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Provisional

President: Mrs. Frazier/Ms. Gatt (Malta)

Members:

Algeria	Mr. Bendjama
China	Mr. Geng Shuang
Ecuador	Mr. De La Gasca
France	Mr. De Rivière
Guyana	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett
Japan	Mr. Yamazaki
Mozambique	Mr. Afonso
Republic of Korea	Mr. Hwang
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Sierra Leone	Mr. Kanu
Slovenia	Mrs. Blokar Drobič
Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Kariuki
United States of America	Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield

Agenda

Children and armed conflict

Addressing the consequences of the denial of humanitarian access for children

Letter dated 25 March 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2024/265)

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The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Children and armed conflict

Addressing the consequences of the denial of humanitarian access for children

Letter dated 25 March 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2024/265)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mrs. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Mr. Edward Chaiban, Deputy Executive Director at UNICEF; and Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas, Executive Director of Authentique Memorial Empowerment Foundation.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2024/265, which contains the text of a letter dated 25 March 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.

I now give the floor to Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter.

Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter: I commend Malta, as Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, for bringing attention to an issue of increasing urgency on our agenda. While this body condemned and pronounced the denial of humanitarian access to children one of the six grave violations since 2004, parties to conflict continue to impede the facilitation of humanitarian relief to children in need, and United Nations reporting of this violation continuously reflects that.

According to the Secretary-General's most recent annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2023/363), the United Nations verified 3,931 cases of denial of humanitarian access, making it one of the highest verified violations in 2022. Since 2019, the numbers in the reports have shown exponential increases in verified incidents of denial of humanitarian access.

Data gathered for our forthcoming 2024 report shows that we are on target to witness a shocking increase in incidents of denial of humanitarian access globally. The blatant disregard for international humanitarian law continues to increase.

In 2022, the highest figures were verified in the occupied Palestinian territory, Yemen, Afghanistan and Mali. Globally, the situation is expected to worsen over time, owing to the adoption of restrictive laws, administrative decrees and regulations and to increasing control over humanitarian work and workers. Some situations involve high levels of arbitrary impediments and/or outright denial of humanitarian access to children, including in such situations as those of the occupied Palestinian territory and in Haiti, to name but two. All parties should be held responsible and accountable when preventing children from receiving life-saving assistance, which threatens their existence and negatively affects their growth and development.

Cases of denial of humanitarian access are linked to the restriction of humanitarian activities and movements, interference with humanitarian operations and discrimination against aid recipients, direct and indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure, disinformation and detention, violence against and killing of humanitarian personnel, and looting. Incidents of that violation are not limited to rural and urban battlegrounds, but also occur in insecure internally displaced persons camps and in cases in which children are deprived of liberty.

The denial of humanitarian access has long-lasting effects on children's well-being and development and may lead to the violation of their basic human rights, including the rights to life, education and the highest attainable standard of health. Such denial also often deprives children of access to safe spaces, as seen in the Sudan and the Sahel. In some situations, denial of humanitarian access is also identified when convoys are detained by armed groups or criminal organizations, delaying assistance to children. Further, the experience of the denial of humanitarian access is inherently gendered, because boys and girls experience such denial differently. For instance, restrictions to girls' movement challenge their access to aid in areas where it may be distributed, including in internally displaced persons camps, while teenage boys could be perceived as associated with an opposing party and therefore denied that access.

Bans or restrictions on female humanitarian staff in several situations, including in Afghanistan and Yemen, have immediate life-threatening consequences, preventing needs assessments and assistance to women and children and severely harming the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action. Compounding that already dire situation, my Office has found that one of the two main violations that are committed mostly by armed groups and that affect children in the context of climate insecurity and armed conflict is, indeed, the denial of humanitarian access. And let us not forget that the denial of humanitarian access attains catastrophic proportions among the most vulnerable of all children, namely, those with disabilities.

Let me be very clear: the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child contain key provisions requiring the facilitation of humanitarian relief to children in need. The denial of humanitarian access to children and attacks against humanitarian workers assisting children are also prohibited under international humanitarian law. I call upon all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access, as well as access by children to services, assistance and protection, and to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and assets. Civilians and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools and their personnel, must be protected, in accordance with international humanitarian law. Further, I urge parties to refrain from the military use of schools and hospitals.

United Nations engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent that and other grave violations against children is critical. To that end, reliable information on the nature, scope and identification of perpetrators of violence against children in armed conflict is essential. We must understand that data on the denial of humanitarian access is of great importance to provide a strong basis for dialogue with all parties to conflict, to recall their legal obligations and to engage them in urgent action to change behaviour.

Council members have already expressed, during the open debate on children and armed conflict in July 2022 (see S/PV.9096), their request for my Office to develop a guidance note for improved monitoring of and reporting on denial of humanitarian access violations. My Office is now engaged in that task, in collaboration with UNICEF, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and in consultation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Such a tool will provide our country task forces for monitoring and reporting with concrete guidance on the many components and different interpretations of the denial of humanitarian access as a grave violation, which, in turn, will strengthen monitoring and reporting capacities in countries on the children and armed conflict agenda. Monitoring, understanding, verification and engagement in the implementation of resolution 1612 (2005) will ultimately increase the protection of children. Guidance will also hopefully assist humanitarian and other workers in better planning their programmes, identifying areas where parties to conflict could remove obstacles to facilitate humanitarian access to children and refining the accountability elements contained in the spirit and the letter of that grave violation.

Finally, I recall that the Security Council and its subsidiary bodies provide several other tools to strengthen compliance with parties' obligations to ensure humanitarian access to children, and those include working group country-specific conclusions and, in the sanctions regimes, the inclusion of the listing criterion of the obstruction of the delivery of, delay in, access to or the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Without compliance by parties to conflict to allow safe, full and unhindered access for timely delivery of humanitarian assistance, children's survival, well-being and development are in jeopardy, and our calls are mere echoes in this Chamber. We cannot prevent the denial of humanitarian access to children unless we understand it and reinforce our capacity to monitor and prevent its occurrence. We must get on with the job.

The President: I thank Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter.

I now give the floor to Mr. Chaiban.

Mr. Chaiban: I thank the delegation of Malta for arranging this critical briefing on children and armed conflict.

Around the world, as conflicts proliferate, grave violations against children continue. The denial of humanitarian access is a particularly pervasive, multifaceted and complex grave violation. It can mean parties arbitrarily restricting access, including through the suspension of essential services, the restrictions of the movements of civilians to reach assistance and protection and bureaucratic and administrative impediments. It can also mean outright attacks on facilities providing life-saving services, including, for instance, water and sanitation; attacks on humanitarian

and medical personnel; and besiegement tactics. Those actions have devastating humanitarian consequences for children.

In January, I visited Gaza for the second time since October and witnessed a staggering decline in the conditions of children. Widespread destruction of logistical infrastructure, a quasi-blockade on the north of Gaza, repeated denials or delays in granting the access of humanitarian convoys, fuel shortages and electricity and telecommunications blackouts have been devastating for children. Attacks on humanitarian workers have also gravely affected humanitarian access with the highest United Nations staff death toll in the Organization's history, among our United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East colleagues in particular, and new attacks this week with the death of our World Central Kitchen colleagues, humanitarian workers trying to feed starving people.

As a result of those constraints, children cannot access age-appropriate nutritious food or medical services and have less than 2 to 3 litres of water per day. The consequences have been clear. In March, we reported that one in three children under 2 years of age in the northern part of the Gaza Strip suffer from acute malnutrition, a figure that has more than doubled in the past two months. Dozens of children in the northern Gaza Strip have reportedly died from malnutrition and dehydration in recent weeks, and half the population is facing catastrophic food insecurity.

