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Ten alarming trends for children in armed conflict

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Doaa, 15, is sheltered at a school in Kassala, Sudan. Doaa writes in a poem, "I spread good tidings and wish the best for all humans"

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The world is entering a period marked by fractured multilateralism, increasing conflict, eroding respect for international law, and a lack of accountability for violations, resulting in heightened protection risks for civilians, including children. In this environment, the rights of children are coming under attack.

Grave violations against children are now increasing year after year, while the essential services on which children depend for their survival, such as water and sanitation, health care and education, frequently come under sustained attack. Humanitarian actors are frequently denied access to populations in need. Modern warfare, marked by the massive proliferation and use of armed drones and other aerial operations, explosive weapons, and high levels of weapon contamination, poses an escalating and deadly threat to children in conflicts around the globe.

A clear pattern is emerging: when protection systems erode, children pay the highest price. Beyond devastating individual lives, these harms destabilize families, weaken institutions, cause mass displacement and entrench cycles of violence that undermine peace and security for decades. In this period of global rupture and reset, protecting children is not a peripheral humanitarian concern – it is a strategic imperative for international security.

As leaders look ahead to 2026, the following trends highlight the most pressing risks facing children in armed conflict with implications for peace and security.

1. **Grave violations have become a daily reality for children - and continue to increase.** Since 2005, the UN has verified more than 389,000 grave violations – an average of more than 53 violations per day. This includes the killing and maiming of 144,500 children, the recruitment or use of children in conflict, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. The number of verified grave violations has risen consistently since 2020, reaching 41,370 violations in 2024 alone - a 25 per cent increase from 2023. These numbers reflect only what the UN was able to verify and are not representative of the true scale[i].

2. **Explosive weapons are the leading cause of child casualties in conflict - and the trend is worsening**. The number of children killed or injured by explosive weapons increased from 49 per cent in 2020 to 69 per cent in 2024. In 2024 alone, approximately 8,280 children were killed or injured by explosive weapons, equivalent to 23 children every day[ii]. Many of those who survive are left with permanent disabilities, carrying life-long physical and psychological consequences.

3. **Aerial operations are the dominant category of weapon causing child casualties**, accounting for nearly one quarter (23 per cent) of all verified cases of child killing and maiming between 2020 and 2024, followed by gunshots and other firearms (21 per cent), explosive ordnance (15 per cent) and artillery and shelling (13 per cent)[iii]. Aerial operations include attacks with weaponized Unmanned Aircraft Systems (armed drones), air-dropped barrel bombs, cluster bombs and other bombs, white phosphorus munitions, and other aerial bombings or airstrikes, highlighting the disproportionate harm caused by contemporary warfare methods.

> "I was scared because people were being killed. Bombs were falling everywhere. People were dying. I am happy that we arrived safely. [in Al-Afas camp for internally displaced in the Northern State of Sudan]. I don't go to school – we don't have one here. I wish we could have one."
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> **Widad, 11-year-old, Sudan**

Focus: Sudan

Sudan is among the most devastating humanitarian crises in the world. More than 5 million children have been forced from their homes – equivalent to 5,000 children displaced every day, many of them repeatedly, with attacks often following them as they move. As of October 2025, nearly 14 million people remain displaced. This includes 4.9 million refugees, asylum-seekers and returnees who sought safety in neighboring countries. Al Fasher in North Darfur State remains heavily cut off from aid, with severe protection risks and shortages of food, water, healthcare and essential supplies. In the South, multiple locations have faced siege-like conditions.

UNICEF is scaling up efforts in Darfur and Kordofan States amid mass displacement, escalating conflict, and overstretched local systems. But we need sustained, safe and unhindered humanitarian access to reach all civilians in need with life-saving assistance, removal of bureaucratic and administrative barriers, and most importantly, we need violence against children and attacks on civilian infrastructure to end immediately.

