

YönderMUN'26 UNICEF STUDY GUIDE

Agenda Item: Protecting Children's Rights in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises

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1. Letter from the Secretariat

1.1. Letter from Secretary General

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to YönderMUN'26!

As the Secretary General, I am very excited to welcome you all to our conference. I hope YönderMUN'26 will be a place where you can share your ideas, meet new people, and improve yourselves while discussing important global issues.

Our academic team has worked hard to prepare your study guides, and I hope they will help you feel confident and ready for the conference.

I wish you all an inspiring, enjoyable, and memorable YönderMUN'26.

Best regards,

Gülce Nil Yılmaz

Secretary General of YönderMUN'26

1.2. Letter from Co-Under-Secretary Generals

Dear Delegates,

On behalf of the Secretariat it is our utmost pleasure to welcome you to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) at our conference. As the Co-Under-Secretary-Generals of this committee, we are truly honored to have the opportunity to accompany you throughout what we hope will be an engaging, thought-provoking, and memorable experience.

Our agenda, **“Protecting Children’s Rights in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises,”** addresses one of the most urgent humanitarian challenges confronting the international community today. Armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies continue to expose children to grave violations, displacement, family separation, hunger, disrupted education and healthcare, recruitment, exploitation, and restricted access to humanitarian assistance. As future diplomats, you will be expected to examine these challenges from your assigned country’s perspective while working collaboratively to develop practical, sustainable, and child-centred solutions.

UNICEF has always served as a platform where international cooperation, humanitarian principles, and the protection of children’s rights take precedence over political division. Throughout the committee sessions, we encourage you to move beyond describing the problems faced by children in conflict. Instead, challenge yourselves to consider *who should implement each solution, how it should be funded, and how it can remain effective during prolonged crises*. Meaningful debate should lead to practical cooperation between governments, UN agencies, humanitarian organizations, and local actors.

As the Co-Under-Secretary-Generals of this committee, We are here to support you academically throughout the conference. If you have any questions regarding the study guide, the agenda item, or your research process, you are always welcome to contact us.

We wish you all a productive and intellectually engaging debate.

Sincerely,

Ebrar Begüm Aslan & Levent Kırım

Co-Under-Secretary Generals of UNICEF

2. Introduction to the Committee

2.1. History of UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was established by the United Nations General Assembly on 11 December 1946, in the aftermath of the Second World War. Originally named the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, UNICEF was created to provide emergency assistance to children affected by war, particularly in Europe and China. Although initially intended as a temporary organization, the continuing needs of children worldwide led the General Assembly to make UNICEF a permanent part of the UN system in 1953, while retaining its original acronym.

Over time, UNICEF's mandate expanded from emergency relief to the broader protection and promotion of children's rights and well-being. Today, UNICEF is mandated to advocate for the protection of every child's rights, help meet their basic needs, and expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. Its work is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, which establishes a comprehensive framework for children's rights. UNICEF supports governments and partners in implementing these rights, with particular attention to children who are disadvantaged or affected by emergencies, conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises.

2.2. Relevant United Nations Resolutions and Treaties

The protection of children during armed conflict and humanitarian crises is supported by a comprehensive international legal and institutional framework. The following treaties and United Nations Security Council resolutions are particularly relevant to the agenda.

Treaties and International Legal Instruments

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the primary international treaty concerning children's rights and provides the foundation for protecting children in both ordinary and emergency situations. It establishes the principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child. It also protects children from violence, exploitation and abuse, recognizes the right to education, and calls for

special protection and humanitarian assistance for refugee children. The CRC therefore provides the broader legal framework for addressing the different dimensions of this agenda.

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), 2000

OPAC strengthens the protection of children from recruitment and use in armed conflict. It requires States Parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces under the age of 18 do not directly participate in hostilities and prohibits compulsory recruitment below the age of 18. It also requires States to take measures to prevent and prohibit armed groups, distinct from the armed forces of a State, from recruiting or using children under 18 in hostilities. This Protocol is particularly relevant to the issue of child soldiers and the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups.

