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Children and armed conflict in Mali

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fifth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali. It covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024.

In the report, the Secretary-General documents the effects of conflict on children in Mali, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations, namely, the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,[a] the abduction of children, and the denial of humanitarian access. Where available, the report contains information on perpetrators. It also outlines progress made in addressing grave violations against children.

The report includes recommendations to parties to the conflict in Mali for ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection.

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

I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fifth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The report covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024 and contains a description of trends and patterns of grave violations against children that have occurred since the previous report (S/2022/856) and the progress made in ending and preventing such violations, in follow-up to the recommendations contained in the previous report and to the conclusions of the Working Group (S/AC.51/2023/3). The violations presented herein have been verified by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting in Mali, which was co-chaired by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) until 31 December 2023. Following the withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali, since 1 January 2024, the country task force has been co-chaired by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the UNICEF representative. Where possible, perpetrators of grave violations are identified. The ability to verify information was at times hampered by limited child protection capacity at the field level, insecurity or access restrictions. Therefore, the information contained herein does not represent the full scale of violations committed in Mali during the reporting period.

2. The report is focused on trends of violations perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. In annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict (A/78/842-S/2024/384), under part B, as parties that commit grave violations affecting children in situations of armed conflict on the agenda of the Security Council, Jama'a Nusrat Ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), including Ansar Eddine, and Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), as part of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), were listed for the recruitment and use of children and for perpetrating rape and other forms of sexual violence against children. JNIM, including Ansar Eddine, was also listed for the killing and maiming of children. The Platform coalition, including affiliated groups, was listed for the recruitment and use of children.

II. Overview of the political, military and security situation

3. During the reporting period, limited progress was observed in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015. On 25 January 2024, the transitional Government of Mali announced with immediate effect the end of the Agreement, which had been a primary framework for dialogue with the signatory parties to prevent and end grave violations against children, including those listed in the annexes to the above-mentioned report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict.

4. The security situation deteriorated compared with the previous period, with an increase in armed confrontations between the parties to the conflict in northern and central Mali. Attacks by JNIM against civilians, the Malian Defence and Security Forces, and MINUSMA, along with clashes between the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (CSP-PSD) and the Malian Defence and Security Forces, resulted in grave violations against children and triggered population displacement. With the termination of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, confrontations between the Malian Defence and Security Forces and the armed groups that had signed the peace agreement resumed in northern Mali.

5. Climate change, resulting in a decrease in precipitation, and the advance of the desert, affecting the availability of the populations' means of subsistence, together with climate-related security risks, continued to affect populations in northern Mali and exacerbate conflicts between communities in conflict-affected areas, as well as access to education and the risks of gender-based violence. The consequence is, among other aspects, massive displacement of populations and an increase in humanitarian service needs while access to affected areas remains insecure and challenging for humanitarians.

6. Following a letter from the transitional Government of Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2023/463) which requested the immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA, on 30 June 2023 the Security Council, by its resolution 2690 (2023), decided to terminate the mandate of MINUSMA as of 30 June 2023 and requested the Mission to immediately start on 1 July 2023 the cessation of its operations and the transfer of its tasks. The Council also decided that the liquidation of MINUSMA would commence on 1 January 2024.

7. The termination of MINUSMA, along with the withdrawal of Mali from the Group of Five for the Sahel in May 2022 and the Operation Barkhane forces from Mali in August 2022, affected the ability of the country task force to monitor and verify grave violations. Those entities played crucial roles in civilian protection, supporting the Malian Defence and Security Forces and facilitating the handover of children associated with armed groups. Notably, the withdrawal of MINUSMA affected the monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children and some related child protection activities in Mali, because of the capacity gap left by the withdrawal of dedicated MINUSMA child protection staff. It also had repercussions due to the leading role of MINUSMA in dialogue with parties to the conflict and its substantial logistical and financial functions, and the technical resources essential for implementing the monitoring and reporting mechanism. Following the departure of MINUSMA, dialogue with parties to the conflict in the framework of the children and armed conflict mandate stalled. The country task force is working on modalities to resume the engagement on children and armed conflict, particularly in relation to support on the implementation of activities agreed upon in the action plans, including visits to the armed groups' bases and the screening of armed groups' members, on which MINUSMA used to lead.

