi abducted almost a decade ago were still missing.

30. Some examples of actions taken by the Security Council include repeated condemnations of the Taliban's restrictions of women's and girls' rights, including through the adoption of Council resolution 2681 (2023), co-sponsored by more than 90 countries, in April 2023; the adoption of stronger measures to address the increased number of incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by armed gangs in Haiti, such as the authorization for a Multinational Security Support mission to help the Haitian National Police as it works, inter alia, to counter sexual violence, kidnappings and trafficking in persons;<sup>30</sup> the establishment of a sanctions regime that has sexual violence as a stand-alone criterion for listing; the mandated deployment of a women's protection adviser; and stronger language on protecting women human rights defenders from reprisal.

31. In his 2022 and 2023 reports on women and peace and security (see [S/2022/740](#) and [S/2023/725](#)) the Secretary-General brought attention to several issues specific to resolution 66/2, including issues linked to trafficking, the abduction of women and girls, arbitrary arrests and detention. Both reports document a deeply concerning rise in threats and attacks against women human rights defenders and women in politics. The Secretary-General has urged Member States and regional organizations to use all forums, including the Security Council, to report regularly on steps to improve the enabling environment for women human rights defenders, provide both material and political support to their work and their organizations, and prevent and respond to specific threats or reprisals against them. In his reports, the Secretary-General also indicated that women continue to have limited opportunities to influence negotiations for peace, conveyed his deep concern that the political space for women to participate in decision-making on peace and security has decreased in several countries over the past years and noted that, 23 years after the Security Council adopted resolution 1325 (2000), women's participation should be a default, not an afterthought. In his reports, the Secretary-General reiterated the importance of realizing his five forward-looking goals on women and peace and security, which were introduced in 2020 ([S/2020/946](#), para. 113).

32. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict have remained seized of issues linked to the theme of the present report and have, with the support of the monitoring and reporting mechanisms linked to their mandates, included United Nations-verified information on related violations,

<sup>29</sup> In resolution [ES-10/22](#), adopted by the General Assembly on 12 December 2023 at its tenth emergency special session, the Assembly also demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, as well as the assurance of humanitarian access.

<sup>30</sup> See Security Council resolutions [2645 \(2022\)](#), [2653 \(2022\)](#) and [2699 \(2023\)](#).

patterns and trends in their briefings and reporting to the Security Council and General Assembly.

33. Conflict-related sexual violence against women, men, girls and boys persisted as an act of torture, a tactic of terrorism and a tool of political repression, displacement and dehumanization. The United Nations verified 2,455 reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence in 2022,<sup>31</sup> with the highest numbers recorded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These numbers must be understood as an undercount, as many cases go unreported or cannot be verified (see [S/2023/413](#)). In his report on conflict-related sexual violence ([S/2023/413](#)), the Secretary-General provided information on how women and girls continue to be exposed to abduction, kidnapping, forced marriage and trafficking and noted that patterns of sexual violence had persisted and deepened across several settings. In Haiti, testimonies from victims and witnesses indicated that kidnapped victims were sometimes raped several times by multiple armed captors in abandoned houses where they were held for weeks. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab had extended its control through the abduction, rape and forced marriage of local girls to its fighters when the girls' families were unable to meet extortion demands. In the Central African Republic, the Lord's Resistance Army continued to abduct women and girls for the purpose of sexual slavery, as a result of which victims and their children, including those born into captivity, suffered devastating physical and psychological repercussions. In most contexts, impunity for conflict-related sexual violence remained the norm.

34. The most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)) documented sharp increases in grave violations in several settings. The signing of the truce in Yemen contributed to a significant decline in violations, underlining the importance of peace in achieving security for children. Details and verified numbers on abductions and children in detention were also provided in the report, as well as in the country-specific reports under the mandate. New guidance was issued on the abduction of children in armed conflict.<sup>32</sup>

35. Despite a steady decline in child marriage in the past decade, UNICEF warned in a new report that multiple crises including conflict, climate shocks and the continued fallout from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic were threatening to reverse hard-earned gains.<sup>33</sup> In its resolution [77/202](#), the General Assembly urged States to enact, enforce and uphold laws and policies aimed at preventing and ending child, early and forced marriage, protecting those at risk and addressing the needs of those affected, and to work towards the coherence of these laws and policies at the local level. The Assembly also urged States to repeal or amend laws and remove any provisions that enabled perpetrators of rape, sexual exploitation and abuse or abduction to escape prosecution and punishment by marrying their victims and that may enable, justify, or lead to child, early and forced marriage.