Geneva Conventions, 1949 and Additional Protocols, 1977

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols form the core of international humanitarian law and establish rules for the protection of civilians during armed conflict. Children benefit from these protections as members of the civilian population, while certain provisions provide them with special protection because of their age and vulnerability. The framework is particularly relevant to preventing violence against children, protecting humanitarian access, and safeguarding civilians in situations of international and non-international armed conflict.

Relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions

Resolution 1261 (1999)

Resolution 1261 was a landmark development in the international response to children affected by armed conflict. It placed the protection of children in armed conflict firmly on the Security Council's agenda and condemned grave violations including killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction, forced displacement, and the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

Resolution 1612 (2005)

Resolution 1612 established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children in armed conflict and created the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The mechanism enables the United Nations to

systematically collect and verify information on serious violations against children, strengthening monitoring, reporting and accountability.

Resolution 1998 (2011)

Resolution 1998 expanded the UN's monitoring framework to include attacks on schools and hospitals as grave violations against children. It called on parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian character of schools and hospitals and protect children's access to education and healthcare during conflict. It is therefore directly relevant to the protection of education in emergencies.

Resolution 2331 (2016)

Resolution 2331 addressed trafficking in persons in situations of armed conflict and recognized the links between conflict, trafficking and exploitation. It called for measures to prevent trafficking, protect victims, and strengthen international cooperation. The resolution is particularly relevant to children who become vulnerable to trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse during conflict, displacement and humanitarian crises.

Together, these instruments establish a framework for addressing the principal challenges of the agenda, including **children's protection during armed conflict, child recruitment, education in emergencies, displacement and humanitarian assistance, trafficking, exploitation, and accountability for grave violations.**

3. Introduction to the Agenda Item

3.1. Understanding Children's Rights in Armed Conflict

Armed conflict poses serious threats to children's fundamental rights, including their rights to life, education, healthcare, family life and protection from violence and exploitation. These rights remain applicable during armed conflict and are protected through both international human rights law and international humanitarian law. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides the primary framework for children's rights, while the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols establish protections for civilians during armed conflict.

The United Nations identifies six grave violations against children in conflict: killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and

hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. These violations frequently overlap; for instance, abducted children may subsequently be recruited or subjected to sexual violence. Protecting children therefore requires more than preventing direct attacks. It also involves maintaining access to education, healthcare and humanitarian assistance, while ensuring accountability for violations. The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, established through Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005), plays an important role in documenting and responding to these violations.

3.2. Child Recruitment, Abduction and Exploitation

Children affected by armed conflict face heightened risks of recruitment, abduction and exploitation by armed forces and armed groups. Child recruitment refers to the involvement of children in armed forces or groups, whether through compulsory recruitment or circumstances described as voluntary. However, a child's apparent willingness to join does not necessarily indicate genuine free choice, as poverty, family separation, lack of education, community pressure or the need for protection may influence their decision. Recruited children may serve as fighters or in support roles such as carrying supplies or gathering information, exposing them to violence, injury and psychological harm. The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) strengthens international protection against their recruitment and use in hostilities.

Abduction can be used to recruit children, exploit them, or subject them to other forms of violence. Children who are abducted may subsequently experience forced labour, sexual violence or recruitment. Conflict and displacement can also increase children's vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking, particularly when family and community protection systems are disrupted. Effective child protection therefore requires prevention, identification and safe release, as well as rehabilitation, family reunification and reintegration for affected children.

3.3. Displacement and the Protection of Children in Humanitarian Crises

Armed conflict, persecution, violence and natural disasters can force children and their families to leave their homes, making them particularly vulnerable to protection risks.