4. **Attacks on civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, water and sanitation facilities remain widespread and alarming**. Between 2005 and 2024, the United Nations verified more than 20,600 attacks on schools and hospitals in conflict situations and over 3,500 cases of the use of schools and hospitals for military purposes[iv]. That is the equivalent to nearly four schools or hospitals attacked or used for military purposes every day. Water and sanitation systems are also frequently coming under attack, with a widespread pattern of such attacks reported in 2025 in Burkina Faso, Sudan, the State of Palestine and Ukraine.

> "It's really hard living in the cold and in the dark. I try to do my homework as fast as I can, because the lamp doesn't stay charged for long. After a while you sort of get used to it, but that doesn't mean it's ok. All kids want is just one thing, for the war to end."
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> **Arina – 12-years-old - Ukraine**

Focus: Ukraine

Ukraine: Nearly four years into the relentless war in Ukraine, children's lives are still consumed by thoughts of survival, not childhood. Intense strikes are devastating vital energy and water systems at a time of extreme sub-zero temperatures. Millions of families across the country are enduring days without heating, electricity, and water supplies. The winter threat follows a tragic 10 per cent increase in verified child casualties during 2025, compared to the previous year, with over 90 children killed and more than 650 injured. In total, more than 3,200 children have now been killed or injured since the start of the full-scale war.

Yaroslav, 11, and Ilia, 11, play on a swing set amidst the ruins of School 134 in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The school was destroyed by shelling.

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5. **Humanitarian workers and frontline responders are increasingly attacked and denied access to reach children in need**. In 2024, 383 aid workers were killed, the highest number ever recorded, representing a 31 per cent surge compared to 2023. This alarming trend shows no sign of slowing down, with 265 aid workers killed in the first 8 months of 2025[v]. In Sudan, for example, the siege of Al Fasher and the obstruction of humanitarian assistance deepened one of the world's largest and fastest-growing protection and humanitarian crises, exacerbated existing famine conditions, and risked profound regional implications.

6. **Violence affecting children in conflict is widespread and global, not isolated to any one crisis or region**. Despite some conflicts appearing in headlines more than others, high levels of child casualties from explosive weapons and attacks on schools and hospitals have been recorded across conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Asia[vi].

7. **Displacement of children has surged dramatically**. Between 2010 and 2024, the number of displaced children due to conflict and violence nearly tripled from around 17.0 million to 48.8 million. In 2024, some of the largest populations of displaced children were recorded in Sudan, Myanmar, the Gaza Strip, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Afghanistan[vii].

> "When I was three years old, my earliest memory, I suddenly woke up to the sounds of an explosion, shattered glass around me, and my parents shouting, "hurry up, hurry up". From that day onwards, our home became a travel bag, and our path became displacement... every time we made a friend, we'd have to say goodbye."
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> **Sila – 17 years old - Syria**

Sama, 12, stands inside what remains of her house in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. She says "I don't want to be displaced over and over; I only want to feel safe"

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Focus: State of Palestine

State of Palestine: The situation for children in the Gaza Strip remains deadly and precarious. Since the ceasefire in October, more than 115 children have been reported killed. While some progress has been made in food availability, an estimated 100,000 children children are at risk of acute malnutrition and require sustained care. Sixty per cent of school-aged children have no access to in-person learning, and more than 90 per cent of schools have been damaged or destroyed. UNICEF has received reports of at least 10 children dying from hypothermia since the onset of winter.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, children continue to face violence, displacement and movement restrictions. Between 7 October 2023 and 31 December 2025, 239 Palestinian and 4 Israel children were reported killed in the West Bank and 1,936 children were reported injured in conflict-related violence. Since early 2025, large-scale military operations and ongoing demolitions have displaced 32,000 Palestinians, including 12,000 children, the largest displacement since 1967.

Despite these challenges, UNICEF and partners continue working to support children. But far more is needed. The ceasefire must be upheld. Killing of children must stop. Supply routes must be expanded, and all available crossings should operate simultaneously, including corridors via Jordan and Egypt. Humanitarian access is essential to support early recovery and reconstruction, including the entry of critical supplies for water and sanitation, including the so-called 'dual-use items', as well as education-related supplies.

