Report on Children in Armed Conflict, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Remains ‘Stark Reminder’ of Need to Put Their Protection First

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Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s remarks to the Security Council open debate on children and armed conflict, in New York today:

I thank the Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Dato’ Sri Anifah Aman, for arranging this critical debate on children and armed conflict.

Last year was one of the worst in recent memory for children in countries affected by conflict.  My report before you outlines the enormous challenges we face in upholding the fundamental rights of tens of millions of children.  We have seen crises multiply and intensify, making protection more and more difficult.

Grave violations against children have been an affront to our common humanity in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.  I am also deeply alarmed at the suffering of so many children as a result of Israeli military operations in Gaza last year.  I urge Israel to take concrete and immediate steps, including by reviewing existing policies and practices, to protect and prevent the killing and maiming of children, and to respect the special protections afforded to schools and hospitals.

Around the world, many thousands of children have experienced acts that no child should suffer.  They have been killed, maimed, forcibly recruited, tortured and sexually abused.  Their schools have been destroyed.  And, in a worrying trend, abductions have increased rapidly.

Groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army have kidnapped children for many years.  But, the scale and nature of this grave violation is changing.  Abduction is now being used as a tactic to terrorize or target particular ethnic groups or religious communities, and children have been a particular focus.  The large number of abductions by Da’esh and Boko Haram have shocked us repeatedly in recent months.

But, we should also recognize that this practice is prevalent in many other situations covered by the report and is perpetrated by a great range of other non-State armed groups.

I am pleased that at the last open debate on children and armed conflict, in March, there was broad support from Member States to address this challenge and increase the tools available to deal with it.

Next month, we will mark the 10-year anniversary of the Council’s resolution 1612 (2005), which established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

My Special Representative and her predecessors have made great strides in protecting children from recruitment.  The “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign is based on many years of work to change attitudes.

This year has witnessed further progress.  We are moving ever closer towards a world in which no child wears a Government uniform and engages in combat.  I encourage those concerned Governments here today to redouble their efforts to implement the goals of the campaign and to work with my Special Representative.

However, there is still much to do in addressing the challenge of ending grave violations against children by non-State armed groups.  The report before you highlights some progress made in this regard.  For example, the release of 1,757 children from the Cobra Faction is a bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture in South Sudan.  My Special Representative will continue to work with such groups to ensure we are doing our utmost to protect children in these most difficult environments.

Grave violations against children are also of great concern both in countries of origin and in countries that children flee to.  Children may cross the border to flee conflict, but that does not mean that they are safe from its effects — they require urgent and sustained protection interventions.

This year, I regret that the contents of the annual report have been the subject of more controversy and discussions than usual, to the extent of threatening its integrity.  The Mechanism has withstood this scrutiny and the content of my report should speak for itself.  It presents strong overview of egregious violations suffered by children in conflict in 2014.  This increases global awareness, highlights the need for accountability, and calls for action.  It is a stark reminder that protection of children in armed conflict must be our common priority.

A healthy debate where Member States put forward their views and provide information is appropriate.  But, national interests should not cloud the objective at stake, which is protecting children.

This is a moral imperative and a legal obligation.  Those who engage in military action that results in numerous grave violations against children will, regardless of intent, find themselves under scrutiny.

Member States should pursue all avenues to protect children affected by armed conflict.  One important way is by ending impunity for the violations outlined in this report.  I also wish to reassure that I am committed to ensuring that the United Nations itself does more and better to prevent any abuse of children in the context of conflict.

Recent allegations concerning abuse in the Central African Republic make this all the more essential.  I urge Member States, and in particular, all the parties to conflict identified in this report to work with my Special Representative to prevent future grave violations against children.

Children have the right to be protected in their schools, in their homes, in their communities.  Let us keep the rights of children at the centre of our efforts to build a future of dignity for all.