Displaced children may become refugees, asylum-seekers or internally displaced persons (IDPs), depending on whether they cross an international border. Displacement can separate children from their families, interrupt their education and limit their access to healthcare, shelter, food and clean water. Unaccompanied and separated children face additional risks of trafficking, exploitation, abuse and recruitment by armed groups.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires States to provide appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance to refugee children and to support family reunification where appropriate. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol establish the broader international framework for refugee protection, including the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to places where their life or freedom would be threatened. Effective protection therefore requires safe reception conditions, identification and registration, family tracing and reunification, access to essential services, and long-term support for displaced children.

3.4. Access to Education and Healthcare During Emergencies

Armed conflict and humanitarian crises can severely disrupt children's access to **education and healthcare**, leaving them vulnerable to long-term consequences. Schools and hospitals may be damaged or destroyed, used for military purposes, or become inaccessible because of insecurity and displacement. Interruptions to education can increase dropout rates, child labour and exploitation, while limited access to healthcare can prevent children from receiving essential vaccinations, medical treatment, nutrition and psychosocial support.

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** recognizes education and healthcare as fundamental rights, while international humanitarian law provides protection for civilians and civilian objects during armed conflict. Hospitals receive specific protection because of their medical function, while schools are generally protected as civilian objects when they are not being used for military purposes. UN Security Council Resolution 1998 (2011) identifies attacks on schools and hospitals as grave violations against children, while Resolution 2601 (2021) further emphasizes the protection of education in armed conflict. Ensuring continuity of essential services therefore requires preventing attacks and the military use of civilian facilities where possible, maintaining humanitarian access, providing alternative learning spaces and healthcare services, and supporting children affected by trauma and displacement.

3.5. Humanitarian Response and Child Protection

Humanitarian response refers to the assistance provided to people affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and other emergencies. For children, an effective humanitarian response must address both immediate needs, such as **food, water, shelter and medical care**, and longer-term protection from violence, exploitation and separation from their families. Children may face greater risks during crises because the institutions and social structures normally responsible for their protection can become weakened or inaccessible.

Child protection therefore needs to be integrated into humanitarian operations from the earliest stages of a crisis. Humanitarian organizations may establish safe spaces, identify and assist unaccompanied or separated children, support family tracing and reunification, and provide psychosocial services. Humanitarian access is also essential, as restrictions on aid can leave children without basic necessities and protection services.

Effective responses require coordination between **governments, UN agencies, humanitarian organizations and local actors**. UNICEF plays a central role in supporting child protection, education, health, nutrition and water and sanitation services in emergencies. Humanitarian action should also follow the principles of **humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence**, while ensuring that assistance reaches children according to their needs and without discrimination.

3.6. Accountability for Violations Against Children

Accountability is an essential component of protecting children during armed conflict and humanitarian crises. When children are subjected to grave violations such as killing and maiming, recruitment, sexual violence, abduction, or attacks on schools and hospitals, effective mechanisms are needed to investigate these violations and hold responsible actors accountable. Without accountability, violations may remain undocumented and perpetrators may face limited consequences, potentially weakening efforts to prevent their recurrence.

The **UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)**, established through Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005), plays an important role in documenting and verifying grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. The MRM does **not itself**

prosecute or punish perpetrators. Instead, verified information is used in UN reports and can inform Security Council action, diplomatic engagement, advocacy and measures aimed at preventing further violations. This makes the MRM an important component of the broader accountability framework rather than a judicial mechanism.

At the international level, the **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)** recognizes the conscription, enlistment and use of children under 15 to participate actively in hostilities as war crimes. Accountability also depends on national legal systems, investigations, prosecutions and victim-support mechanisms. However, conflict-affected areas can make evidence collection, access to victims and prosecution particularly difficult. Effective accountability therefore requires cooperation among States, UN mechanisms, international courts and humanitarian actors, while ensuring the safety, dignity and rights of child victims and witnesses.

