

Rise in number of children killed, maimed and recruited in conflict: UN report

More than 10,000 children were killed or maimed in conflict last year while more than 8,000 youngsters were recruited or used as combatants, the United Nations reported on Wednesday.

These violations contributed to the overall rise in the number of children globally affected by fighting in 2017, as documented in the [annual report](#) of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC).

UN chief António Guterres has expressed [outrage](#) over the numbers, according to a statement issued by his spokesperson.

“Boys and girls have once again been overly impacted by protracted and new violent crisis. Despite some progress, the level of violations remains unacceptable,” the statement said.

“The Secretary-General reiterates that the best way to address this horrific situation is to promote peaceful solutions to conflicts. He calls on all parties to exert maximum efforts in this regard.”

The report covers 20 countries, including hotspots such as Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan, but also situations in countries such as India, the Philippines and Nigeria.

[Virginia Gamba](#), the UN’s expert on Children and Armed Conflict, said 66 parties to conflict are listed this year – three more than in the 2016 report – with nine government forces and 57 armed groups named.

“Among the most significant violations registered in 2017 were killing and maiming, recruitment and use and attacks on schools and hospitals, all of which registered a rise in comparison to the previous year,” she told journalists at UN Headquarters.

Overall, the UN verified more than 21,000 grave violations of children’s rights between January and December 2017, compared with 15,500 the previous year.

Government forces committed at least 6,000 of these crimes while the majority involved various non-state armed groups.

Ms. Gamba said crises in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen were the main reason for the “serious increases” reported.

She provided examples, including what she described as the “despicable trend”

of turning children in Nigeria into “human bombs”, where nearly half of the 881 verified child casualties resulted from suicide attacks.

Also worrying is the number of children detained for their alleged association with armed groups. For example, more than 1,000 children in Iraq were held due their suspected affiliation with the terrorist group ISIL, also known as Daesh.

Ms. Gamba also reported positive developments, such as the formal release of more than 10,000 child soldiers from armed groups and forces, while four armed groups in Myanmar have agreed to work with her Office.

[UN chief welcomes agreement by rival leaders in South Sudan, as a step towards ‘inclusive and implementable’ peace](#)

The [United Nations Secretary-General](#) has welcomed an agreement signed on Wednesday by the President of South Sudan and his former Vice President, which it is hoped will lead to an “inclusive and implementable” peace deal to end years of civil conflict in the world’s youngest nation.

President Salva Kiir, and his rival and former deputy, Riek Machar, reached an agreement in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, which according to reports, includes a ceasefire between government and opposition forces that is due to begin within 72 hours.

Previous efforts to end fighting between the rival forces since 2013 around South Sudan have failed, leaving tens of thousands dead, and around four million either internally-displaced or forced to flee to neighbouring countries. The humanitarian crisis has left millions without enough to eat, and led to famine in parts of the country.

In a statement issued by his Spokesman, UN chief António Guterres said that Wednesday’s agreement had been signed “at a time when the security situation in parts of South Sudan continues to deteriorate, marked by violations of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement of December 2017, with killings of civilians and other atrocities.”

“He therefore, welcomes the Parties renewed commitment to redouble their efforts in the interest of peace,” the statement continued.

Mr. Guterres also commended the continuing efforts of the so-called High

Level Revitalization Forum which first met in December last year, under the auspices of the African regional development forum, known as IGAD. Together with the UN and the African Union, IGAD has been working for years to facilitate the peace process.

“Welcoming the intention of the parties to continue negotiations to finalize the IGAD bridging proposals”, the statement from UN Headquarters in New York said, “the Secretary-General urges all parties to demonstrate the political leadership required at this critical juncture of the peace process and engage to reach agreement on the outstanding issues of governance and security arrangements.”

The UN chief pledged to support the leadership and the people of South Sudan,

[UN rights expert ‘strongly recommends’ probe by International Criminal Court into ‘decades of crimes’ in Myanmar](#)

The United Nations rights expert on Myanmar is “strongly” recommending that the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigate and prosecute those allegedly responsible for “decades of crimes” in the form a grave violations of international human rights and humanitarian law inside the country.

In an oral briefing to the Human Rights Council on Wednesday, [Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee](#) underscored that accountability for crimes committed in Myanmar “is the only way” to end the long-term cycle of violence.

“I strongly recommend the persons allegedly responsible for the violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law [be investigated and prosecuted by the ICC](#) or a credible mechanism,” she said.

Since late August 2017, widespread and systematic violence against Myanmar’s mainly-Muslim minority Rohingyas, has forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in Rakhine state and seek refuge across the country’s border, in Bangladesh.