In the Sudan, the world's worst child displacement crisis, the violence and blatant disregard for permission to allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance essential to protect children from the impact of conflict in Darfur, in Kordofan, in Khartoum and beyond has greatly intensified their suffering. We are seeing record levels of admissions for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition — the deadliest form of malnutrition — but insecurity is preventing patients and health workers from reaching hospitals and other health facilities. Assets and staff are still being attacked. The health system remains overwhelmed resulting in severe shortages of medicines and supplies, including life-saving items, owing to the severe interruption of the supply management system. Worse, our inability to consistently access vulnerable children means that protection by presence is simply not possible and that risks of other grave violations may escalate without an attendant rise in our ability to monitor or respond.

And in Myanmar, the intensified conflict and significant increase in the restriction of humanitarian access have hindered critical humanitarian assistance, and UNICEF partners have had to relocate or postpone planned life-saving responses to ensure staff safety in some areas. As the country enters the peak of its dry season, access to safe water is a major challenge for an already struggling population, including 6 million children in need of humanitarian assistance, many living in hard-to-reach areas.

Since the establishment of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict, the United Nations has verified almost 23,000 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, with nearly 15,000 verified over the past five years and 3,931 incidents in the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2023/363), a stubbornly high figure.

The lack of access to humanitarian services creates greater vulnerability and increases other child rights violations. Children are the first to suffer and the ones who will carry the longest-lasting humanitarian consequences. Parties have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure children's access to humanitarian services.

Around the world, our teams on the ground are working under increasingly difficult operational circumstances to access children. UNICEF has increased its investment in humanitarian access specialists to better reach children in some of the most challenging access contexts in which it operates, including Haiti, Ethiopia and the Sudan. Our commitment is to negotiate with all parties and to stay and deliver for children.

UNICEF fully supports the development of tools to strengthen the United Nations monitoring and reporting on the denial of humanitarian access, and it will accompany the Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter in its development of a guidance note to that end. It is important in that process to build on and strengthen the systems in place, including those established and used by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the humanitarian agencies in this domain.

Our ability to sustain access can be greatly enhanced by the work of the Security Council.

First, in the same vein as resolution 2664 (2022), we call on the Council to strengthen carveouts designed to protect humanitarian access. Humanitarian agencies

need to be able to engage with all armed groups for the purposes of humanitarian access to affected populations without fear of consequences.

Secondly, we ask Council members to use their influence to press States and non-State armed actors to prevent and end the denial of humanitarian access to children, protect humanitarian actors and allow humanitarian organizations to safely and timely reach those in most need, across front lines and across borders. That includes ensuring that any assistance provided to any party to a conflict is accompanied by a robust assessment of the consequences for humanitarian access.

Thirdly, we are counting on Council members to support the United Nations efforts to implement children and armed conflict monitoring and advocacy on the ground, both through resource allocation and through their commitment to work with the United Nations to protect humanitarian access to children no matter where they are.

The President: I thank Mr. Chaiban for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Niger-Thomas.

Ms. Niger-Thomas: I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to address the Security Council today.

As a humanitarian, peacebuilder, mother and front-line access negotiator in Cameroon, I face daily challenges and uncertainties that impact both me and my children. Today I will share insights from the field and propose solutions to address the critical issue of the denial of humanitarian access worldwide.

Local front-line access negotiators and humanitarians grapple with the risk of attack, threats, suspicion and the denial of access by both Government authorities and non-State armed groups. Many State and non-State armed groups perceive non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as aligned with their adversaries, when in fact they strive hard to remain neutral and impartial.

The long-term consequences of denied humanitarian access are particularly devastating for children, who bear the brunt of conflicts they did not choose. As frontline responders, local civil society workers operate in challenging environments without the same international support systems, protections and resources as United Nations and international NGO colleagues. Our safety net lies in our local civil society networks.

In many contexts, there is a need for a more harmonized approach towards the issuing and recognition of administrative authorizations for humanitarian field operations. Those bureaucratic impediments unintentionally hamper smooth operations for NGOs because documents obtained from government authorities are often disputed at checkpoints by State security forces, an issue many civil society organizations face around the world. Often, those delays may result in the cancelation of distribution activities, affecting, for example, children's nutrition and lactating mothers who are heavily dependent on assistance for their well-being. That leads to frustration and distrust from communities.

The lack of civil documentation is an underappreciated barrier to the local population's ability to access humanitarian assistance. Children whose homes were burned and lost their civil documentation owing to fighting face legal constraints in movement and an inability to register for and take public exams and access health services. That hampers their human rights and ability to develop.

In Cameroon, non-State armed groups often disregard official identification documents, at times destroying the identity cards of adults. Those actions affect the children, as they are dependent on the access their parents and caregivers have. In recent times, some government structures have reissued birth certificates and waivers for internally displaced persons. That is a good practice that other Member States facing similar challenges should take up.

Non-State armed groups often splinter and divide. That creates multiple interlocutors who we must deal with in access negotiations. That slows down and confuses negotiations, sometimes leading to denial. The multiplicity of non-State armed groups makes humanitarian access and creating safe passages very daunting, because after negotiating with one commander before a field mission, NGO employees are often stopped on the same road by another commander who claims to be in charge and may manifest aggressive behaviour, alleging that his authority has been undermined. Equally, opportunistic criminals take advantage of the volatile security situation and impersonate non-State armed groups and attack civilians — especially children, women and humanitarians — for personal financial gain.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of restricted humanitarian access owing to their heightened needs for protection, health care, nutrition and education. When humanitarian aid is blocked or limited, they are at a higher risk of malnutrition, disease, lack of education, recruitment into armed groups, exploitation, gender-based violence and trauma. The denial of humanitarian access exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and can have long-lasting negative effects on children's physical, emotional and psychosocial well-being.

For example, where we work, children in non-formal learning find it hard to adapt and are slow in learning simple lessons normally adapted to their age. Often, we must lower standards and content for better understanding. That can restrict their development and opportunities in the future.

Education is a fundamental right for every child and an essential part of the humanitarian response, yet in Cameroon education is weaponized by some non-State armed groups, especially in rural areas. I personally experienced the impact of access constraints on education, having to relocate my family owing to armed groups enforcing a no-school policy.

In numerous communities, children have been deprived of education for years, with some never having the opportunity to attend school. In 13 communities that we have assessed, more than 75 per cent of children from 6 to 14 years of age have not seen a classroom for over five years. Worse still are those children 8 years of age and below, who were born in the era of the ongoing crisis and have never been to school.

To address those critical issues and ensure that humanitarian access is granted to all those in need, while upholding humanitarian principles, concrete solutions must be implemented.

First, local data collection must be strengthened. Many local systems on the ground need strengthening. Some seven years since the start of the crisis in Cameroon, I can comfortably say that using local information and data from civil society ensures real-time action that can be taken to avert some of the negative impacts from denial of humanitarian access to children. The Security Council should ensure that there are strong, well-funded monitoring and reporting systems across the world to raise awareness, hold perpetrators accountable and advocate for action.

Secondly, regarding diplomatic pressure, what national organizations want is for the international community to be more concerned with our work, efforts and safety on the ground. Member States must use their power at the highest levels of Government and through international forums to ensure unimpeded access for humanitarian actors to support children. To keep the Council informed and engaged in this matter, more invitations to brief the Council should be issued to local civil society organization leaders with hands-on practical experience, and children and armed conflict monitoring and reporting data on the denial of humanitarian access should be incorporated into broader Security Council discussions, reports and resolutions.

Thirdly, on capacity-building and funding, strengthening the capacity of local humanitarians to navigate challenges and deliver aid effectively in complex environments is crucial. I remember when we started access negotiations — it was all new to us, and we had never faced or responded to a humanitarian context. Over time we have learned, with support from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the coordination of international humanitarian NGOs, international NGO partners and the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation. However, gaps remain for local organizations that need funding to access such training — it is a question of unlocking opportunities for civil society organizations to learn and become empowered. That must be matched by a commitment to meaningfully include local organizations at every level of the humanitarian decision-making process, including Security Council decisions, so that local experiences can help identify and deliver realistic solutions.

As local NGOs, we will remain in our communities when other structures such as the United Nations and international NGOs someday leave. Therefore, I make a solemn call to the members of the Security Council, and the United Nations more widely, to strengthen their engagement, ensuring that support systems and safety nets are carved out for local civil society organizations — the first and last responders on the ground. That would go a long way to ensuring better humanitarian access to children around the world.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Malta.