4. Current State of the Problem

4.1. Grave Violations Against Children

4.1.1. Killing and Maiming

Killing and maiming of children is one of the six grave violations identified by the United Nations in situations of armed conflict. Children may be killed or seriously injured through direct attacks, crossfire, airstrikes, shelling, landmines, unexploded ordnance and other explosive weapons. These violations can also occur when attacks fail to adequately distinguish between civilians and military targets or when feasible precautions to protect civilians are not taken.

The scale of this problem remains severe. In 2025, the United Nations verified **6,266 killings and 7,958 cases of maiming** of children, making killing and maiming the most frequently verified grave violations that year. The UN also reported that killing increased by 34% compared with 2024. Explosive weapons were a particularly significant factor, with children facing heightened risks in densely populated areas.

The consequences extend beyond immediate physical injuries. Children who survive may experience permanent disabilities, psychological trauma and disruption to their education and family life. Landmines and explosive remnants of war can continue to threaten children even

after active fighting has ended. In Ukraine, for example, the UN verified **753 children killed or maimed**, with intensified missile and long-range drone attacks contributing significantly to these violations in 2025.

4.1.2. Recruitment, Abduction and Sexual Violence

Recruitment, abduction and sexual violence are closely interconnected grave violations affecting children in armed conflict. **Recruitment and use** includes the compulsory, forced or apparently voluntary enlistment of children into armed forces or armed groups. Children may be used not only as fighters but also as cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for other support roles. Poverty, displacement, family separation, coercion and the need for protection can increase children's vulnerability to recruitment, meaning that apparent willingness does not necessarily reflect genuine free choice.

Abduction refers to the unlawful removal, seizure, capture or enforced disappearance of a child. Abducted children may subsequently be recruited, held hostage, subjected to forced labour or exposed to sexual violence. These violations frequently overlap, increasing the risks faced by affected children.

Sexual violence against children includes rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage or pregnancy, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. It may be used as a tactic of war to intimidate, punish or forcibly displace communities. Although girls are disproportionately affected, boys can also be victims. In 2025, the United Nations verified **7,402 cases of recruitment and use** and **1,982 cases of sexual violence** against children. However, these figures represent only verified cases, while fear, stigma, insecurity and limited access to affected communities can prevent many incidents from being reported.

4.1.3. Attacks on Schools and Hospitals

Attacks on schools and hospitals are among the six grave violations against children identified by the United Nations. Under **international humanitarian law (IHL)**, schools are generally considered civilian objects and may not be intentionally attacked unless they meet the legal criteria for a military objective. Under Article 52(2) of Additional Protocol I, an

object qualifies as a military objective when, by its nature, location, purpose or use, it makes an effective contribution to military action and its destruction, capture or neutralization offers a definite military advantage. In cases of doubt, objects normally dedicated to civilian purposes, including schools, are presumed not to be used for military purposes.

Hospitals and other medical units benefit from specific protection under IHL that goes beyond the general protection afforded to civilian objects. They must be respected and protected and must not be made the object of attack while they are performing their medical functions. This protection does not cease simply because hospitals treat members of armed forces or because medical personnel carry light weapons for self-defence or the defence of their patients. The special protection may cease only if a medical unit is used, outside its humanitarian function, to commit acts harmful to the enemy. Even then, the protection does not cease automatically: where required, a warning must first be given and remain unheeded within a reasonable time limit. Any subsequent attack must still comply with the other applicable rules of IHL, including **distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack**.

Military use of schools occurs when armed forces or armed groups use educational facilities for military purposes, such as accommodation, storage of weapons or equipment, military positions, or detention. IHL does not establish an absolute prohibition on every instance of military use of a school. However, such use can affect the school's protection as a civilian object and increase risks to students and teachers. Even when a school qualifies as a military objective, students and teachers remain civilians unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities. Parties to the conflict must also take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize harm to civilians. The **Safe Schools Guidelines** encourage parties to avoid using functioning schools for military purposes, although the Guidelines themselves are not legally binding.