8. The departure of MINUSMA also resulted in several practical challenges, including the need to find alternatives to the MINUSMA services that used to enable humanitarian activities, such as security provisions, including securing air strips and mine action. This affected humanitarian access, most notably in Kidal and Ménaka. The Malian armed forces have agreed to secure landing strips previously secured by MINUSMA for humanitarian flights, which is helping to address this concern.

9. On the political front, a referendum organized by the transitional Government introduced a new constitution adopted in July 2023, with a provision under article 3 that addresses the protection of children against trafficking, including measures to prevent their recruitment by groups designated by the authorities as "violent extremist groups".

10. The human rights situation remained worrisome throughout the reporting period, due to continued violence against civilians by armed groups, including community-based armed groups. In some instances, counterterrorism or military operations conducted by the Defence and Security Forces had an adverse impact on human rights, in central Mali in particular. Children in conflict-affected areas continued to suffer grave violations perpetrated by all parties involved in the conflict. The spillover of armed group activities into neighbouring countries and the impact on the protection of children in those countries remain a concern.

11. Humanitarian access in northern and central Mali, as well as in some areas in the south, remained challenging due to an increase in armed groups activities, intercommunal violence, military operations and the presence of improvised explosive devices, landmines and explosive remnants of war. The destruction of bridges and roads, the use of improvised explosive devices and the use of blockade and siege tactics against villages by armed groups hindered people's access to basic services and livelihoods, as well as the delivery of humanitarian services, exposing children to increasing food insecurity. The number of security incidents and threats affecting humanitarian personnel and services remained high. According to Displacement Tracking Matrix reports, the number of internally displaced persons remained exceedingly high; there were 354,739 internally displaced persons in Mali as at 31 March 2024, many of whom were children. Despite these challenges, humanitarian partners were able to deliver most types of humanitarian assistance in most locations of Mali, including through community engagement and liaison.

12. Persistent food insecurity and malnutrition, as well as the impact of climate change, increased the risk of families resorting to negative coping mechanisms, such as encouraging children to join armed groups or giving away women and girls in exchange for protection or to gain the favour of armed groups. In certain regions of central and northern Mali controlled by armed groups, the groups used threats and deprived civilians of essential goods needed for survival. The imposition of *zakat* (a financial obligation) has led to child marriages in families that are unable to meet this requirement.

13. As of March 2024, 1,788 schools in the country were closed due to insecurity, threats and attacks from armed groups. These closures have prevented 536,400 children from gaining access to education and 10,728 teachers from practising their profession. The most affected regions were Kidal, with 72 per cent of schools closed; Ténenkou, with 65 per cent of schools closed; Ménaka, with 48 per cent of schools closed; and Douentza, with 42 per cent of schools closed.

III. Grave violations against children

14. The country task force verified 2,091 grave violations against 1,782 children (1,433 boys, 334 girls, 15 sex unknown), including some children who were victims of multiple violations. The number of grave violations is similar to the number verified in the previous period (2,095). However, the number of child victims has increased compared with the previous period (1,473).

15. About 50 per cent of the grave violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (877). Other perpetrators were JNIM (322) (including Front de libération du Macina (FLM) (210), unidentified JNIM (108),[1] Ansar Eddine (4)); CMA (273) (including Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) (109), MNLA (84), Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA)-CMA (71), unidentified CMA[2] (9)); Platform (212) (including Ganda Lassal Izo (83), Ganda Izo (45), Groupe d'Autodéfense des Touareg Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA) (28), Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad Daoussak (26), MAA-Platform (15), Ganda Koy (7), Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) (6), MAA-GATIA (2)); Malian Defence and Security Forces (159) (including Malian Armed Forces (153), Gendarmerie (5), Police (1)); Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (134); unidentified MSA (43); Dozo traditional hunters (22); Katiba Serma (20); unidentified MAA (13); Dan Nan Ambassagou (DNA) (11);

[1] This includes groups affiliated with JNIM, but it was not possible to verify which specific group within the JNIM coalition was involved.

