

Protecting Children and Upholding Humanitarian Rights in the Face of Armed Conflict and Exploitation

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Abstract

Amidst global instability and political turmoil, the world faces a grave challenge regarding the digression of individual and humanitarian rights. As arms proliferation, regional conflicts, and the growing threat of nuclear escalation continue to escalate, children and vulnerable populations find themselves at the heart of these crises. The protection of their rights and well-being must be placed at the forefront of international priorities.

One of the most urgent human rights issues of our day is the terrible toll that armed war takes on children. Children all across the world are involved in terrible situations where their futures, safety, and lives are constantly at jeopardy due to transgressions of international law and order. Children are vulnerable to a variety of horrific atrocities in conflict zones, such as rape and other types of sexual violence, kidnapping, attacks on hospitals or schools, denial of humanitarian access, recruitment or use as child soldiers, serious injury, and murdering. In addition to violating basic human rights, abuses like these lead to serious traumatic incidents affecting youth in their future lives with disorders such as post traumatic stress disorder or other trauma based psychological issues.

The number of children impacted by armed conflict has increased dramatically in recent years, according to the UN, with over 12,000 child casualties recorded in a single year in war areas including Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, major civil and proxy war sites. Another concerning rise is the systematic recruitment of child soldiers; an estimated 250,000 youngsters, many under the age of 15, are currently serving in armed groups worldwide, of which most are recruited by terror organizations or militaries of least economically developed countries (LEDCs). Numerous children suffer from physical and psychological damage as a result of sexual assault, especially the pervasive rape of girls in conflict areas.

International laws and conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which expressly forbids the use of children under the age of 18 in hostilities, have governed the world's response to these horrible crimes. Furthermore, child soldier recruitment, sexual assault, and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including as hospitals and schools, are specifically recognised as war crimes by the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The number of transgressions persists at a startling rate in spite of these safeguards.

The lack of humanitarian access, which worsens the suffering of children caught in violence, makes the problem even worse. Conflicting parties frequently block aid agencies from accessing children in need, making the humanitarian catastrophe worse. The urgency of guaranteeing unconditional access to humanitarian aid and the necessity of holding those responsible for such atrocities accountable have been emphasised time and time again by the UN Security Council in its resolutions. However, these demands for action are all too frequently disregarded or downplayed in many conflict areas due to the lack of governance and decree. The increasing frequency of these serious infractions emphasises how urgently international law must be enforced more strictly and there must be a stronger commitment to protecting children during armed conflict.

The situation is in need of dire solutions, and the ongoing involvement of minors engaging in combat calls for the emergence of new conflicts providing an even bigger threat to global peace and security. As a global community, we must make sure that children are seen as victims in need of immediate care and protection rather than being used as pawns in conflict.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **Global instability and political turmoil**: A state of the lack of global order and political conflict between states and organizations, often caused by violent conflict, economic hardship, or governance failures.
2. **Humanitarian rights**: The rights and protections afforded to individuals, particularly vulnerable groups like children, in times of conflict or crisis, which include access to food, shelter, medical care, and protection from violence.
3. **Arms proliferation**: The spread of weapons, particularly small arms and light weapons, which increases the potential for conflict and exacerbates violence, including child recruitment and the targeting of civilian infrastructure.
4. **Nuclear escalation**: The risk of nuclear weapons or nuclear war, either being used or increasing in production, increasing the threat to global peace and international stability.
5. **Child soldiers**: Children under the age of 18 who are forcibly recruited or used in combat, either by armed groups, militias, or state military forces.
6. **International Law and Order**: The system of legal norms and treaties that govern the conduct of states and individuals, with the aim of protecting civilians, including children, from the worst consequences of armed conflict and the breach of global order.
7. **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**: An international treaty that outlines the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. It mandates that children be protected from exploitation, abuse, and violence, including in armed conflict.
8. **Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict**: A protocol to the CRC that specifically prohibits the recruitment and use of children in hostilities and seeks to provide protections for children caught in armed conflict.
9. **War crimes**: Grave violations of international law, including the recruitment of children into armed forces, sexual violence, and attacks on civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. War crimes can be prosecuted by international courts like the *International Criminal Court (ICC).*
10. **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols**: A set of international treaties that set standards for the humane treatment of individuals during wartime, with specific provisions for the protection of children, civilians, and non-combatants.
11. **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**: The treaty that established the ICC, which has jurisdiction over individuals accused of committing war crimes, including the recruitment of child soldiers and attacks on civilian populations.
12. **Humanitarian access**: The ability of aid organizations to deliver critical services (such as food, medicine, and shelter) to civilians in conflict zones. Humanitarian access is often obstructed by warring parties, worsening the suffering of children and other vulnerable groups.
13. **UN Security Council (UNSC)**: A principal organ of the United Nations responsible for maintaining international peace and security. The UNSC issues resolutions that call for action in conflict areas, including the protection of children and the provision of humanitarian aid.
14. **LEDCs (Least Economically Developed Countries)**: Countries that face severe challenges to development, including poverty, weak governance, and lack of infrastructure. Many LEDCs are heavily affected by armed conflict, which exacerbates the suffering of children and other vulnerable populations.
15. **Proxy wars**: Conflicts in which external powers support opposing sides in a war, often in a third-party country. These wars can involve irregular or non-state armed groups, and children are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, exploitation, and abuse in such settings.
16. **Civil war**: A conflict between factions within a country, often between the government and opposition forces or different ethnic or political groups. Civil wars create a dangerous environment for children, leading to displacement, recruitment as soldiers, and exposure to violence.
17. **Psychological trauma**: Emotional and mental harm resulting from exposure to violent events, leading to disorders such as **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. Children who witness or are involved in armed conflict are particularly susceptible to long-term psychological harm.
18. **Conflict zones**: Areas of active armed conflict where civilians, especially children, face immediate threats to their safety, health, and well-being. These areas are marked by violence, instability, and the collapse of essential services.
19. **International Criminal Court (ICC)**: The permanent court established to prosecute individuals for the gravest offenses, including war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. The ICC is key in holding individuals accountable for violations of children's rights in armed conflict.
20. **Rehabilitation and reintegration**: The process by which child soldiers or children affected by armed conflict receive psychological care, education, and support to reintegrate into society. This process is vital for helping children heal from trauma and rebuild their futures.
21. **Accountability and justice**: The legal and moral responsibility of states, organizations, and individuals to prevent, stop, and punish violations of children's rights, including the recruitment of child soldiers, sexual violence, and attacks on civilians.