The destruction, closure or military use of educational and medical facilities can severely disrupt children's access to education, healthcare and other essential services. Protecting these facilities therefore requires compliance with IHL while preserving their civili

4.1.4. Denial of Humanitarian Access

Denial of humanitarian access is one of the six grave violations against children monitored under the United Nations Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) framework. It refers to actions that prevent or seriously obstruct the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance to children and other civilians in need, including restrictions on access to food, water, healthcare, shelter and protection services. It also includes deliberate attacks against humanitarian personnel assisting affected populations. In 2025, the United Nations verified **8,322 incidents of denial of humanitarian access**, making it one of the most frequently documented grave violations against children.

Under **international humanitarian law (IHL)**, parties to an armed conflict have a primary responsibility to meet the basic needs of the civilian population under their control. Impartial humanitarian organizations have the right to offer their services when humanitarian needs are not adequately met, and consent to such relief operations cannot be withheld arbitrarily. Once relief operations are accepted, parties must allow and facilitate their **rapid and unimpeded passage**, while retaining a limited right to control and inspect humanitarian assistance. Such control cannot be used to unduly delay, obstruct or make humanitarian relief impossible.

Humanitarian access is therefore **not an unlimited right of humanitarian organizations to enter any area without restriction**. Parties may impose temporary and geographically limited restrictions when required by imperative military necessity, provided that these restrictions comply with IHL. However, military necessity does not provide a general legal basis for completely preventing impartial humanitarian relief from reaching civilians in need. In situations where civilians face starvation or lack essential supplies, IHL places particular importance on allowing and facilitating humanitarian relief.

For children, denial of humanitarian access can have immediate and long-term consequences. Blocked or delayed assistance can leave children without sufficient food, clean water, medical treatment, va

4.2. Displacement and Humanitarian Vulnerability

4.2.1. Forced Displacement and Family Separation

Forced displacement occurs when individuals or communities are compelled to leave their homes because of armed conflict, violence, persecution or other circumstances that make remaining unsafe. Children may become **internally displaced persons (IDPs)** when they remain within their country's borders, or **refugees** when they cross an international border and meet the relevant legal criteria. Displacement can expose children to additional risks, including loss of shelter, disruption of education and healthcare, food insecurity, trafficking, exploitation and recruitment by armed groups.

Family separation is a particularly serious consequence of conflict and displacement. Children may become separated from their parents or other caregivers during attacks, evacuation, flight or the collapse of family and community structures. Unaccompanied and separated children face increased risks of exploitation, abuse and trafficking. Under **Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, children should not be separated from their parents against their will except when competent authorities determine that separation is necessary for the child's best interests. Article 22 further requires States to provide appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance to refugee children and to cooperate in efforts to reunite children with their families.

Effective protection therefore requires early identification and registration of unaccompanied and separated children, family tracing and reunification, safe reception arrangements and access to essential services. Family reunification should be pursued where it is in the child's best interests, while decisions concerning the child's care must prioritize **the best interests of the child** and respect the child's rights and dignity.

4.2.2. Hunger, Malnutrition and Food Insecurity

Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity are major humanitarian consequences of armed conflict and displacement. **Food insecurity** refers to a lack of regular access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, while **malnutrition** includes deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in nutrient intake and can be particularly dangerous for children. Conflict can disrupt food

production and markets, destroy agricultural infrastructure, restrict humanitarian access and force families to abandon their livelihoods. Displacement can further limit children's access to sufficient and nutritious food.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of malnutrition because their physical and cognitive development depends on adequate nutrition. Severe acute malnutrition can weaken the immune system and significantly increase the risk of disease and death, while prolonged nutritional deficiencies can cause lasting developmental consequences. These risks are often intensified when children also lack access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare.