[2] This includes groups affiliated with CMA, but it was not possible to verify which specific group within the CMA coalition was involved.

foreign security personnel (4); and Fulani armed elements (1). Violations took place in the regions of Gao (464), Timbuktu (464), Kidal (234), Ségou (230), Ménaka (219), Mopti (205), Bandiagara (169), Douentza (41), Taoudeni (35), Koulikoro (13), Sikasso (11), Kayes (4) and Bamako (2).

16. The recruitment and use of children remained the most prominent grave violation verified, followed by killing and maiming, and abduction of children. All three violations increased respectively by 14 per cent, 23 per cent and 27 per cent compared with the previous reporting period. On the other hand, the number of verified attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access decreased by 70 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively. The number of instances of sexual violence against children remained constant.

17. In addition, the country task force verified 165 grave violations against 164 children (142 boys, 22 girls) that occurred before the reporting period: recruitment and use (155); killing and maiming (6); sexual violence (3); and denial of humanitarian access (1). Violations occurred in Ménaka (95), Gao (42), Kidal (28), and they were attributed to Platform (113) (including MSA (63), GATIA (27), Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad Daoussak (MSA-D) (10), MAA Platform (10) and Coordination des mouvements et forces patriotiques de résistance (3)); CMA (42) (including HCUA (19), MNLA (17), MAA-CMA (6)); Katiba Serma (4); ISGS (3); unidentified perpetrators (2); and the Police (1).

A. Recruitment and use

18. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 1,052 children (972 boys, 80 girls) aged between 5 and 17 years. This represents a significant increase compared with the 901 violations verified in the previous reporting period. On average, 44 children were recruited and used per month during the current reporting period, compared with 38 children per month in the previous period.

19. Child recruitment primarily occurred at the community level, often driven by economic hardships that left families unable to meet their children's basic needs, such as providing food. Families sometimes encouraged their children to join armed groups for economic reasons or for protection, or at times did not discourage them from doing so. With over 1,700 schools closed nationwide, a lack of livelihood opportunities, bleak prospects for a better future and increasing food insecurity, many children felt they had no other option but to join armed groups. For instance, in August 2020, a 13-year-old boy joined an armed group due to poverty and the absence of opportunities such as schooling, vocational training, income-generating activities and recreational spaces. He underwent six months of military training and served as a guard for two years and three months. The boy left the armed group in October 2023, at the age of 16.

20. In total, 80 girls were recruited and used, a decrease of 46 per cent compared with 147 girls in the previous reporting period. The girls were mainly used as cooks, to fetch wood and to run errands. Some of them were also victims of sexual violence during their association.

21. Identifying perpetrators of the recruitment and use of children was not always possible, because in many cases children either could not clearly identify the names of the groups with which they were associated or would not do so for fear of reprisals. A total of 283 violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators. Among the identified perpetrators, armed groups signatories to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation were the main perpetrators: CMA (266) (including HCUA (106), MNLA (83), MAA-CMA (69), unidentified CMA (8)); Platform (193) (including Ganda Lassal Izo (83), Ganda Izo (45), GATIA (26), MSA-D (15), MAA-Platform (15), Ganda Koy (4),

MSA (3), MAA/GATIA (2)); JNIM (104) (including unidentified JNIM (62) and FLM (42)); Malian Defence and Security Forces (78) (including Malian Armed Forces (72), Gendarmerie (5), Police (1)); ISGS (52); unidentified MSA (43); Dozo traditional hunters (19); unidentified MAA (13); and Fulani armed elements (1).