I welcome Special Representative of the Secretary-General Virginia Gamba de Potgieter and Deputy Executive Director Ted Chaiban, and thank them for their important and insightful briefings. I also thank Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas for sharing her perspective and for the inspiring work she and her organization carry out.

On this occasion, I also pay tribute to the World Central Kitchen staff members killed by an Israeli strike yesterday in Gaza. We recall that humanitarian personnel must always be protected.

Across the globe, children are facing lasting humanitarian consequences of the denial of humanitarian assistance and access. Since 2005, when the children and armed conflict mandate started monitoring and reporting on the denial of humanitarian access, the number of instances has increased every year, as we have heard. Last year alone, there were nearly 4,000 violations verified for 2022. There is an unprecedented number of children in need of humanitarian assistance.

Whether brought about through attacks on humanitarian workers and convoys, restrictive laws and decrees, or bureaucratic and arbitrary impediments, such barriers are unacceptable and require the full attention of the Council.

In the Sudan, the escalation of conflict has displaced more than 4 million children, making it the world's largest displacement of children. Some 14 million children need urgent humanitarian assistance. Bureaucratic impediments, failure by the parties to the conflict to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers and numerous attacks on and looting of humanitarian convoys have further impeded children's access to food and medical aid and trapped them in the conflict.

In Gaza, the continued conflict and near complete lack of humanitarian access has been catastrophic for children. Without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the denial of essentials such as food, medicine and clean water is accelerating acute malnutrition and mortality. We are further alarmed by the denial of access to children who have been detained or abducted and who have been reported to be subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment.

We are also gravely concerned about the deteriorating situation in Haiti. The escalating violence and displacement have deprived more than 3 million children of essential services. Humanitarians are putting their own safety at risk to try to provide essential aid.

The denial of humanitarian access continues to be verified in other situations on the children and armed conflict agenda such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Yemen. In Ukraine, civilians, including children, continue to face significant humanitarian needs and more than ever before require the provision of life-saving and life-sustaining aid. In Afghanistan, the banning of female humanitarian workers is an egregious violation of their rights. It effectively puts the lives and well-being of all Afghans at risk, especially among women-headed households. The denial of humanitarian access can have severe gender- and age-differentiated impacts on children throughout their development. We support a concerted effort to measure the impact of the denial of humanitarian access on children and to strengthen age- and sex-disaggregated monitoring and analysis of that grave violation. The actions needed to prevent those impacts are inherently political. Denying humanitarian access to children is a grave violation of children's rights under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Malta remains committed to protecting the most vulnerable.

I resume my functions as President of the Council.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): I thank the Maltese presidency for convening this meeting on the devastating impact of armed conflict on children, especially the consequences of the denial of humanitarian access. We express our deep appreciation to Mrs. Virginia Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, for her steadfast commitment to and advocacy in safeguarding children from grave violations of their rights during armed conflicts. We extend our appreciation to the UNICEF Deputy Executive Director, Mr. Ted Chaiban, and the civil society representative, Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas, for the insightful information.

Children remain the most vulnerable group severely affected by armed conflicts facing unimaginable violence, displacement and trauma. Ensuring their safety, access to education, health care and emotional well-being must be a top priority for the international community. Shocking statistics show that more than 468 million children worldwide are living in armed conflict zones, and approximately 150 million children required humanitarian assistance in 2023. That underscores the urgency of our collective

action. It is particularly alarming that almost all grave violations against children, including killing, maiming, abductions and sexual abuse, are on the rise as conflicts escalate globally. The denial of humanitarian access to children in conflict situations, compounded by restrictions on essential services, such as education and health care, severely impedes their normal development and jeopardizes their future. Mozambique joins the Security Council in expressing its grave concern over the devastating impact of limiting humanitarian access to the most vulnerable, particularly children in conflict situations. Mindful of that alarming situation, we call on all parties to conflicts to abide by their obligations under international human rights law, ensuring international humanitarian access to children in need.

Denying much-needed humanitarian access to children as a war tactic is unacceptable and violates children's rights under international human rights and international humanitarian law. We therefore urge all parties to conflicts to increase their actions to end and prevent grave violations against children and create the necessary conditions for humanitarian access to children affected by conflicts. They include: first, fully implementing all relevant resolutions, including resolution 2664 (2022), and the recommendations of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict; secondly, enhancing cross-border cooperation to ensure safe passage for humanitarian aid; thirdly, strengthening the enforcement of international humanitarian law prohibiting the denial of access; and fourthly, raising awareness and advocating for unimpeded humanitarian access. We also call on donors and development partners to scale up their support to increase the humanitarian response and address development needs, in particular at the community level. Addressing the root causes of conflict is a more sustainable approach to addressing grave violations against children.

In conclusion, Mozambique reaffirms its total commitment to upholding its obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including the protection of children in armed conflicts. We remain committed to deepening cooperation with different partners, including the United Nations, to ensure the protection of children under all circumstances, including during armed conflict.

Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield (United States of America): Let me begin by offering my condolences to the many people affected by the terrible earthquake

in Taiwan. Our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones, those who are injured and those whose homes and businesses have been destroyed.

I also want to thank Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter for her insightful remarks and for her tireless efforts to address the critical issue that we are gathered here to discuss today. I also thank Mr. Chaiban and Ms. Niger-Thomas for their insights.

I want to congratulate Japan for its successful March presidency, and I wish Malta all the best as it begins its time in the Security Council President's seat. Already, Madam President, you have brought us together to highlight and advance the children and armed conflict agenda item in the Security Council. Because let us be clear: any threat to peace and security is a threat to children. The children and armed conflict mandate aims to eliminate that threat to ensure that children in crisis have access to essential humanitarian assistance today and to help children live free from the horrors of war in the future. We see broad support for that agenda. And yet, in every corner of the globe, millions of children in conflict zones are in desperate need of food and clean water, education and medical care — all the essentials of life.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, children are forced into overcrowded camps, where humanitarian aid is sparse and gender-based violence is rampant. In Myanmar, Rohingya children have been killed, detained and displaced, and young girls in refugee camps have little access to education. In Ukraine, Russian forces continue to target critical infrastructure, killing children and first responders and destroying schools, hospitals and family homes. In Afghanistan, girls face early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and systemic discrimination, including in education, while young boys have been recruited as child soldiers. In Yemen, the Houthis are disrupting the delivery of life-saving aid — aid that could be used to feed 11 million children, who are currently going hungry. In the Sudan, malnutrition among young children is “among the worst projections”. Reports have found that hundreds of boys under age 18 were coerced into joining the Rapid Support Forces, in many cases driven by hunger. Cholera, measles and malaria have spread, all while parties to the conflict continue to impede cross-border and cross-line humanitarian aid. The Sudanese Armed Forces must fully reopen the border with Chad, especially the critical Adré border crossing, and allow aid agencies to deliver assistance across borders and conflict lines into the hands of the 14 million children in desperate need of life-saving aid.

The list of places where children live in fear unfortunately goes on and on. Across the Sahel, including in Burkina Faso, ongoing violence has shuttered a quarter of all schools and left hundreds of thousands of young children with acute malnutrition. It goes on in Israel, where children were murdered or taken hostage by Hamas on 7 October and continue to face rocket fire. And it goes on in Gaza, where, over the past few months, thousands and thousands of children have been injured, often killed. We have heard from doctors, without are horrified that they have to treat children suffering from war wounds and watch children die from acute malnutrition. Humanitarian assistance is desperately needed now, and it must be facilitated in order to mitigate the impact of an impending famine. At this time, I want to express my sincere condolences to World Central Kitchen for the deaths of their staff, killed in Gaza while trying to do just that.

