

Speech: “Children are innocent bystanders in times of conflict, caught up in the atrocities taking place around them”

Thank you Mr President for convening today’s important debate. I would also want to thank the Secretary-General for his report on Children and Armed Conflict, and also the contribution of the special representative Ms. Gamba, for her insights on children in armed conflict and her important work in this area, and in doing so to recognise the hard work done by the UN country task forces and Peace Operations – often in difficult circumstances – to provide reliable, evidence-based information on violations against children. I would also at this juncture like to acknowledge the contribution of Mubin Shaikh and his personal insight into this important area.

When it comes to children’s lives, no effort can be spared. Children are innocent bystanders in times of conflict, caught up in the atrocities taking place around them.

That is why the evidence in the annual report is so alarming. It shows that grave violations continue to be committed on an increasing scale. In the many conflicts taking place around the world, children are being maimed and killed, recruited and used as child soldiers, and denied basic humanitarian access.

In some conflicts, there has been a growing trend to detain children on security charges. This is deeply concerning. No child should be detained unless they are charged with a recognisable criminal offence, and only in accordance with international law and juvenile justice standards. Authorities should seek alternatives to detention and if they do detain juveniles, they should prioritise their rehabilitation and reintegration, and fully protect their human rights.

The United Kingdom considers the agreement and implementation of the UN Action Plans to be a vital step in improving the protection of children. We therefore call on all parties listed within the annex of the Secretary-General’s report that have not put these measures in place to do so as a matter of priority. And we call on all other parties who have put measures in place to honour their commitments in full.

Mr President, I would like to highlight two aspects of this issue that are of particular concern to the Government of the United Kingdom.

The first is to ensure that children continue to have access to education in times of crisis. This is vital, first, in order to provide young people with at least a degree of normality and stability; and secondly to give them the skills they need to advocate for a better, more peaceful future for

themselves, for their families, and their communities.

The UK continues to provide educational support to the millions of children around the world in need of education in emergencies and protracted crises. Following on from UNICEF's 'No Lost Generation' initiative, where £82 million of UK International Development funding was allocated to provide protection, trauma care, and education for children affected by the crisis in Syria and the wider region, the UK is committing £30 million this year in support to 'Education Cannot Wait'.

I urge all Member States to support such initiatives, which help provide education to those children most in need.

The second issue of particular concern to the UK is the sexual exploitation and abuse of children by UN peacekeepers and other personnel operating in the name of the United Nations.

The annual report shows that this abuse remained a major issue in the Central African Republic in 2016. It is abhorrent and absolutely unacceptable. UN peacekeepers must respect and protect the rights of children.

Children expect and trust peacekeepers to protect them – every time a peacekeeper fails to do so, that trust and the integrity of the UN are gravely undermined. However, it is not only peacekeepers who commit offences against children. Reports continue to indicate that some personnel in the development and humanitarian agencies are also guilty of abusing their position. In the past, our collective failure to prosecute allegations of child rape and sexual exploitation and abuse has sent a signal to predators that working under the UN banner protects them from being held accountable for their actions and facing justice. There must be no more impunity for perpetrators of such heinous offences against innocent and vulnerable children.

The United Kingdom will insist on a zero-tolerance approach to sexual exploitation and abuse and we expect the UN to demonstrate the highest possible standards of protection for children, including actions to prevent abuse, investigate all allegations, and report annually on progress. The United Kingdom's International Development Secretary's comments on child rape in her UN reform speech resonated strongly at the UN General Assembly. And we will continue to work closely with the UN and bring together other Member States to explore how to improve accountability of any of our citizens who face substantiated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse. We want to end the culture of impunity, so all children are protected, and all those charged with abuse are brought to justice.

Finally Mr President, I want to acknowledge the progress that has been made and look to the future.

In 2016, Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC-EP brought an end to over 50 years of conflict. Reincorporation of FARC-EP minors is now a major focus for implementation of the peace accords. We have also witnessed a temporary ceasefire with the National Liberation Army, including a commitment to stop

recruiting children into their ranks. These are encouraging early steps, in what will hopefully become a more substantive peace process.

Elsewhere, UN engagement with non-state armed groups in Mali and Sudan has led to the signing of two new action plans, whilst in the Philippines more than 1,850 children were freed from the military wing of the Mono Islamic Liberation Front.

These are important milestones; perhaps unthinkable over 20 years ago when Graca Machel's report was released. Such achievements would not have been possible without the mandate and the work of the Special Representative, which the UK continues to fully support.

Children, Mr President, are the innocent victims of conflict. Let us today renew our determination to work together to protect the many children caught up in the conflict, to get them back to school and give them hope of a brighter future free from fear, free from conflict.

Thank you.