22. The most affected region with the highest number of violations was Timbuktu (333) followed by Gao (262), Kidal (201), Ménaka (87), Ségou (78), Bandiagara (42), Taoudenit (35), Douentza (9) and Mopti (5).

Deprivation of liberty of children for alleged association with armed groups

23. During the reporting period, 40 boys were captured during military operations or arrested by the Malian Defence and Security Forces and international forces for alleged association with armed groups. Of the total, 20 boys were handed over to State child protection structures in accordance with the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups, signed in 2013 between the United Nations and the Government of Mali. Before being released, 18 other boys were detained by national authorities for extended periods and in contravention of the Protocol. The situation of the two remaining children was unknown at the time of writing.

24. The release of children from detention remained hampered by the lack of valid civil documentation to prove their age. The country task force continued to advocate for the adoption by the national authorities of credible alternatives for assessing the age of children.

B. Killing and maiming

25. A total of 530 children (350 boys, 165 girls, 15 sex unknown), some as young as three months old, were killed (235) and maimed (295), compared with 408 child casualties verified during the previous reporting period. Violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (281); JNIM (136) (including FLM (124) and unidentified JNIM (12)); Malian Armed Forces (59); ISGS (24); Katiba Serma (10); DNA (6); CMA (5) (including HCUA (3), MAA-CMA (1), unidentified CMA (1)); Platform (4) (including MSA (3), MSA-D (1)); foreign security personnel (4); and Dozo traditional hunters (1). Violations were verified in the regions of Mopti (135), Gao (100), Bandiagara (86), Ménaka (73), Timbuktu (54), Ségou (40), Kidal (25) and Douentza (17).

26. The verified number of children killed or maimed increased by 30 per cent compared with the previous reporting period. Most child casualties resulted from explosive devices (222), followed by firearms (219), airstrikes (16) and unknown weapons (73). For example, in July 2022, in Timbuktu, a 10-year-old girl lost the fingers of her left hand when an explosive device that when she was playing with exploded. In Mopti region, a 17-year-old boy was abducted on his way to the weekly Diamankan fair by Macina Katiba elements in December 2023 and killed in retaliation to the ban on access to the local market imposed on the population from Sofana village.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

27. The country task force verified that 48 children, all girls aged between 12 and 17, were subjected to sexual violence during the reporting period, compared with 50 child survivors in the previous reporting period. Most verified violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (31), followed by Platform (7) (including MSA-D (5), Ganda Koy (2)); Malian Armed Forces (4); CMA (2) (MAA-CMA (1), MNLA (1));

DNA (2); ISGS (1); and Katiba Serma (1). Violations occurred in Ménaka (18), Ségou (15), Timbuktu (9), Gao (3) and Bandiagara (3). For example, in February 2024, in the *cercle* of Koro, Bandiagara region, a member of the Katiba Serma group attempted to rape a 16-year-old girl at gunpoint. The attempted rape failed, as the victim was able to escape but was severely wounded.

28. Monitoring and reporting on rape and other forms of sexual violence continued to be limited by several factors, including prevailing insecurity in the northern and central regions, fear of reprisals, lack of protection for victims and witnesses, lack of holistic and continuous service provision to survivors, limited access to justice, and sociocultural barriers that tend to stigmatize survivors of sexual violence.

D. Abduction of children

29. The country task force verified the abduction of 240 children (183 boys, 57 girls). Violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (119); ISGS (52); JNIM (54) (including FLM (34), unidentified JNIM (20)); Platform (8) (including MSA-D (5), GATIA (2), Ganda Koy (1)); Katiba Serma (5); and DNA (2). The violations occurred in Ségou (84), Gao (56), Mopti (41), Ménaka (22), Bandiagara (16), Timbuktu (12) and Douentza (9) regions.