The adoption of resolution 2664 (2022) was an important step towards accelerating the delivery of food, medicine and humanitarian aid while upholding sanctions on those who put so many at risk. Already, we have seen that resolution help reduce barriers to humanitarian assistance globally, including in the Sahel and Gaza, and we call on national Governments to follow suit and integrate humanitarian exemptions into all domestic sanctions regimes. What is more, for our part, the United States is proud to be the leading donor to UNICEF and the World Food Programme. We urge the world to do more and to give more in order to address the needs of children in armed conflict.

We must enhance monitoring and reporting capabilities so as to better document incidents of denial of humanitarian access. We must protect those working in dangerous conflict zones, help people in need and empower United Nations peacekeepers and humanitarian workers by providing them with more financial and logistical support. We must ensure that robust psychosocial support is given not only to children who have experienced trauma, but to their caregivers as well.

We must take into account the disproportionate risks faced by girls, including conflict-related sexual violence and work to meet the long-term mental and physical needs of child survivors. We must consider the unique needs of children with disabilities in conflict zones and apply a lens of inclusivity to our approach. We must safeguard medical, nutritional and hygienic support for children and their families, as such services are a bedrock for their education and mental health. We

must ensure the rights of children to play, to be just children. That right must be safeguarded. And we must meet the immediate needs of children in conflict.

We must also consider the resources they need for their future. That means prioritizing education, rehabilitating schools and distributing supplies, training teachers to deal with the complex needs of children affected by conflict and offering children and their parents the resources they need to get back into the classroom. We must do all that because when we do — when we ensure children are safe, warm and fed, when we give them access to education, health care and the psychological support they need to grow — we not only safeguard their future, but we also build a safer, more peaceful world for us all. Today, as one in five children is living or fleeing from conflict, as lives are being cut short before they even truly begin, let us therefore recommit to action. We do not have a moment to waste.

Mr. De La Gasca (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank you for convening this informative meeting. I take note of the information presented by Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Mr. Edward Chaiban, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF; and Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas, civil society representative.

Throughout these months, Ecuador has consistently expressed its concern about the persistence of the six grave violations against children in the different conflict scenarios and has reiterated the need to identify strategies to prevent such violations and address their effects on the physical and mental health of the victims.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs notes that in 2023 approximately 400 million people around the world required humanitarian assistance to survive, 110 million of which were children caught in crossfire, suffering the consequences of displacement and uprooting and facing multidimensional risks such as orphanhood, food insecurity and sexual and gender-based violence.

Of particular note are cases in which State and non-State forces obstructed access to humanitarian assistance, sabotaged preventive vaccination campaigns and destroyed schools and hospitals, leaving children defenceless and restricting their right to access health and education services, in contravention of international humanitarian law and the principles contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The exponential increase in the number of children dependent on humanitarian assistance is interrelated with the radicalization of the following variables: the escalation of violence associated with conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip; the increase in natural disasters resulting from climate change; and the funding crisis for humanitarian assistance operations, which has reached record levels.

The denial of rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilian populations, including children, takes concrete form through denial of access to humanitarian operators; restriction of efforts of aid workers, especially women; and reluctance to agree on diplomatic and political alternatives to de-escalate the violence and address its root causes.

I take this opportunity to convey, on behalf of my delegation, our regret with regard to the attacks perpetrated against humanitarian personnel, which cut their lives short. In that context, Ecuador expresses its unwavering support for the complex work of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, the UNICEF and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees teams, the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism and all the task forces on the ground.

As members of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, we have witnessed their commitment to ensure that States respect and demand respect for the international normative framework for the protection of children. The international community must ensure its funding, and States must ensure access and security for the teams so that the latter can continue to issue reports that guide decision-making, in accordance with the mandate of resolution 1612 (2005).

My delegation deems it essential to increase the knowledge of the parties to the conflict about the rights of minors and to promote the adherence of States to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Safe Schools Declaration, the Vancouver Principles, and the Paris Commitments and Principles, among others.

We must work diligently to create institutions that promote accountability, transitional justice and the investigation and conviction of perpetrators of violations in armed conflict, in cooperation with international institutions such as the International Court of Justice.

Finally, we believe that working towards lasting solutions and restoring peace, stability and the rule of law is the ideal and definitive solution. We must work more closely with local and regional bodies in order to implement national frameworks for the protection of children based on international humanitarian law and international child protection standards.

Mr. Hwang (Republic of Korea): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's significant meeting. I also extend my gratitude to Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter and Deputy Executive Director Chaiban of UNICEF for their insightful briefings. My appreciation also goes to Ms. Niger-Thomas for her contribution.

Last year, the number of children living in conflict zones amounted to 468 million, having doubled since the mid-1990s. The alarming increase of children in armed conflicts demonstrates the urgency of both preventing and resolving armed conflicts. It also reminds us of the harsh reality of children bearing the brunt of the devastating humanitarian consequences that armed conflicts cause.

Since the adoption of its landmark resolution 1261 (1999) on children and armed conflict 25 years ago, the Security Council has developed a pioneering framework for preventing six grave violations against children in armed conflicts. Among those six grave violations, denial of humanitarian access deserves special attention, not only owing to its immediate effects on children, but also considering its enduring adverse impacts on children's development and on their physical and mental health.

International humanitarian law clearly indicates that children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection. And as the Committee on the Rights of the Child affirmed in its report, such respect and protection include ensuring humanitarian access to children in armed conflict. It is deeply deplorable that that sacrosanct principle is violated too often, as parties to conflicts attack humanitarian workers and use siege and blockade tactics to deny the delivery of vital relief supplies. A striking example is the dire situation in the Gaza Strip, where the number of United Nations workers killed in the past six months has surpassed the total number of United Nations staff fatalities in all conflict zones and terrorist incidents worldwide over the past 12 years. We are particularly appalled by the tragic deaths two days ago of seven

staff members from the World Central Kitchen, who were delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip.

In the face of those dismaying challenges, it is imperative, first and foremost, that the Security Council stand firm on its zero-tolerance stance against the denial of humanitarian access to children. There can be no room for geopolitical considerations in that regard. At the same time, we should continuously review ways to improve and make better use of existing normative and operational tools designed under the Council's children and armed conflict agenda.

First, we need to reinforce the capacity for child protection, including by ensuring adequate human and financial resources for the monitoring and reporting mechanism established by resolution 1612 (2005). Among others, we support the allocation of child protection advisers within United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Secondly, given the lack of guidance on monitoring and reporting of the denial of humanitarian access, it is crucial to develop more systematic and detailed guidelines, reflecting the various views of humanitarian actors. That improvement is particularly important, given that the denial of humanitarian access is the only grave violation that does not trigger listing in the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict.

Thirdly, we have to fully use the engagement tools at our disposal, such as the comprehensive action plan first signed between the United Nations and South Sudan in 2020. My delegation hopes that action plans of that kind, covering all six grave violations against children, will be applied to other regions as well, because the denial of humanitarian access greatly increases the likelihood of recruitment and use of children and of sexual violence against children, according to a recent study by Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and Fordham University.

I take this opportunity to draw the Council's attention to the grim situation of children in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to numerous public sources, including the testimonies of North Korean defectors, children in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are exposed to egregious human rights violations, including the death penalty for distributing South Korean dramas, detention to political prisons alongside their family members as

collective punishment, and widespread use of child labour. Moreover, children in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea face a devastating humanitarian crisis, as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea regime relentlessly pursues its nuclear and ballistic missile programme, and its leadership squanders their scarce resources on luxury items. Seventeen per cent of children in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are reported to suffer from growth stunting due to rampant undernourishment, according to a recent joint publication by UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the World Bank Group.

In conclusion, the Republic of Korea lends its full support to Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter's determination and tireless efforts to advance her unique and crucial mandate to protect children across the world.

Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett (Guyana): I thank Malta for convening today's important discussion. I also thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter and Deputy Executive Director Chaiban for their sobering briefings, and Executive Director Niger-Thomas for sharing her perspectives.

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States parties committed to make the best interest of the child the primary consideration in all actions concerning children. They also undertook to take all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children affected by armed conflict. Denial of humanitarian access to civilians, including children, and attacks against humanitarian workers assisting children are prohibited under the Fourth Geneva Convention and its Additional Protocols and may amount to a crime against humanity and a war crime. The Council has also identified the denial of humanitarian access for children as one of the six grave violations against children in armed conflict.