General Overview

Children's rights are among the most critical humanitarian issues affecting global policies on youth welfare. In particular, the most severe human rights abuses against children occur in areas of armed conflict, religious and ethnic disputes, and invasive conflicts. The devastating effects of conflict on children include forced displacement, sexual violence, recruitment into armed groups, injury, death, and the loss of family members. The denial of access to essential services like healthcare and education only worsens their suffering. The climate of war seriously threatens children’s rights to protection, survival, and development.

Particularly targeting children in conflicts, local armed groups and factions, often supported by foreign powers, take advantage of them in a variety of ways. Children that are utilised as labourers, military personnel, or human shields suffer from physical and psychological damage that may last for years, if not leading to their death. In addition to complicating matters, proxy conflicts make it more challenging for governments to respect human rights and international humanitarian law as well as for international organisations to deliver relief. The breakdown of law and order in these areas, particularly in places with poor governance, permits the ongoing abuse of children with little accountability.

The rights of children are often infringed in countries that are involved in ongoing conflicts, including countries such as: Yemen, South Sudan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia, Nigeria, and Myanmar. Armed groups enlist, force, or exploit youngsters in these conflicts, which are fuelled by political, ethnic, and religious tensions. They endure severe brutality such sexual abuse, kidnapping, trafficking, employment and soldiers, human shields, forced prostitution, or labourers. Children lose access to protection, healthcare, and education as a result of the breakdown of state institutions and infrastructure, and many are uprooted from their homes, making them more susceptible to abuse.

Child soldier recruitment is rampant in Yemen as a result of the civil war between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels. Children are made to fight or work as cooks and messengers. Basic services have also been seriously affected by the violence, depriving children of access to healthcare and school. In a similar vein, armed organisations have been enlisting minors for the South Sudanese civil conflict since 2013. Millions of children are uprooted and at risk of additional exploitation as a result of the violence, which is exacerbated by famine and disease, and the kidnapping and forced labour of many. Since the start of the Syrian civil conflict in 2011, both state and non-state actors have recruited children, particularly for extremist organisations like ISIS, which has resulted in a large number of child casualties.

During decades of conflict in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), many armed groups have enlisted minors as sex slaves, porters, or soldiers. Vulnerable children are used in violent warfare by armed groups, especially those from displaced families. Children have also been enlisted by Seleka rebels and anti-Balaka militias in the Central African Republic (CAR) for use in sexual exploitation, forced labour, or combat. Many children are now orphaned, displaced, and at risk of more maltreatment as a result of this tragedy. Children are frequently recruited by terrorist groups for use in fighting, suicide missions, and espionage in Afghanistan's protracted conflict, which has been made worse by the Taliban's return. Children are now much more susceptible to exploitation as a result of the breakdown of the health and education systems.

Children have also been forcibly recruited in Mali during the 2012 war between separatist groups and the Malian government, especially by Islamist extremists. Armed groups utilize children for spies, fighting, and other tasks. Additionally to this, Al-Shabaab has also recruited minors in Somalia for use in battle, suicide attacks, and other risky positions. These kids are frequently kidnapped or forced to serve. Another ongoing incident regards Boko Haram, a terror syndicate with a notorious history of kidnapping children in Nigeria, most notably during the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl abduction. Children are used by Boko Haram for sexual abuse, bombings, and as troops. Millions have been displaced by the fighting, leaving youngsters open to abuse, forced labour, and human trafficking. Lastly, there has been widespread violence and harsh crackdowns against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, leading to ethnic conflicts, displacement and territorial border clashes.