International humanitarian law (IHL) provides specific protections relevant to preventing starvation of civilians. Parties to armed conflict must respect and protect objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas, livestock and drinking-water installations. **Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited**, and parties must allow and facilitate humanitarian relief operations for civilians in need, subject to the applicable rules of IHL.

Recent conflicts demonstrate the close relationship between conflict, displacement and food insecurity. In **Sudan**, for example, continued fighting and displacement have severely disrupted food systems and humanitarian assistance, while children face high risks of acute malnutrition. In the **Gaza Strip**, restrictions on humanitarian access, damage to essential infrastructure and prolonged displacement have contributed to severe food and nutrition insecurity among children. Addressing these risks requires both immediate humanitarian food assistance and longer-term measures to restore food systems, healthcare, clean water and livelihoods.

4.2.3. Access to Healthcare, Water and Shelter

Access to healthcare, safe water and adequate shelter is essential for protecting children during armed conflict and humanitarian crises. Conflict can damage hospitals and healthcare infrastructure, displace medical personnel and restrict access to essential medicines and treatment. Children may consequently lose access to vaccinations, emergency care, maternal and child health services and treatment for injuries or diseases. The disruption of healthcare

can be particularly severe in areas where medical facilities have been damaged or where humanitarian organizations face difficulties reaching affected populations.

Access to **safe drinking water and sanitation** is equally important. Damage to water and sanitation infrastructure, displacement and overcrowded living conditions can increase exposure to contaminated water and infectious diseases. Children are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of unsafe water because dehydration and waterborne diseases can become life-threatening rapidly. Humanitarian responses therefore commonly prioritize the provision of safe water, sanitation facilities and hygiene services alongside healthcare.

Adequate shelter provides children with protection from environmental conditions, violence and exploitation. However, displacement can force families into overcrowded shelters, informal settlements or damaged buildings that may lack privacy, sanitation and protection. Under **Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, children have the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. States and humanitarian actors therefore have responsibilities to support children and families in accessing essential services and adequate living conditions.

These needs are closely interconnected. For example, a child who lacks safe water and sanitation faces greater health risks, while inadequate shelter can make access to healthcare and protection services more difficult. Effective humanitarian responses therefore require **integrated assistance** that combines healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter and child protection rather than addressing these needs in isolation.

4.2.4. Trafficking and Exploitation

Trafficking and exploitation are serious protection risks for children affected by armed conflict, displacement and humanitarian crises. The breakdown of family and community protection systems, loss of livelihoods and lack of safe accommodation can increase children's vulnerability to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Unaccompanied and separated children are particularly at risk because they may lack adults who can protect them or help them access essential services.

Under the **Palermo Protocol**, trafficking in persons involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through specified means, such as coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation. In the case of **children**,

the “means” requirement does not apply: the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation constitutes trafficking. Exploitation may include sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs.

Conflict can create conditions in which children are exploited for **forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage, criminal activities or recruitment by armed groups**. Displacement can further expose children to traffickers operating along migration routes, in refugee or displacement settings, and through informal employment networks. Poverty and the absence of legal documentation or family support can also make it more difficult for children to seek protection or report abuse.

Effective prevention requires **safe reception and accommodation, family tracing and reunification, birth registration and legal documentation, access to education and social services, and mechanisms for identifying and referring child victims**. Responses should prioritize the child's best interests, protection from further exploitation and access to appropriate recovery and reintegration support.

4.3. Education in Conflict and Emergencies

4.3.1. Attacks on Education and School Closures

Attacks on education can severely disrupt children's right to learn during armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies. They may involve attacks against schools, teachers, students or educational personnel, as well as threats, intimidation and other violence that prevent education from continuing safely. Even when educational facilities are not directly attacked, insecurity can force schools to close or prevent children and teachers from safely reaching them. Repeated interruptions can result in learning loss, increased dropout rates and greater exposure to child labour, recruitment, exploitation and other protection risks.