Despite such a robust legal regime, in recent years, denial of humanitarian access for children has consistently been among the most prominent grave violations verified by the United Nations in the Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict. The December 2023 report by Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter (A/HRC/55/57) indicates that that violation continued to be verified at alarmingly high levels, with government forces as the main perpetrators.

More children in conflict situations are increasingly going without food and medicine and are at risk of dying from hunger and disease. That is compounded by lack of access to essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, health care and education. Examples stretch across the globe. They include the Sudan, where, according to UNICEF, “widespread malnutrition and a shattered health system threaten to kill far more children than the armed conflict itself”; Gaza, where malnutrition among children has skyrocketed to unprecedented levels in record time and a human-made famine is imminent — all while food is available but access is restricted by the occupying Power; Haiti, where protracted gang violence is affecting children’s safety, health and overall well-being and one in four children suffer from chronic malnutrition; and Afghanistan, where the restrictions on Afghan women working in the humanitarian sector are gravely diminishing the access of Afghan children and girls to life-saving services.

The denial of humanitarian access can have devastating long-term impacts on the overall well-being of children, and denial over protracted periods will affect their growth and development, as we have heard from our briefers. It also increases the vulnerability of children to other violations and abuses, including recruitment and use by armed forces or armed groups, abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

The intentional deprivation of or impediment to the passage of humanitarian assistance indispensable to children’s survival by parties to conflict is illegal in any context, and there must be accountability. In that regard, we offer our condolences to the families and colleagues of the staff of World Central Kitchen who were killed. Actions that impede the provision of vital humanitarian support to children must never be condoned. Those include the suspension of aid delivery, attacks on humanitarian workers and convoys, administrative impediments and the adoption of restrictive laws and decrees related to humanitarian work and workers. Counter-terrorism measures and sanctions regimes must be consistent with international law and not restrict or criminalize the delivery of humanitarian aid for children. The Security Council must make effective use of the tools at its disposal to combat the incidence of this grave violation.

It is important that the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict issue conclusions in a timely manner, given their value in promoting accountability and encouraging conflict parties to take specific actions to prevent and end violations against children.

Guyana is of the view that, given the upward trajectory in the incidence of this violation, the denial of humanitarian access for children should be considered a trigger for listing in the annexes of the Secretary-General’s annual report. We also look forward to the development by the Office of the Special Representative of the guidance note on the denial of humanitarian access.

In conclusion, Guyana calls on all parties to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and facilitate unimpeded, rapid and safe access to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to children in situations of armed conflict. Children must be protected at all times.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Special Representative, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and Ms. Niger-Thomas for their statements.

Children are the main civilian victims of armed conflict. France is deeply concerned by the serious violations against them and the denial of humanitarian assistance that they endure. In 2023, more than 150 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance. Cases of children being denied access to humanitarian assistance have increased considerably since the establishment of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict in 2005. Nearly 4,000 incidents were reported in 2022. And the figures for 2023 and 2024 unfortunately will likely show an increase in those incidents.

The denial of humanitarian access and assistance to civilians, specifically children, and attacks on humanitarian personnel are prohibited under international humanitarian law. Under certain conditions, they may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The denial of humanitarian access has a disproportionate impact on young women and girls, who are more likely to drop out of school and be victims of sexual abuse and forced marriage. Those obstacles to humanitarian assistance for children occur in many of the world’s conflict zones: Burma, Yemen, the Sudan, Burkina Faso and elsewhere.

In Afghanistan, the policy of segregation that women face and the restrictions on female aid workers are obstacles to the humanitarian assistance that women and children need.

In Gaza, children need vital humanitarian assistance. All barriers must be lifted, the use of all land crossings must be authorized, and their capacity must be increased. This is of the utmost urgency in view of the imminent risk of famine. France reiterates its call for an immediate and lasting ceasefire in Gaza.

We must act. France urges all parties responsible for violations against children to respect international law and put an immediate end to those abuses. France urges all States to ratify and implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, as well as the Rome Statute, which are essential tools in the fight against impunity.

Since 2005, the Council's action to eradicate the scourge of children in conflict could have been a great success. Let us recall that more than 200,000 children were extricated from theatres of war. The Council must continue to support the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict, which was established in 2005. It must be provided with the necessary means to enable the Secretary-General to establish a comprehensive and objective list of shame. The Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict must be able to rapidly adopt conclusions that can then be implemented on the ground. In that respect, I applaud the work and efforts of the Maltese presidency.

France will continue to support the implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda, as protecting future generations is a prerequisite for lasting peace.

Mr. Yamazaki (Japan): I thank Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter, Mr. Chaiban and Ms. Niger-Thomas for their informative and insightful briefings. I would also like to thank Malta for convening this very important and timely briefing. And again we would like to express our congratulations on its assumption of the presidency of the Council for this month.

First of all, Japan expresses its deepest concern about the fact that harm is caused to civilians, including aid workers who are working tirelessly to deliver essential humanitarian supplies to the people of Gaza and elsewhere. Japan extends its sincere sympathy to the victims and offers its condolences and also expresses its heartfelt sympathy to those injured. This tragedy should not have happened, and Japan strongly calls for staunch respect for international humanitarian law on the ground.

The denial of humanitarian access has serious impacts on children. It is alarming that there has been a sharp increase in reports of such denials since 2019. Japan is concerned about the consequences of denials, which include a disruption of education, the recruitment and the use of children, suffering from malnutrition and mental health issues.

It is particularly striking that one in every five children now lives in armed conflict, facing heightened risk of death not only from attacks but also from disease and hunger. The leading factor contributing to this grave situation is the denial of humanitarian access. The denial of humanitarian access creates human security crises, threatening the dignity of all, especially children. We must act decisively and consistently to improve the situation of children in armed conflict.

In that regard, let me stress three areas in which the international community should take action immediately.

First, it is imperative to remove impediments to humanitarian operations. Ensuring safety, such as through the removal of explosive weapons, including landmines, is a prerequisite for delivering humanitarian assistance. Allowing smooth administrative procedures, such as prompt visa approvals and custom clearances, must not be overlooked either.

Secondly, the international community should expand its efforts to support children's right to education and their development under armed conflict. Every single day counts when it comes to children's education and development. We should spare no effort in ensuring access to safe and quality education for children, particularly for girls who are disproportionately affected by interruptions to education and therefore become vulnerable to other grave violations, such as sexual violence.

Japan values UNICEF and other humanitarian partners that provide, in situations where continual formal education is difficult, recreational activities which can at least serve as a safe space for children. In alignment with those efforts, in 2023, Japan provided over \$100 million to UNICEF to protect children's well-being in Syria, Haiti, Mali, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia and Myanmar. Japan also recently announced a \$12 million grant to UNICEF to support children in the Middle East and North Africa who are affected by humanitarian crises, including conflicts.

Finally, we must all unite under the rule of law, and all parties to conflict must comply with international law, including international humanitarian law. Save the Children describes the increase in violations relating to children as a crisis of compliance. That highlights that the issue is not the lack of legal instruments to protect children. Instead, it underscores an increasing trend of disregarding international humanitarian law.

Strengthening the rule of law requires building strong governance and legal institutions. Japan is a proud supporter of national efforts to build legal institutions and to develop humanitarian resources around the world. We will continue to work together with other States to make every possible effort to protect children.

We are responsible for addressing human security threats and removing any impediments hindering children's ability to pave their future. Let us once again put forward our best efforts to make sure all sufficient humanitarian aid is delivered to children in crises, because they deserve to live in dignity.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter and the other briefers for their statements.

Children are the most innocent victims and most vulnerable group in need of assistance in armed conflicts. Globally, 150 million children are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Ensuring smooth humanitarian operations and safe and unhindered humanitarian access is a basis and prerequisite for safeguarding the rights of the interests of those children. China welcomes Malta's initiative in convening today's meeting. We hope the international community and the Security Council will take concrete action to remove obstacles to humanitarian assistance and build a solid protection barrier, so that every child in armed conflict can receive the maximum physical and psychological support and assistance and enjoy a peaceful and tranquil childhood.