## V. Conclusions and recommendations

**36. Hostage-taking, abductions, enforced disappearances, trafficking and kidnappings of women and children by State and non-State actors have continued to receive attention from intergovernmental bodies, including the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council and human rights treaty mechanisms. The reports and briefings before these bodies and the investigations, resolutions and observations of these bodies show that**

<sup>31</sup> See [www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/factsheet2022-2.pdf](http://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/factsheet2022-2.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> See [https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22-00040\\_Abduction-Guidance-for-CAAC\\_FINAL\\_WEB-1.pdf](https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22-00040_Abduction-Guidance-for-CAAC_FINAL_WEB-1.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> See <https://data.unicef.org/resources/is-an-end-to-child-marriage-within-reach/>.

urgent and more determined action is needed to prevent and address these grave violations. The protection of civilians is paramount in any armed conflict and parties to an armed conflict should comply with international humanitarian law.

37. Member States have recognized the need to radically accelerate the implementation of existing norms and standards, including on peace and security, humanitarian action, human rights and gender equality. In September 2023, at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, world leaders reaffirmed their commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and promote a systemic shift towards a more inclusive, just, peaceful, resilient and sustainable world for people and planet, for present and future generations. The Political Declaration adopted at the high-level political forum on sustainable development, under the auspices of the General Assembly, in September 2023, expressed concern about the untold human suffering caused by persistent or intensifying armed conflict and instability as well as the exacerbation of existing gender inequality caused by the cascading global crises.

38. The Political Declaration welcomed the Summit of the Future in 2024 as an important opportunity to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Concrete initiatives, actions and recommendations are outlined in the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda” (A/75/982) and in respective policy briefs, including the brief entitled “A new agenda for peace”.<sup>34</sup> In that policy brief, the Secretary-General put forward a unifying narrative about the current state of global peace and security and proposed a comprehensive set of recommendations ranging from nuclear disarmament and preventive diplomacy to intergovernmental reform and ideas to transform gendered power dynamics in peace and security.

39. Violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights are unacceptable. Truth, justice and accountability remain essential components in efforts towards reconciliation, the peaceful settlement of conflicts and the end of impunity. Member States have an obligation to uphold and enforce the relevant provisions contained in international humanitarian law and human rights instruments and ensure respect for, and the protection of, civilians. States should join relevant treaties and incorporate their international humanitarian and human rights obligations into national laws. Relevant obligations should also be reflected, as appropriate, by States and non-State armed groups in military manuals, codes of conduct, rules of engagement and training.

40. Parties to conflicts must take immediate steps to release all those taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts, and to ensure the safe and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel, including those engaged in the search for and identification of missing persons. In this regard, I reiterate my call for all hostages held by Hamas and other groups since the abhorrent attacks of 7 October to be released immediately and unconditionally. They must be treated humanely and must be allowed to receive visits from ICRC. The United Nations and regional organizations play important roles in supporting these efforts. Accountability for all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, with full respect and care for the rights of the victims, is crucial, in line with international norms and standards.

41. Addressing the issue of the release of women and children taken hostage in armed conflicts, including those subsequently imprisoned, as part of broader peace processes wherever applicable, remains critical. As emphasized in previous

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<sup>34</sup> See <https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace>.

reports, this should be done with reference to all justice and rule of law mechanisms and on the basis of transparency, accountability and public involvement and participation. Greater efforts are needed to ensure women's safe, full, equal and meaningful participation across all stages of peace processes in accordance with global commitments.

42. Continued efforts are needed by all actors to strengthen the quality of gender analysis in monitoring and reporting, including the availability of data disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other relevant factors. The various concerns, threats, challenges and recommendations related to the situation of women and girls should be highlighted systematically in all reports and briefings to intergovernmental bodies and their related outcomes.

43. There remains an urgent need to strengthen the protection and support provided to women leaders and human rights defenders, including individuals at immediate risk, and to strengthen national capacities to collect and analyse disaggregated data and report on the number of verified cases of killings, kidnappings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and other harmful acts against women human rights defenders.

44. States should apply a gender-responsive and survivor-centred approach and ensure that the victims of all forms of hostage-taking, abduction and detention have access to non-discriminatory and comprehensive health-care services, including sexual and reproductive health services, and psychosocial, legal and livelihood support.

45. The Commission may wish to reiterate the importance of addressing gender inequality as one of the root causes of women's and girls' vulnerability to abduction, hostage-taking, exploitation and abuse and note the need for coordinated action by all stakeholders to tackle the inequalities and marginalization that make individuals or groups more vulnerable to human rights abuses. Additional opportunities should continue to be created by bodies and mechanisms with mandates linked to issues covered by resolution 66/2 for the exchange of good practices by Member States in preventing and addressing violations addressed in the resolution, including in terms of legal reforms, policy initiatives and mechanisms to strengthen rule of law and access to justice, end impunity, provide services to survivors and support family reunification and community-based reintegration. Such exchanges should be used to strengthen prevention measures and responses across all countries.

46. The Commission may also wish to consider referring these issues to the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council and to make an explicit call before those bodies for systematic analysis, disaggregated data and interconnected reporting on gender-specific concerns in related reports.