Under **Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, States recognize the child's right to education and are required to pursue measures toward accessible education on the basis of equal opportunity. International humanitarian law also protects schools as civilian objects unless and for such time as they become military objectives under the applicable rules

of IHL. The **Safe Schools Declaration** and its accompanying Guidelines provide a framework for reducing the impact of armed conflict on education and encouraging the continuation of education during conflict.

School closures may be necessary in situations where continuing classes would expose students or teachers to unacceptable risks. However, prolonged closures can have consequences beyond the immediate interruption of schooling. Children may lose access to school-based meals, psychosocial support, social networks and protection mechanisms, while prolonged absence from education can increase the likelihood of permanent dropout. Displacement can further complicate access when children relocate to areas where schools are overcrowded or unavailable.

Ensuring educational continuity therefore requires measures such as **safe learning spaces, distance or alternative forms of education where feasible, protection of teachers and students, rehabilitation of damaged facilities and humanitarian support for displaced children**. Maintaining access to education during emergencies is not only a matter of academic continuity but also an important component of child protection and long-term recovery.

4.3.2. Military Use of Schools

Military use of schools occurs when armed forces or armed groups use educational facilities for military purposes rather than for their intended educational function. Examples include using classrooms or school buildings as **barracks or temporary accommodation for fighters, command and observation posts, weapons or ammunition storage sites, military training facilities, detention sites, or firing positions**. A school may also be used to store military vehicles or equipment. Such uses can prevent children from attending classes and may expose students, teachers and nearby civilians to increased risks associated with military operations.

The legal status of a school depends on the circumstances of its use. Under **international humanitarian law (IHL)**, schools are generally civilian objects and are protected from attack unless and for such time as they meet the criteria for a military objective. However, **the mere presence of military personnel near a school does not automatically mean that the**

school itself is being used for military purposes. Similarly, a school does not become a military objective simply because fighting is occurring nearby. The legal assessment depends on the school's actual use and the applicable rules of IHL.

The **Safe Schools Declaration** and its accompanying Guidelines encourage parties to armed conflict to avoid using functioning schools and universities for military purposes whenever possible. The Guidelines specifically address practices such as using schools as military bases, barracks, temporary shelters for combatants, weapons storage facilities or positions from which military operations are conducted. They are **political commitments and practical guidance rather than legally binding rules in themselves.**

Military use can have consequences even after armed forces or groups leave a school. Educational facilities may require repairs, decontamination or the removal of military equipment before classes can safely resume. Students may also experience prolonged displacement and learning disruption. Preventing military use where feasible and restoring schools to safe civilian use are therefore important for protecting **education continuity and child safety** during and after armed conflict.

4.3.3. Learning Disruption and Out-of-School Children

Learning disruption refers to interruptions or reductions in children's ability to participate in regular education and continue learning. Armed conflict can disrupt education through school closures, displacement, attacks on educational infrastructure, insecurity, shortages of teachers and learning materials, and damage to electricity or communication systems. Even when schools remain open, repeated interruptions can reduce instructional time and make it difficult for children to maintain consistent learning.

The consequences of prolonged disruption can include **learning loss, delayed educational progress and increased risk of dropping out.** Children may fall behind in literacy, numeracy and other basic skills because they miss lessons or cannot access learning materials. Repeated displacement can make it difficult to transfer between education systems or maintain continuous schooling. Younger children may also lose important opportunities to develop foundational skills, while older children may be more likely to leave education permanently because of economic pressures or prolonged interruption.

Out-of-school children are children who are not participating in formal education. Conflict can increase their numbers when families are displaced, schools become inaccessible or unsafe, or children are required to work or provide care for family members. Children in refugee and internally displaced communities may face additional barriers, including overcrowded schools, language differences, lack of documentation, financial constraints and insufficient educational infrastructure.

The consequences extend beyond education itself. Prolonged exclusion from school can increase children's vulnerability to **child labour, exploitation, trafficking, recruitment and other forms of violence**, while also limiting their future educational and employment opportunities. Schools can additionally provide safe environments, psychosocial support, social connections and access to other essential services.