Currently, children in Gaza are experiencing a catastrophe. According to UNICEF, in the past six months, over 13,000 children have been killed in Gaza, which is more than the total number of children killed in all regions of the world in the past four years. The children in Gaza have been devastated by the fighting. Some hide in overcrowded hospitals without access to medicines and care, suffering from malnutrition, illness, disability and even death. Some have been

forced to move from one place to another, under fire, never to find safe haven. Many more children wake up every day to the sound of rumbling artillery, huddled under the shadow of war, seeing no way out for peace and no hope of survival. The continued losses of young lives and the shattering of countless childhood dreams have repeatedly called into question the conscience of the international community. Such a situation should not continue.

The protection of children in Gaza is the responsibility of the international community and has the consensus of the Security Council. After the outbreak of the new round of the conflict in Gaza, the first resolution adopted by the Security Council focused on the protection of children in Gaza. Last week, the Council adopted resolution 2728 (2024), calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. It is imperative that the Council's resolutions be fully and effectively implemented, that a ceasefire be immediately realized and that all acts that harm civilians be halted, so that children in Gaza can see the dawn of peace as soon as possible. It is necessary to immediately lift the blockade of Gaza, so that humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East can carry out relief work and deliver humanitarian supplies to the population of Gaza, especially to children, in a safe and timely manner. The authority of international justice must be upheld. Grave violations of international law and international humanitarian law must be vigorously dealt with. The perpetrators of children's rights violations must be held accountable. Human dignity must not be dishonoured. And international justice must not remain absent.

In addition to Gaza, children in many other conflicts areas are also suffering a tragic fate. There are many acute issues that cry out for our attention. Greater humanitarian assistance must be promoted. Countries such as Afghanistan are mired in humanitarian disasters, with a large number of children facing difficulties in obtaining timely assistance and suffering from hunger and displacement, which is heartbreaking. Developed donor countries should focus on the survival needs of Afghan people and provide timely emergency humanitarian assistance, rather than using the reduction of humanitarian funds as a tool for pressure and allowing Afghan children to become victims of politics.

Unilateral sanctions must be lifted. In places such as Syria, prolonged unilateral coercive measures have exacerbated the humanitarian and economic crisis,

leading to severe shortages of food, medicine, fuel, electricity and other basic goods. Many sick children are unable to receive timely treatment owing to a lack of medicine and care. We urge the countries concerned to immediately and unconditionally lift all illegal unilateral sanctions and ensure that all humanitarian assistance operations can be carried out smoothly, so that there can be an end to people's suffering.

Grave violations must be stopped. Security Council resolutions explicitly prohibit six grave violations, including the killing and maiming of children, sexual violence against children and attacks on schools. However, those red lines have been repeatedly crossed. The recent deteriorating situation in Haiti and the rampant gang violence there pose a serious threat to the survival of tens of thousands of children. Curbing gang violence requires preventing the illegal influx of arms and ammunition into Haiti. The Council should take concrete measures to ensure that an arms embargo against Haiti can be implemented.

Comprehensive development should be promoted. In the Sahel, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a large number of children are being recruited by terrorists and armed groups. The root cause is poverty, unemployment and poor living conditions. The international community should help the Governments of the countries concerned to take effective measures to eradicate hunger and poverty and to provide universal access to education and health care in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and ensure the comprehensive development of children.

Children are the future of humankind. In September of this year, the United Nations will hold the Summit of the Future. We should take the Summit as an opportunity to push for a clearer blueprint, more pragmatic initiatives and a louder voice in the area of children's rights to benefit children and our future generations in order to help them realize common development, seek common security and build a common future.

Before I conclude, in their statements, some representatives mentioned the strong earthquake in the Taiwan region in China. The Chinese mainland is paying close attention to the damage caused by the earthquake. We have already extended our sincere sympathy to our affected Taiwan compatriots and are ready to provide disaster relief. We thank the international community for its concern and good wishes.

Mr. Kariuki (United Kingdom): I thank Special Representative Gamba de Potgieter, Mr. Chaiban and Ms. Niger-Thomas for briefing us today. The children and armed conflict mandate is an important tool for advancing the protection of the world's most vulnerable people, and the United Kingdom is committed to supporting the work of the Special Representative and her Office.

I would like to emphasize three points today.

First, denial of humanitarian access is impacting children worldwide. The United Nations reported nearly 4,000 violations in 2022, and there is every indication that that number rose in 2023. In the Sudan, the United Kingdom is concerned about humanitarian obstruction by both the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, resulting in the starvation of the Sudanese people, including children. In Ukraine, Russia still does not allow humanitarian organizations meaningful access to territories temporarily under its control. And severe humanitarian access restraints persist in Houthi-controlled areas of northern Yemen.

Secondly, almost half of all verified incidents of denial of humanitarian access in 2022 occurred in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Today Palestinian children are facing unfathomable suffering. We were horrified to hear of the killing of seven members of World Central Kitchen staff on 1 April and are deeply concerned by reports that Israel continues to block access to northern Gaza by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. We will continue to call on Israel to ensure the protection of humanitarian workers and to facilitate rapid, unimpeded access for humanitarian organizations to deliver aid to children at the greatest risk of harm, including children in northern Gaza on the brink of starvation.

Thirdly, the United Kingdom calls on all parties to conflict to abide by applicable international humanitarian law, including allowing and facilitating rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians in need, many of whom are children. The Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict plays a vital role.

All Council members should redouble efforts to reach consensus on children and armed conflict conclusions in a timely manner, setting aside political interests to prioritize the protection of children. We also call for redoubled efforts to implement resolution 2664

(2022), while ensuring clarity to help humanitarians and their service providers continue to support the most vulnerable.

Children are never responsible for wars, but they suffer disproportionately from the impacts thereof, including denial of humanitarian access. The Council — and all parties to conflict — must do more to protect them.

Mr. Kanu (Sierra Leone): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's meeting as a signature event of Malta's presidency. Let me also thank our briefers, Special Representative of the Secretary-General Virginia Gamba de Potgieter and Deputy Executive Director Ted Chaiban, for their valuable briefings to the Council. I also thank Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas for her perspective.

The briefings have heard today reveal how profoundly children are being affected by conflicts in all corners of the world. The shocking number of violations against children in situations of armed conflict is troubling. Sierra Leone commends the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict for their tireless efforts in safeguarding and advancing the agenda to protect children affected by armed conflicts worldwide. The world today has the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War. As the world continues to grapple with war, millions of children — who bear the brunt of the violence — continue to be affected globally.

We are deeply troubled by the incredibly high numbers of children who continue to be subjected to grave violations of their rights in conflict situations. Today the briefers reminded us of the difficult overall situation for children during the reporting period. Besides focusing on worrisome trends of the denial to children of access to humanitarian assistance, they also affirmed that those violations are increasing daily.

The denial of humanitarian access is one of the six grave violations of children's rights in armed conflict. In recent years, the increase in instances of denial of humanitarian access has consistently been among the most prominent grave violations verified by the United Nations in the Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict. According to the 2023 annual report on children and armed conflict (S/2023/363), the United Nations verified 3,931

incidents of denial of humanitarian access in 2022 alone, and that denial was perpetrated by both State actors and non-State armed groups.

The denial of humanitarian access can take many forms, including attacks against relief workers and convoys; bureaucratic and administrative impediments, such as cumbersome registration procedures and denial of entry visas for humanitarian personnel; suspension or diversion of aid; and interference with programming decisions, such as the selection of beneficiaries or areas of intervention. Parties to conflicts have also used siege and blockade tactics to deny the delivery of relief supplies to civilians, in most cases including children.

