

UN hails release of more than 200 child soldiers in South Sudan

Two hundred and seven child soldiers have been released by armed groups in South Sudan, part of a series of planned discharges that should see nearly 1,000 children return home over the coming months.

The move, facilitated by [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), follows the release of 300 children by armed groups in early February.

"No child should ever have to pick up a weapon and fight" [said](#) Mahimbo Mdoe, the head of UNICEF programmes in the country.

"For every child released, today marks the start of a new life," he said. "We are proud to support these children as they return to their families and start to build a brighter future."

But officials also noted that thousands more children remain in the hands of armed groups in South Sudan, in violation of international law.

This week's discharge took place in Bakiwiri, a rural community in Western Equatoria state.

The children will now undergo medical screenings and receive counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration programme, said UNICEF. Once home, they will also have access to vocational training as well as age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centres.

Their families will also be provided with three months' worth of food assistance to support reintegration.

Those discharged – 112 boys, 95 girls – were from the South Sudan National Liberation Movement and Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition.

About 19,000 children still remain in armed groups

However, despite this release, and the one before it, there are still about 19,000 children in use by armed forces and groups in South Sudan. And with conflict lingering in the world's youngest nation, the risk that children will be used in fighting remains.

"So long as the recruitment and use of children by armed groups continues, these groups fail on their commitment to uphold the rights of children under international law," underscored UNICEF.

As peace talks resume, the UN agency has called on all parties to the conflict to end the use of children and to release all children in their ranks.

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has spent much of its short life mired in conflict, as what began as a political face-off between President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar erupted into full-blown war late in 2013.