30. An increase of 37 per cent in the number of verified abductions was observed compared with the previous reporting period, when 175 children were verified as abducted. The increase can be explained by growing insecurity and the intensification of military activities of armed groups. Of the 240 children, 104 were released or escaped, 17 remained in captivity and the whereabouts of 119 children was unknown at the time of writing. For example, in January 2024, in Gao region, unidentified armed men attacked a locality and stole animals and properties from villagers. During the attack, three boys aged 8, 10 and 11 were abducted. The 8-year-old boy was released while the two other boys remained abducted at the time of writing.

E. Attacks on schools and hospitals

31. The education and health systems remained deeply affected by conflict, intercommunal violence and overall insecurity, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of their fundamental rights to education and basic healthcare. During the reporting period, 71 attacks on schools (52), hospitals (19) and protected persons in relations to schools and hospitals were verified, representing a 70 per cent decrease compared with the previous reporting period (240).

32. Most attacks on schools could not be attributed to a specific armed perpetrator (35) followed by JNIM (9) (including FLM (7) and unidentified JNIM (2)); Malian Armed Forces (3); ISGS (2); DNA (1); Katiba Serma (1); and Dozo traditional hunters (1). Violations were verified in Timbuktu (16), Koulikoro (11), Bandiagara (10), Kidal (5), Ménaka (4), Ségou (3), Mopti (2) and Sikasso (1) regions. Incidents involved the destruction and burning of school buildings, materials and equipment, lootings of school materials and premises, threats and physical assaults against protected persons, including their killing and abduction, and armed clashes in school premises. For example, in May 2022, an armed group burst into an elementary school in Bandiagara region, broke down the door of the school management and burned all stored administrative documents and materials. The school was subsequently closed. In December 2023, an aerial drone operation by the Malian Defence and Security Forces targeted a position held by an armed group. During the operation, projectiles struck and damaged the walls of a nearby school. No child casualties were reported at the school.

33. The situation of non-functional schools due to insecurity or humanitarian crises remains alarming. In April 2022, 1,652 schools were closed, and this number decreased slightly to 1,546 in March 2023. However, it rose again to 1,788 in March 2024.

34. The country task force verified three instances of military use of schools in the Bandiagara region: two by FLM and one by Malian Armed Forces. On July 2, 2022, following threats from armed groups in the surrounding area, Malian Armed Forces used a village elementary school in the *cercle* and commune of Koro for several hours before establishing a temporary camp on the southern slope of the village to secure the local population.

35. The 19 attacks on hospitals were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (13), JNIM (4) (including unidentified JNIM (3) and FLM (1)) and Katiba Serma (2). The attacks took place in Bandiagara (7), Timbuktu (5), Mopti (4) and Gao (3) regions. Incidents involved attacks and threats against medical personnel, attacks against health service vehicles and premises, the looting of medicines, the hijacking of ambulances and other health centres vehicles and the destruction of an ambulance that had been loaded with explosives. For instance, in June 2022, in Timbuktu region, unidentified armed individuals on motorcycles burst into a community health centre. The assailants first searched the technical director's office inside the centre, then destroyed all the electrical installations and took away a large sum of money, medicines, two laptop computers and medical equipment. In November 2023, an international medical humanitarian organization, which had been the last one still operating in Nampala, had to evacuate to the town of Niono in the Ségou region to ensure the safety of its personnel.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

36. Humanitarian access continued to be hampered, particularly in the central and northern regions, owing to armed groups attacks on villages, counter-terrorism operations, intercommunal clashes and the increased presence of improvised explosive devices. The country task force verified 150 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, compared with 321 incidents verified during the previous reporting period, representing a 53 per cent decrease.

37. The violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (115); JNIM (15) (including unidentified JNIM (9), Ansar Eddine (4), FLM (2)); Malian Armed Forces (15); ISGS (3); Dozo traditional hunters (1); and Katiba Serma (1). These occurred in the regions of Gao (40), Timbuktu (35), Mopti (18), Ménaka (15), Sikasso (10), Ségou (10), Douentza (6), Bandiagara (5), Kayes (4), Kidal (3), Bamako (2) and Koulikoro (2).

