

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
18th June 2015, Security Council Chamber

Statement made by Olof Skoog, Representative of Sweden to the United Nations

I have the honour to speak on behalf of Finland, Iceland, Norway and my own country, Sweden.

At the outset, we would like to warmly thank the Malaysian presidency, and particularly the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dato Sri Anifah Aman, for taking the initiative of holding this open debate and for showing leadership on this important topic. We would also like to acknowledge the crucial role played by the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, and her Office, as well as the important work of UNICEF and other United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations in the field. We would like to thank the Secretary-General and the other keynote speakers for their valuable contributions this morning.

In 2015 we celebrate the tenth anniversary of resolution 1612 (2005). The unprecedented challenges we see today for the protection of children growing up in countries affected by conflict illustrate the enormous importance of that resolution. We very much welcome today's adoption of resolution 2225 (2015), which we are all proud to sponsor.

The Secretary-General's annual report (S/2015/409) paints a very gloomy picture of the situation around the world for children in armed conflict. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been listed as committing all the trigger violations involving violence against children, a result of their appalling atrocities. In Syria, the systematic use of indiscriminate aerial weapons, such as barrel bombs, accounts for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties, including children. This cannot be allowed to continue. In addition, during the hostilities in Gaza last summer, civilians, including children, bore the brunt of the suffering. At least 540 Palestinian children were killed and hospitals and schools, including United Nations facilities, were severely damaged or destroyed. The scale of the impact on children was unprecedented and unacceptable.

These facts and all other incidents listed in the report are profoundly disturbing and raise serious concerns regarding the observance of the rules of international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality, and respect for international human rights law, including, let it be said, in the Security Council.

Given that armed non-State actors account for the vast majority of violations, further reflection on forms of engagement is needed. In that regard, we thought that interesting proposals were presented at the open debate presided over by France in March (see S/PV.7414).

In 2014, the world bore witness to several appalling cases of mass abduction of children in armed conflict. We therefore particularly welcome the addition of abduction as a fifth trigger violation in the report, which we hope will send a strong signal to all parties to armed conflict around the world.

I want to highlight three areas of particular concern to us.

First, the right of children, particularly girls, to high-quality education in war and disasters is vital to the protection of children during conflict, because attendance at school can create a sense of normality and a vision for a better future in an otherwise chaotic situation. It is therefore all the more disturbing that there were attacks on education facilities in at least 70 countries between 2009 and 2013. Since then, the problem has only escalated in a number of conflicts. We must intensify our efforts to uphold the right to education, even in conflict situations. By making schools safer for children today, we are protecting the future. The Safe Schools Declaration expresses a commitment to protecting education from attack. It merits our full consideration and we hope that it will be endorsed by as many States as possible. We are also concerned by the severe impact on children of the continued use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Such indiscriminate use of weapons is prohibited under international humanitarian law and we would support practical steps to stop it.

Secondly, there is still a lack of accountability for violations of international law committed against children in armed conflict. It is crucial to fight impunity and ensure that victims have access to justice. Crimes against children must be independently and impartially investigated and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Individual responsibility must be upheld; that means that all perpetrators must be held accountable and punished accordingly, regardless of their status or capacity. The Children in Armed Conflict Accountability Framework is a step in the right direction and provides a methodology to both redress past violations and prevent future violations. My own country, Sweden, will launch this

tool in cooperation with the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Kinshasa this autumn. The International Criminal Court plays an important role in ensuring accountability and we welcome the initiative of the Prosecutor's Office to develop a comprehensive policy paper on children.

Thirdly, and lastly, we must have a stronger policy for protecting children's rights in peacekeeping operations. The recent serious allegations in the Central African Republic bear tragic witness to that. It is essential that personnel deployed in the field have adequate training in the rights of the child. Two of the many steps needed could be the inclusion in all missions of child protection structures, including child protection focal points, and making predeployment training of peacekeepers in child protection mandatory.

Before concluding, we would like to once again congratulate the Special Representative and UNICEF on a successful first year of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign. They have our wholehearted support, but, as today's debate has shown, we have a lot of work in front of us.