Even though the number of new arrivals has tapered off and an agreement reached on establishing conditions in Myanmar to allow the refugees to return voluntarily and in safety, UN agencies on the ground have reported that such conditions are yet not present.

Far too many crimes have been committed, and have been documented and reported with scant consequences faced by those who perpetrated

them – *UN rights expert Yanghee Lee*

In her briefing, Ms. Lee also drew attention to the [possible war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) by security forces in other regions of Myanmar, including in Kachin and Shan states, where other minorities have endured protracted conflicts since shortly after the country gained independence in 1948, she said.

“Far too many crimes have been committed, and have been documented and reported with scant consequences faced by those who perpetrated them,” said the Special Rapporteur.

The UN human rights expert also voiced “deep concern” over the “apparent inability” of the UN Security Council to unite to refer the situation to the ICC, and urged the Human Rights Council, “as a matter of urgency”, to back her proposal to establish an international accountability mechanism.

She explained that the mechanism should have three components: first, to interview victims, investigate and document alleged violations and abuses, and consolidate investigations already undertaken; second, the mechanism should have legal and judicial experts to examine patterns and trends of violations; and third, the development of a framework for victim support in their pursuit of “justice, reconciliation and reintegration”.

“To prepare for credible investigation and prosecution, and in order to finally put an end to decades of such crimes and to take effective measures to bring justice, I recommend that the [Human Rights] Council establishes an accountability mechanism under the auspices of the UN without delay,” she said.

► **SEE ALSO: Photo story ‘[Rakhine crisis: UN responds to mass exodus from Myanmar](#)’**

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

The [mandate](#) of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar was first established in 1992. Since then, it has been extended annually, and broadened on two occasions –in 2014, in relation to the electoral process and in 2016, concerning priority areas for technical assistance.

In December last year, the Government of Myanmar [denied all access](#) to Ms. Lee and withdrew cooperation for the duration of her tenure.

Saudi Arabia: UN experts push for prompt release of women human rights defenders

A ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia may have officially ended at the weekend, but on Wednesday, nine United Nations experts called for the immediate release of a number of women's rights defenders who were imprisoned following a government crackdown which began in mid-May.

"In stark contrast with this celebrated moment of liberation for Saudi women, women's human rights defenders have been arrested and detained on a wide scale across the country, which is [truly worrying](#) and perhaps a better indication of the Government's approach to women's human rights," said UN Human Rights experts in a joint statement.

"We call for the urgent release of all of those detained while pursuing their legitimate activities in the promotion and protection of women's rights in Saudi Arabia," added the Special Rapporteurs and experts.

The crackdown began on 15 May with a spate of prominent women's rights defenders' arrests. Over the following three weeks, some 12 other human rights defenders, including both women and men, were also arrested.

The majority of detainees were advocating for lifting the driving ban and for improvements in women's rights within Saudi Arabia. Many of those detained face extremely serious charges, such as 20 years in prison, according to reports.

Although charges have not been confirmed, the experts' statement said that some of those imprisoned have been reportedly accused of undermining national security, and of acting against religious and national foundations inside Saudi Arabia.

These arrests portray a contradictory stance in policy regarding women's rights *—UN Experts*

"Women human rights defenders face compounded stigma, not only because of their work," added the statement, "but also because of discrimination on gender grounds."

While noting that Saudi Arabia has won acclaim for its recent programme of modernization under Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the experts said that "these arrests portray a contradictory stance in policy regarding women's rights."

"We reiterate our long-time concern over others detained in Saudi Arabia on the basis of their activism and the exercise of their right to freedom of

expression as well as their right to freedom of association,” the experts stated, urging the Government to improve its human rights record, “especially with regards to women’s rights.”

“The first step in demonstrating such commitment is to free the human rights defenders who remain in prison solely as a result of working to advance the enjoyment of rights for all,” the experts concluded.

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[Guterres condemns killing of peacekeeper while protecting humanitarian workers in South Sudan](#)

A peacekeeper from Bangladesh was killed on Tuesday in an attack against a convoy providing protection to humanitarian workers delivering supplies to vulnerable communities in the Central Equatoria region of South Sudan – drawing “condemnation” from United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres.

“The Secretary-General offers his [deepest condolences](#) to the bereaved family, and to the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh,” Stéphane Dujarric, his spokesperson, said in a statement.

“The Secretary-General recalls that attacks against United Nations peacekeepers may constitute a war crime,” stressed Mr. Dujarric, adding that the UN chief reaffirmed “unwavering support to the brave men and women serving in the [United Nations Mission in South Sudan](#) (UNMISS) in their efforts to protect civilians and stabilize South Sudan.”