38. Incidents included carjacking, threats and physical violence against humanitarian personnel, resulting in killing and injuries; the kidnapping of humanitarian personnel; the looting of valuables; restrictions on movement, affecting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations; and the burning of vehicles of humanitarian organizations. For example, in May 2022, members of ISGS entered the Inekar village in Ménaka region to disrupt a humanitarian aid operation for internally displaced persons. They killed three people, including two humanitarian workers, and prohibited all forms of humanitarian assistance in the area. On 9 February 2024, a humanitarian team was detained for over 24 hours by unidentified perpetrators in the Koro circle, Mopti region. They were released, but their vehicle and drilling equipment were stolen. Two days later, another team of six humanitarian workers was kidnapped by unidentified perpetrators in the same area and released after several days in captivity.

39. Despite those constraints, humanitarian actors were able to continue to deliver aid to the vulnerable population, through dialogue with communities, engagement with concerned stakeholders, including parties to conflict, and by adapting their operations where necessary.

IV. Progress in addressing grave violations against children

A. Legislative reform and combating impunity

40. The country task force, in collaboration with national partners and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, continued to advocate for the revision and adoption of the draft national law on child protection, which currently foresees criminalizing, inter alia, the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 by armed forces and groups, by designating it as a war crime. The country task force organized a workshop with key stakeholders to review and adopt a new version of a road map to achieve the adoption of the law. To date, no step has been taken by the authorities towards the revision and adoption of the legislation.

41. The national technical monitoring committee for implementing the Safe Schools Declaration has continued its consultations and drafted a bill to protect education from attacks. In December 2022, the draft bill was submitted to the General Secretariat of Government for consideration. The adoption of the legislation was pending at the time of writing.

42. The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission established in 2015 completed its mandate on 31 December 2022 with the support of the country task force and presented its final report that included child protection provisions. To date, the report has not been adopted by the transitional Government nor shared with partners. On 1 March 2023, the Autorité de gestion des réparations en faveur des victimes des crises was created by the transitional authorities as a follow-up to the work of the Commission and to manage compensation for victims of crises in Mali.

43. In addition, the transitional Government adopted Law No. 2022-041 of 15 November 2022, establishing general rules on compensation for damage resulting from serious human rights violations.

44. In January 2023, the Islamic High Council of Mali issued a fatwa prohibiting sexual violence, which constitutes an important step in tackling stigma, and in December 2023, the Ministry of Defence of Mali adopted a gender strategy that addresses the reform of the security and justice sectors through a comprehensive action plan and dedicated budget. However, challenges remain in the fight against impunity in connection with the investigation into allegations and the prosecution and conviction of those found responsible for sexual violence against children and other grave violations. Child survivors of sexual violence continued to face difficulties in gaining access to services, for reasons that include the absence of courts of justice in certain areas, the understaffing and insufficient training of judicial personnel, the lack of medical services, the fear of reprisals and of stigmatization, the absence of protection for victim and witness and forced amicable settlements.

B. Action plans and dialogue with parties to the conflict

45. In 2023, the country task force continued to provide technical support to the transitional Government during their revision of the draft national plan to prevent grave violations against children. The plan is pending approval by the transitional Government.

46. Some progress was observed in the implementation of action plans adopted respectively by CMA and Platform. In the second and third quarter of 2022, CMA and Platform adopted separate road maps to accelerate the implementation of each action plan. CMA also adopted a military code for the protection of children. The road maps were updated in 2023 during follow-up meetings between the country task force and the armed groups' focal points. From January to March 2023, the country task force conducted five field visits to CMA, Platform-Fahad and Platform-Haballa military camps in Kidal and Gao. The aim of the visits was to conduct age screenings of combatants and to facilitate awareness-raising activities on grave violations against children. No children were identified during the visits. In 2022, child screening planned at CMA military bases in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu could not be carried out due to the security situation.

47. Following the withdrawal of MINUSMA and the end of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, the country task force has been adapting its strategy to engage with parties to the conflict to prevent and end grave violations against children.