Denial of humanitarian access disrupts humanitarian operations and, in many cases, has a devastating impact on the survival of civilians, including children, caught up in humanitarian crises. Children in countries affected by armed conflict are in many instances unable to access food and medicine and are at risk of dying from hunger and disease. Moreover, the denial of humanitarian access increases the vulnerability of children to other rights violations and abuses, such as abduction, recruitment and use by armed forces or armed groups, rape and other forms of sexual violence, including early marriage.

Legislation and policies restricting or placing undue burdens on humanitarian work and workers, particularly where such laws and policies are related to counter-terrorism measures, are compounding those issues and further complicate children's access to humanitarian assistance. Such policies restrict or even prevent children living in areas under the control of armed groups designated as terrorist groups from accessing life-saving aid. With that in mind, we urge all parties to conflict to uphold their obligations under international law, to allow and facilitate unimpeded, rapid and safe access of the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations, especially children, and to respect and protect humanitarian personnel, assets and infrastructure. Member States should ensure that their counter-terrorism measures and sanctions regimes are fully consistent with the applicable international law and that they do not restrict, hinder or criminalize the effective and timely delivery of aid, including for children, by humanitarian organizations.

Sierra Leone is aware that it is yet to be agreed whether the denial of humanitarian access should be a trigger for listing in the annexes to the Secretary-

General's annual report on children and armed conflict and that it is currently the only grave violation that is not a trigger. We are also mindful of the strong compelling opinions on both sides. Humanitarian access, however, is crucial in situations of armed conflict where civilians, including children, are in desperate need of assistance.

We believe that access to humanitarian assistance should not be used as a bargaining tool during conflict. Therefore, it is imperative that access to food and other vital goods and services as humanitarian assistance be allowed to ensure the survival of those directly affected by armed conflict. Impeding access to those vital services can, in many cases, lead to starvation and eventual death. Where the denial of humanitarian assistance through the intentional behaviour of certain persons whose actions deny the intended beneficiaries of these services, we regard that as a grave violation, and we are firmly convinced that due consideration should be given to the denial of humanitarian assistance as a trigger.

Given our experience with conflict and its horrendous impact on children, and the importance of accountability to address impunity, we have no option but to point out any issue that can be considered to be a trigger of a grave violation. In that regard, we were quick to appreciate the imperative to protect our children, with the realization that stable peace and sustainable development cannot be achieved in post-conflict settings if prompt and effective action is not taken to prevent a repeat of grave violations, allowing impunity to prevail.

Sierra Leone is of the view that Member States and the Security Council should endeavour to strengthen conflict prevention tools and strategies, as well as those for protecting children in conflict situations. It is also imperative that we strengthen accountability mechanisms against violations of children's rights, including by taking concrete action against those who attack schools and hospitals, deny humanitarian access and perpetrate sexual violence against children in situations of armed conflict. Sierra Leone commits itself not only to support those outlined endeavours, but to continue our collective leadership.

Mrs. Blokar Drobič (Slovenia): I join others in thanking Special Representative of the Secretary-General Gamba de Potgieter, Deputy Executive Director Chaiban and Ms. Niger-Thomas for their briefings. We welcome their valuable work and contributions to better

protection for children in armed conflicts. We thank the Maltese presidency for excellently steering the work of the Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

We are appalled that the denial of humanitarian access to children still exists and is increasing. Even in wars, there are rules. Parties to conflict must abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Every party to an armed conflict bears the primary responsibility to meet the basic needs of the civilian population living under its control, and special attention must be paid to children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most universally ratified instrument, is clear in that regard.

Denying children humanitarian access is cruel and inhumane. It prolongs their acute plight and triggers their vulnerability to further human rights violations and abuses, sexual and gender-based violence, particularly against girls, recruitment, disease, malnutrition and, too often, death. That has to stop. How can we consider ourselves a civilization if we are capable of inflicting so much pain on our most vulnerable members? Rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian delivery must be guaranteed at all times and by all sides. To that end, the Security Council has adopted a humanitarian carveout in sanctions regimes. It is also imperative that States harmonize their national counter-terrorism legislation.

Humanitarian response is a lifeline for millions of children. We call on all parties to all conflicts to silence their guns and cease hostilities. Only a stable ceasefire can create conditions for the delivery of humanitarian assistance at the scale required. We also call on them to fully cooperate with the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and other humanitarian actors.

Only two weeks ago, in the Chamber (see S/PV.9581), we were confronted with alarming projections of severe acute malnutrition among children in the Sudan. The assessment by the humanitarian community that more than 220,000 children could possibly die of malnutrition is horrifying. Starving children in Gaza are being killed at an unprecedented level. In Yemen, nearly half of children under 5 suffer from stunting. In Afghanistan, girls are denied access to basic services, including education and health care, but also humanitarian aid. In Haiti, amid security and humanitarian crises, seven of 10 cases of reported sexual violence include children.

In Myanmar, 6 million children are being left behind by not having access to life-saving aid. In Ukraine, daily targeting of critical civilian infrastructure leaves children without access to food, water, health care and education, thus adding to their overwhelming suffering. Unfortunately, we could go and on.

The international humanitarian community has an almost impossible mission of delivering food and providing basic services, critical humanitarian assistance and psychosocial support. I wish to extend our deep appreciation to all humanitarian, medical and United Nations workers for their dedication, and we condemn, in the strongest terms, the killing of humanitarian workers anywhere.

Efforts to safeguard the rights of children must be comprehensive, encompassing prevention, accountability and rehabilitation, including psychosocial support for children traumatized by armed conflict. Collaboration among Governments, humanitarian organizations, local communities and individuals is required to ensure a future where every child is safe from the horrors of war.

Slovenia will continue working with partners to support better protection of children in armed conflict and beyond by providing food assistance and long-term psychosocial and health rehabilitation.

Mr. Bendjama (Algeria): At the outset, my delegation would like to thank Malta for organizing this briefing on addressing the consequences of the denial of humanitarian access for children during armed conflicts. I also thank the briefers, especially Mr. Edward Chaiban, Deputy Executive Director for UNICEF. I listened very carefully to the briefing delivered by Special Representative Virginia Gamba de Potgieter. I am astonished that she did not say a single word regarding the dire situation of the children in Gaza, even as all delegations in the Chamber sitting around this have table highlighted the devastating consequences of the denial of humanitarian assistance to the children in Gaza.

My delegation welcomes topic of this briefing, particularly as it allows us to emphasize the devastating impact that the denial of humanitarian assistance can have on the well-being of children. Currently, we confront a horrifying reality — the denial of humanitarian access leaves children in the crosshairs of conflict.

The dire humanitarian situation in Gaza is a vivid example. For months, the occupying Power in Palestine has deliberately denied humanitarian access, leading to terrible humanitarian consequences, notably causing children to die from malnutrition, dehydration, starvation and the lack of health care. Those who survive will be scarred for life, unable to grow and develop as they would have in a normal situation. Their dreams have been shattered.

In February, UNICEF indicated that children in the Gaza Strip were dying an alarming rate. Thousands had been killed and thousands more injured. Around 1.6 million people are estimated to have been internally displaced — half of them children, with more than 17,000 wounded children that have no surviving family. More than 600,000 children are trapped in Rafah alone, with nowhere safe to go. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East reported that more children have been killed in recent months in Gaza than in four years of conflict worldwide.

Today as we gather, children in many parts of the world continue to be victims of constraints on humanitarian aid, which, in some cases, tend to be extreme. The Council, including through its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, alongside the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, have a responsibility for the fate of children affected by war. Further work is needed to strengthen the international response to humanitarian crises related to grave violations affecting children in situations of armed conflict on the agenda of the Security Council, inter alia, by empowering monitoring mechanisms, including by enhancing data collection; advocating for safe and unhindered passage for humanitarian workers and supplies, without preconditions; adding the denial of humanitarian assistance to the violations that trigger the listing of parties in annex I of the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflicts.

Children are disproportionately affected by armed conflict, especially by the six grave violations condemned by the Security Council. Children should not be trapped in conflicts and denied a lifeline.