> "We want to build a new life. The war has finally stopped, and I hope it never returns."
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> **Montaser – 13 years old – The Gaza Strip**

8. **Conflict is now consistently a top driver of growing food insecurity and malnutrition**. For the first time in over two decades, two famines had occured simultaneously in Sudan[viii] and in Gaza city[ix] in 2025. As of February 2026, levels of acute malnutrition have surpassed famine levels in two localities in North Darfur, suggesting an increased risk of excess mortality[x]. An estimated 8 million children are now facing the highest risk of death from hunger and malnutrition in Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen and State of Palestine, where the absence of food, clean water or basic health care could mean death within days[xi].

9. **Sexual violence against children in conflict settings occurs at nearly twice the global average[xii]**. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, cases of sexual violence in conflict-affected eastern provinces have been showing a steady rise since 2022, with a sharp increase in cases involving girls[xiii]. In Haiti, as the security situation continues to deteriorate, sexual violence has emerged as one of the most extreme and least visible forms of harm, with the country recording a dramatic 1,000 per cent increase in cases of sexual violence committed against children in 2024[xiv]. In Sudan, an estimated 12.1 million women and girls – along with increasing numbers of men and boys – are at risk of sexual violence, representing an 80 per cent increase in 2025 compared to 2024[xv].

10. Widespread funding cuts are constraining life-saving assistance and child protection services, further increasing risks to children's survival and protection at a time of heightened instability and growing conflict. Drastic funding shortfalls are forcing impossible choices: between protecting children from explosive ordnance risk and providing support to survivors of sexual violence. Between providing life-saving treatment for malnutrition and ensuring access to clean drinking water. In 2026, UNICEF is appealing for US $7.66 billion to help reach 73 million children in humanitarian crises with life-saving assistance and protection services[xvi]. This represents a minuscule investment compared to the world's global defense spending, which reached US $2.7 trillion in 2024[xvii].

> "At the avenues at the top of my neighborhood, the damage I have seen here is distressing. But we the residents of the City of Goma want only one thing: Peace and security for ourselves, for our loved ones and for our families."
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> **Cassien, 14-year-old, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Focus: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo escalated sharply in early 2025, leaving children exposed to extreme violence. Sexual violence – including against children and adolescent girls – remains alarmingly high, while children continue to be killed, injured and recruited by armed groups. The country faces a severe food crisis, with 28 million people experiencing acute food insecurity, including an estimated 720,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition in the eastern provinces. Health and education systems are under strain, and humanitarian access remains highly restricted. Regional impacts are growing, with more than 830,000 Congolese refugees hosted in neighbouring countries putting pressure on essential services.

UNICEF continues to deliver life-saving assistance across child protection, health, nutrition, education, and water and sanitation despite immense operational challenges. But there needs to be an immediate cessation of hostilities to protect children and enable a political pathway forward. Sexual violence and child recruitment must end, perpetrators must be held accountable, and parties to the conflict should engage constructively with the United Nations to implement action plans to prevent grave violations against children. Safeguarding humanitarian space and ensuring safe, sustained access remain essential so life-saving assistance can reach children in need.

Calls to Action

To reverse these trends, political and security leaders must treat the protection of children in conflicts as a core pillar of international security – not an optional afterthought. At minimum, **5 key actions** must be prioritized:

1. **All parties to conflict – and those supporting them – must end and prevent grave violations against children**. Children cannot be made to bear the consequences of war not of their making. Every lever must be used to influence and ultimately ensure compliance by all parties with their international obligations to protect children, including through the development of Action Plans with the UN to end and prevent grave violations.

2. **All parties to conflict must uphold international humanitarian law**, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions during military operations. This also means protecting children and the infrastructure they rely on. Children's survival and wellbeing in war is dependent on safe access to health care and treatment, nutritious food, clean water, and learning – all endangered when hospitals, schools, and water and sanitation facilities are damaged and destroyed.

3. **All parties to conflict and those supporting them must prioritize ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas**. This includes halting the transfer of explosive weapons to warring parties likely to use them in densely populated areas with devastating impacts on children and the infrastructure they rely on. Member States should endorse and implement the EWIPA Political Declaration, including by adopting standard operating procedures, policies, and practices that reduce harm to children, and reaffirm their commitments under relevant international weapons treaties which remain essential to preventing civilian harm, including to children.