C. Release of children and programmatic response

48. The country task force worked in close collaboration with the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and the Family and other partners to reinforce community-based mechanisms focused on the prevention of grave violations against children by armed forces and groups. In addition, the same partnership with community-based actors has made it possible to put in place measures to support the provision of care to children released from armed forces and armed groups and other vulnerable children at risk of violence and abuse.

49. The country task force continued to support the functioning of five transit and orientation centres for children released from armed forces and armed groups and other vulnerable children, in Gao, Kidal, Mopti, Timbuktu and Bamako. The country task force also supported local and international NGOs in providing care services to children released from armed forces and armed groups in the Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Mopti and Timbuktu regions.

50. From April 2022 to March 2024, 939 children (772 boys, 167 girls) released from armed forces and groups were provided with adequate care services, including shelter, food and medical and psychosocial assistance, while in the transit and orientation centres or with temporary foster families. Of those children, 335 received assistance from April to December 2022, 596 in 2023 and 17 children during the first three months of 2024. The children also benefited from socioeconomic reintegration opportunities, including education, vocational training and income-generating activities, enabling them to return to a normal life and rebuild their resilience.

51. The major challenges that hampered the identification, provision of services for and reintegration of children continued to be the limited access to some conflict-affected areas, such as the Kidal and Ménaka regions and some areas of the Gao, Mopti, and Ségou regions, due to insecurity, the scarcity of the services in those areas and the children's lack of knowledge about their rights. In Gao, Kidal and Ménaka, the country task force established new partnerships or strengthened pre-existing collaboration with local and international NGOs to ensure that the reintegration of children released from armed groups is effective and sustainable.

52. Between April 2022 and March 2024, 68 girl survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault or child marriage, received multisectoral assistance (medical, psychosocial and socioeconomic support, and food and shelter) from UNICEF through implementing partners in Bamako and the Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu regions. In coordination with the national authorities, the United Nations

supported the set-up and sustainability of 17 integrated one-stop service centres to provide multisectoral services for survivors of gender-based and sexual violence in a confidential and protective environment in Bamako and the Gao, Kayes, Koulikoro, Kangaba, San, Mopti, Ségou, Timbuktu, Bougouni and Sikasso regions.

53. Multisectoral service provision to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence remained a major challenge, but the greatest challenge remains the distance between survivors and support services. In some conflict-affected areas, survivors of gender-based and sexual violence refuse to seek those services for fear of reprisals. Due to a lack of adequately trained staff, funding constraints, cultural barriers, remoteness and a limited number of service providers in certain regions, the availability of accessible assistance for survivors was hampered and remains insufficient compared with the needs. This situation is exacerbated by the ongoing insecurity and the overall climate of impunity and the limited access of humanitarian actors to areas outside of urban centres.

D. Advocacy and mainstreaming of child protection

54. Under the lead of the Ministry of Education, the Safe Schools Declaration monitoring committee and the country task force organized several training and awareness-raising sessions on school safety for the regional monitoring committee on the Safe School Declaration, NGOs, children's organizations, State agencies, religious organizations and Malian Defence and Security Forces.

55. The country task force trained 109 members of the Malian Defence and Security Forces on the 2013 Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups and discussed their roles and responsibilities in the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. In addition, 69 political and military leaders, including 2 women, from CMA and Platform were trained on the prevention of grave violations against children.

56. The country task force also organized training sessions on the promotion and protection of children's rights in armed conflict for 554 people, 20 of whom were women, including people from State services (child protection, health, education and justice), as well as religious and community leaders, young people and children, arms manufacturers and dealers, traditional hunters and members of the national human rights commission.

57. To address child casualties linked to improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, the United Nations collaborated with the transitional Government and non-government partners in Gao, Kidal, Ségou, Bandiagara, Tessalit, Timbuktu, Ménaka and Mopti on explosive ordnance risk education activities. Over 92,000 community members received risk education and awareness-raising on the dangers of explosive hazards, including 50,628 children (25,039 boys, 25,589 girls).