Let this meeting be a catalyst for action. Let us hold perpetrators accountable and prioritize safe access to humanitarian assistance in order to ensure that the needs of children in armed conflict are met. Together we can build a world where children are no longer victims of war, but beacons of hope for a peaceful future.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the delegation of Malta for having organized today's briefing. We thank Ms. Gamba de Potgieter, Mr. Chaiban and Ms. Niger-Thomas for their contributions to our discussion.

Access to humanitarian assistance is often the path to life in situations of armed conflict. In accordance with international humanitarian law, it must be provided by all warring parties. When it comes to children in need, those obligations become a moral imperative. At the same time, the work of humanitarian actors must be based on the Charter of the United Nations and basic humanitarian principles and must be conducted in close coordination with the conflict-affected States.

Increasingly, restrictions are being placed on the provision of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian workers are victims of targeted attacks. In that way, terrorists are obstructing humanitarian access on the ground as a tactic to gain a military advantage.

The politicization of the humanitarian sphere also hinders the achievement of the important objectives of preventing and minimizing the suffering of civilians. In that context, the extremely negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on humanitarian access has not been getting the attention it deserves. Such measures cause incalculable damage to children in conflict-affected countries. They affect the entire social sphere and impede the delivery of medicines and foodstuffs, which are vital for children in need. The negative impact of unilateral sanctions is clearly visible in Syria, where they impede humanitarian assistance and access to basic services, as noted in the Secretary-General's reports. So-called humanitarian exemptions provide no relief at all. Today unilateral coercive measures are a form of denial of humanitarian assistance and must be viewed and assessed accordingly.

An unprecedented humanitarian disaster is currently unfolding in the Gaza Strip, where Israel, in violation of its international obligations, has essentially blocked humanitarian access. Even before the 7 October attack, the Israeli authorities were denying humanitarian access to children. For example, Israel systematically prevented Palestinian children from traveling outside Gaza to receive specialized medical treatment. In 2022 alone, five children died while awaiting approval of the relevant permit applications, as noted in last year's report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/363).

However, Israel's actions with regard to humanitarian assistance for Palestinians since the October 2023 events has been shocking in terms of their magnitude and impact. For more than six months now, we have seen the systematic erection of all manner of barriers to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. First, access to Gaza was completely blocked. Then, the tactic of denying visas to humanitarian non-governmental organizations was introduced, and there was bureaucratic red tape and endless inspections of humanitarian cargoes.

The information war against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) deserves a special mention. Ultimately, that leading humanitarian agency has been left without funding as a result of allegations that have not yet been verified by the United Nations. In any event, it is not clear why the allegations against 12 employees of UNRWA should result in the cessation of funding for the organization, which has been the sole lifeline for many residents of Gaza.

The delivery of assistance to the people of Gaza is fraught with mortal dangers. We pay tribute to the heroism and dedication of all those who continue to deliver assistance to the residents of Gaza. Israeli missile strikes against humanitarian facilities in Gaza, including schools and hospitals, have also resulted in the deaths of aid workers. Just yesterday, an Israeli air strike killed seven employees of the World Central Kitchen humanitarian mission who were rescuing Gazans from starvation. Since October 2023, approximately 200 humanitarian workers have been killed in Gaza as a result of Israeli air strikes, the vast majority of them were UNRWA employees. We would like to know if an investigation is being carried out into the deaths of those people. What is the Organization doing when it comes to the protection of its own staff?

Israel's blockade has already led to widespread hunger. Children in the north of the Strip are starving to death. In that connection, we condemn the Israelis' decision to prohibit the entry of UNRWA food convoys to that part of Gaza. Unless the overall situation changes, a similar fate will await children throughout Gaza. The current humanitarian delivery volumes, arriving by both air and sea, are not yet sufficient to improve the harrowing situation. According to the United Nations, the number of people who are already facing acute hunger is 1.1 million. That is half of the population of the Gaza Strip.

The denial of humanitarian access is only one of the grave violations against children that are taking place in the Gaza Strip. Children are dying and suffering there every day. Since the beginning of the escalation, more than 13,000 children have died, and thousands more are missing. The majority of schools and hospitals have been destroyed. Since October 2023, not a single child in Gaza has had access to education.

In that regard, we call on Ms. Gamba de Potgieter to visit Gaza as a matter of priority to assess the situation of grave violations against children. We call on the Israeli Government to ensure the Special Representative's immediate access to the region. We would also like to ask the Special Representative and Mr. Chaiban if there are currently any obstacles to visiting the Gaza Strip.

We trust that resolution 2728 (2024), adopted by the Security Council on 25 March, will contribute to at least a temporarily improving the situation in Gaza during the Ramadan period and, among other things, to increasing the supply of humanitarian aid to the Strip. We assume that this legally binding decision of the Security Council will be implemented without delay. So far, we have seen it being violated on a daily basis.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I thank you, Madam President, for organizing this briefing. I also thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Mrs. Gamba de Potgieter; the Deputy Executive Director at UNICEF, Mr. Chaiban; and the representative of civil society, Ms. Atim Niger-Thomas, for their briefings and for the crucial work of their organizations.

Recently, one of Mr. Chaiban's colleagues described the serious consequences of restricted humanitarian access, which she witnessed in Khartoum:

“We met a young mother at a hospital whose three-month-old toddler was extremely ill. The number of children suffering from acute malnutrition is increasing, and the lean season has not even begun.”

In the Sudan, as everywhere else where humanitarian access is restricted, the first to suffer are the children. Although it is their right, many of them have no access to adequate food, health care or education. The consequences are disastrous: children suffering from acute malnutrition are at high risk of death or illness. Long-term malnutrition also affects cognitive development.

In recent years, verified cases of denial of humanitarian access have risen sharply. I say “verified” because that is one of the six grave violations against children monitored by the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict mandated by the Council. That denial can take many forms: attacks and violence against humanitarian personnel, obstructions to the delivery of aid or bureaucratic obstacles. Attacks on humanitarian workers, such as those of the World Central Kitchen, are unacceptable. We expect the investigation to fully shed light on that attack and measures to be taken to ensure that it does not happen again. It should be remembered that all parties to an armed conflict have an obligation under international humanitarian law to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access.

As we speak, thousands of children around the world are suffering the consequences of restrictions on humanitarian access. In the Gaza Strip, children are dying from acute malnutrition. The Sudan, too, is being pushed towards famine. In both Gaza and the Sudan, we call on the parties to implement the resolutions of the Council calling for an immediate ceasefire. Aid deliveries and other humanitarian services must be ensured without further delay — through all possible crossing points and routes. In Yemen and Afghanistan, discrimination against women aid workers is affecting the provision of services. In Myanmar, where a third of the population is in need of humanitarian support, access to humanitarian aid is also very limited. In Haiti, the breakdown of law and order is preventing humanitarian aid from reaching the population. Finally, the lack of humanitarian access to the Ukrainian territories under Russian military control remains a major concern.

What can be done about that sad list, which is not even exhaustive?

First, all parties must respect international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights in all circumstances. That includes the rules relating to the conduct of hostilities, including the obligation to protect the civilian population, which includes the humanitarian personnel who contribute to the protection of children in armed conflict; the prohibition on the use of starvation as a method of warfare; the obligation to protect objects indispensable to the survival of the population; and the obligation to authorize and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid. We also recall that the

Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the rights to life, to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to education.

Secondly, given the enormity of humanitarian needs, we must ensure sufficient and predictable funding for such aid, which must include protection services.

Thirdly, resolution 2664 (2022), on humanitarian exemptions in all United Nations sanctions regimes, must be fully implemented, thereby helping to ensure the flow of funds for humanitarian action as well as humanitarian access in highly complex contexts.

Fourthly, we must break the cycles of violence and suffering by finding political solutions to conflicts — including within the Council.

All war is a war against children. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the rights of all children are protected. It is also essential that those providing humanitarian aid and protection be able to do so without putting themselves at risk. Indeed, those people are increasingly exposed to violence, which is why Switzerland is working on a draft resolution on the protection of humanitarian and United Nations personnel.

Finally, let us not forget that humanitarian aid and protection not only save lives, but also show children that the world has not forgotten them.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.