4. **Member States should unequivocally denounce attacks on children, reject their normalization, and hold perpetrators accountable**. This means investing the political capital and funding required to facilitate monitoring and reporting of violations against children, strengthen accountability mechanisms that combat impunity, provide assistance to victims and ensure child survivors can seek justice and access reparations. Member states should integrate these measures into domestic legislation and budget allocations, and into military codes, training manuals, and other policies and procedures.

5. **All actors directly or indirectly engaging in conflict must proactively support sustained diplomatic engagement for peace and to secure safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access**, both critical to protecting children and reduce preventable death, displacement and suffering for millions of children trapped in war.

The principles, norms and protection infrastructure that have been built to prevent and end grave violations, strengthen accountability and provide response services to survivors must be resourced financially and backed politically. Without it, children are defenseless.

Protecting children in conflict is inseparable from global security. In this period of geopolitical fracture, leaders must act decisively to protect the most vulnerable and reduce further suffering – and, in doing so, reinforce the foundations of peace.

Endnote

i. UNICEF analysis based on data published in the annual Secretary-General Reports on Children and Armed Conflict (2005-2025).

ii. UNICEF, 'Explosive weapons and child casualties in conflict: Five key facts', New York, 2025, www.unicef.org/documents/explosive-weapons-and-child-casualties-conflict-five-key-facts, accessed 5 February 2026.

iii. ibid

iv. UNICEF analysis based on data published in the annual Secretary-General Reports on Children and Armed Conflict (2005-2025).

v. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'World Humanitarian Day: Attacks on aid workers hit another record, humanitarians call for urgent action' Geneva/New York, August 2025, www.unocha.org/news/world-humanitarian-day-attacks-aid-workers-hit-another-record-humanitarians-call-urgent-action, accessed 30 January 2026.

vi. UNICEF analysis based on data published in the annual Secretary-General Reports on Children and Armed Conflict (2005-2025).

vii. UNICEF Data, 'Monitoring the situation of children and women: Displacement', updated June 2025, data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/, accessed 29 January 2026.

viii. IPC, Famine Review Committee: Sudan, October 2025, published 3 November 2025, www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Sudan_Oct_2025.pdf.

ix. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, Famine review committee: Gaza Strip, August 2025. www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Gaza_Aug2025.pdf; IPC Global Initiative – Special Brief – Gaza Strip, 19 December 2025, www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Oct2025_Apr2026_Special_Brief.pdf.

x. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Alert, Sudan, 5 February 2026, reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-famine-threshold-acute-malnutrition-surpassed-two-more-north-darfur-localities-crisis-worsening-greater-kordofan, accessed 5 February 2026.

xi. UNICEF analysis, including the most recent Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Malnutrition Analyses, and in some cases the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans and/or Nutrition Cluster, January 2026.

xii. UNICEF, 'When Numbers Demand Action: Confronting the global scale of sexual violence against children', New York, October 2024, p.12.

xiii. UNICEF, 'The hidden scars of conflict and silence: Sexual violence against children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo 2022–2025.' December 2025, p.5.

xiv. UNICEF, 'Haiti's children under siege: The staggering rise of child abuse and recruitment by armed groups', February 2025, www.unicef.org/press-releases/haitis-children-under-siege-staggering-rise-child-abuse-and-recruitment-armed-groups, accessed 25 January 2026.

xv. UNICEF Executive Director remarks at UN Security Council meeting on Sudan, 13 March 2025, www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-catherine-russells-remarks-un-security-council-meeting-0, accessed 3 February 2026.

xvi. UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2026 Overview, New York, December 2025, p.14.

xvii. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Global Humanitarian Overview 2026: Forward by the Emergency Relief Coordinator', December 2025, www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2026-enesfr, accessed 3 February 2026.

Behind these trends are the lived experiences of millions of children. The children and young people quoted here live in conflict-affected situations and reflect how insecurity and the failure to protect children and the services they rely on are shaping their lives and futures.