58. The country task force reached 1,837 individuals (481 girls, 423 boys, 358 men and 575 women) with awareness-raising activities on the monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children.

59. Before the withdrawal of MINUSMA, the country task force integrated children's issues into the activities of the MINUSMA components.

V. Observations and recommendations

60. I remain extremely concerned by the continuing high number of verified grave violations committed against children in Mali, in particular the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access. I urge all parties to the conflict in Mali immediately to halt grave violations, release all children in their ranks and abide by international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

61. I welcome the engagement of the transitional Government with the United Nations to address grave violations against children by the Malian armed forces. I am, however, concerned by the elevated number of cases of recruitment and use of children by the Malian armed forces. I urge the transitional Government to work with the United Nations, including by notifying the Organization of children associated with the Government's forces and releasing them. I also urge the transitional Government to reinforce effective age assessment procedures within the ongoing reform of the security sector, to include child protection provisions in the code of conduct and rules of engagement of the Malian armed forces and to institutionalize child protection training for them. I call upon the transitional Government to finalize and adopt its national plan for the prevention of grave violations against children with the support of the United Nations. I encourage the international community to support the development and the implementation of that national plan, including through a subregional approach.

62. I welcome the release of children from detention by Malian authorities and I reiterate my call to the authorities to implement fully the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups and to work with the United Nations on releasing children who remained detained for alleged association with armed groups.

63. I welcome the advances made in the transitional justice process, including the commitment by the authorities to award compensation for victims of crises in Mali. I call for the adoption of the final report of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission and the implementation of its recommendations relating to child protection.

64. I remain concerned by the prevalence of impunity for perpetrators of grave violations against children. I appeal to the transitional Government to pursue its efforts to promote accountability by investigating and prosecuting individuals accused of grave violations against children and by ensuring there are disciplinary measures for grave violations against children, and to ensure that all victims have access to justice and are provided with comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive protection services. I call upon the transitional Government to finalize the revision of the draft child protection law, criminalizing the recruitment and use of children, including those between the ages of 15 and 17, as well as other grave violations against children.

65. I call upon the transitional Government of Mali to ensure that all disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and justice and security sector reforms consider the specific needs of boys and girls, including through the development of a gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.

66. I welcome the endorsement of the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles) and I call upon the transitional Government to endorse the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers. I also welcome advances in the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, including through

the establishment of a national implementation committee and the revision of the bill on the protection of education from attacks. I reiterate my call for the adoption and implementation of the draft bill.

67. The elevated number of incidents of attacks and threats of attacks against schools and related protected personnel, however, remains a grave concern. Parties to conflict must stop and prevent such attacks and the military use of such facilities.

68. I am concerned by the increase in verified numbers of killing and maiming of children. I urge all parties not to target civilians, including children, and to take all measures necessary to avoid harm to children in the conduct of their operations.

69. Sexual violence against children must end. In addition to prioritizing accountability, I call upon the transitional Government to ensure that survivors have access to the required services and assistance, as well as to justice.

70. I am concerned by the continued denial of humanitarian access to children and urge all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access by humanitarian actors to children in need.

71. I remain concerned by the continued recruitment and use of children by the CMA and Platform and the delay in the implementation of their respective action plans. I call upon those parties to release all children from their ranks, to prevent further recruitment and use and other grave violations and to translate their commitments into action by fully implementing their action plans. I encourage the international community to support the implementation of all action plans, including through the provision of community-based reintegration programmes to children who experienced grave violations in situation of armed conflict. I am concerned by climate-related security risks that continue to weaken populations in conflict-affected areas, exacerbate violence between communities, deprive children of the fundamental right to education and expose them to recruitment into armed groups, gender-based violence and other forms of exploitation and abuse. I encourage the international community to support national initiatives aiming at evaluating and respond to the impact of climate-related security.