In all conflicts present and ongoing in our politically derived and polarized global circumstance, children endure the harshest effects of all these conflicts, including exploitation, deprivation, psychological anguish, and physical assault. Children are particularly at risk of being recruited, abused, and exploited by armed groups because of the ongoing violence, instability, and breakdown of basic services. International accountability should be sought to penalise those responsible for the exploitation and harm of children in war, and efforts to protect children in conflict areas must be bolstered.

Timeline of Events

| ***1960s-Present*** | ***The Human Trafficking Insurgency of Latin America****Countries facing severe internal conflicts such as Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela etc…, fueled by political turmoil and economic instability resort to methods of gang violence and cartel control, leading to the growth of the trafficking sector, selling sex slaves and children in exchange for financial assets.* |
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| ***1989*** | ***Creation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)****The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989 as an international treaty to protect children's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. The treaty emphasizes the need to protect children in armed conflict, particularly through provisions such as the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), which prohibits the recruitment and use of children under 18 in hostilities.* |
| ***1990s-Present*** | ***The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers*** *The Democratic Republic of the Congo has experienced decades of violence, with armed groups like the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and various militias recruiting children as soldiers, sex slaves, and laborers.* |
| ***1991–2002*** | ***Sierra Leone Civil War*** *The Sierra Leone Civil War involved brutal conflict between government forces and rebel groups, particularly the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who recruited thousands of children as soldiers, porters, and sex slaves. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was adopted in 1998, criminalized the use of children in armed conflict, and the UN Security Council passed resolutions condemning such practices.* |
| ***2003–Present*** | ***Darfur Conflict*** *The Darfur Conflict in Sudan (2003–present) saw government-backed militias, such as the Janjaweed, and rebel groups recruit and use child soldiers, as well as perpetrate widespread sexual violence and exploitation. The ICC responded according to the Rome Statute.*  |
| ***2009–Present*** | ***Recruitment of Child Soldiers by Boko Haram****The rise of the Boko Haram militant group in northeastern Nigeria has led to the abduction and recruitment of thousands of children, especially girls, for use as child soldiers, bombers, and sex slaves.* |
| ***2011–2024*** | ***The Syrian Civil War****The Syrian Civil War (2011–present) had led to a catastrophic situation for children, with over 5 million displaced, and thousands of children recruited by various groups, including ISIS and Al-Nusra Front. The conflict had also involved the widespread targeting of schools and hospitals.* |
| ***2014–Present*** | ***The Yemen Civil War*** *The Yemen Civil War, which began in 2014 between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels, has led to widespread recruitment of child soldiers by both sides of the conflict. Children have been used in combat, as human shields, and for forced labor.* |
| ***2017–Present*** | ***The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar****In 2017, the Myanmar military launched a violent crackdown against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State, leading to mass displacement, with over a million Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh. Many of these refugees were children. Impact* |
| ***2022–Present*** | ***The Russia-Ukraine War****The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in February 2022, has had a devastating impact on children, with millions displaced, schools and hospitals targeted, and children at risk of violence, exploitation, and recruitment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to widespread human rights violations, including the destruction of civilian infrastructure, attacks on children, and forced relocations of minors, particularly in occupied territories.* |

Previous Attempts and Treaties to Resolve the Issue

The international community has made numerous attempts to address the issue of children in armed conflict through treaties, events, and frameworks aimed at protecting their rights and ensuring accountability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989 and ratified by 196 nations as of 2023, is the most widely recognized human rights treaty. It outlines fundamental protections for children, including the right to be shielded from violence, abuse, and exploitation, with specific provisions such as Article 38, which prohibits the recruitment of children under 15 into armed forces, and Article 39, which calls for the rehabilitation of child victims. Complementing the CRC is the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), which raises the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities to 18 and emphasizes the need for the demobilization and rehabilitation of child soldiers. Similarly, the Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional Protocols (1977) provide essential protections for children in both international and non-international conflicts, prohibiting violence, abduction, and mistreatment of civilians. The Paris Principles (2007) focus specifically on reintegrating former child soldiers into society, advocating for their physical and psychological recovery and ensuring they are treated as victims rather than perpetrators. National efforts, such as the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) enacted by the United States in 2008, impose restrictions on military support to nations that recruit child soldiers and incentivize their demobilization. Lastly, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopted in 1998, classifies the recruitment of children under 15 as a war crime under Article 8, holding perpetrators accountable and reinforcing global efforts to eliminate the use of children in armed conflict. Despite these initiatives, the persistence of violations underscores the urgent need for stricter enforcement and renewed international commitment.