Ensuring continuity of education therefore requires measures such as **temporary learning spaces, catch-up and accelerated education, distance learning where feasible, teacher support, flexible enrolment procedures and integration of displaced children into local education systems**. These measures can reduce learning loss, help prevent permanent dropout and maintain children's connection to education during emergencies.

4.4. Regional Hotspots and Case Studies

4.4.1. Sudan: Conflict, Hunger and Mass Displacement

Sudan has experienced a severe humanitarian crisis since fighting broke out between the **Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)** and the **Rapid Support Forces (RSF)** in April 2023. Continued fighting has caused large-scale displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure and severe disruptions to food, healthcare, education and water services. By mid-2026, approximately **9.1 million people were internally displaced**, while **17.3 million children** were estimated to require humanitarian assistance.

Hunger and malnutrition have become major consequences of the conflict. Fighting, displacement, damaged markets and disrupted agricultural activities have reduced access to food, while restrictions on humanitarian access have made assistance more difficult to deliver. As of mid-2026, an estimated **19.5 million people were experiencing Crisis-level**

acute food insecurity or worse, with areas of Darfur and Kordofan remaining at risk of famine. UNICEF also reported that millions of children were at risk of acute malnutrition in 2026.

Children face interconnected protection risks alongside hunger and displacement. Violence has damaged or destroyed **homes, schools, health facilities, water systems and markets**, while insecurity has restricted humanitarian access. Between January and June 2026, at least **330 children were reported killed or injured**, with Darfur and Kordofan among the areas recording the highest child casualties. Children have also faced recruitment and use, abduction, sexual violence and attacks on schools and hospitals.

Education has been severely affected as well. In mid-2026, **more than 8 million school-aged children were out of school**, with disruption particularly severe in Darfur and Kordofan. This demonstrates how conflict, displacement, hunger and the destruction or occupation of civilian infrastructure can reinforce one another, making Sudan a significant case study for understanding the interconnected nature of child protection and humanitarian needs during prolonged conflict.

4.4.2. Gaza: Humanitarian Access, Hunger and Destruction of Essential Services

The **Gaza Strip** has faced a severe humanitarian crisis marked by prolonged hostilities, large-scale displacement, restrictions on humanitarian access and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure. By mid-2026, approximately **1.9 million of Gaza's 2.1 million people were displaced**, while access to healthcare, water, sanitation and protection services remained severely constrained. UNICEF reported that around **82 per cent of families were water insecure**, with nearly 90 per cent of water and sanitation infrastructure damaged or destroyed.

Hunger and food insecurity remain major concerns for children. Although food-security conditions showed some improvement following increased humanitarian and commercial assistance, these gains remained fragile. In July 2026, approximately **1.4 million people, or 67 per cent of Gaza's population, were estimated to be experiencing crisis-level acute food insecurity or worse**, while an estimated 74,000 children were expected to require treatment for acute malnutrition over the following year. Continued restrictions on

humanitarian and commercial access, limited food diversity and the disruption of local food production continue to threaten these improvements.

The destruction and disruption of **essential services** have further intensified children's vulnerability. Damage to water and sanitation systems has increased risks of disease, while shortages of fuel, spare parts and other essential materials have affected healthcare and WASH operations. In August 2026, a UNICEF-supported water facility was severely damaged, disrupting access to safe drinking water for more than 4,000 people, including around 2,000 children. A nearby strike also destroyed a warehouse containing UNICEF nutrition supplies intended for more than 40,500 young children and 4,900 pregnant and breastfeeding women.

Humanitarian access therefore remains central to the protection of children in Gaza. Restrictions on the entry of essential supplies, security risks and operational constraints can delay the delivery of food, medicine, fuel, water and shelter assistance. As of September 2026, humanitarian operations continued to face severe access and funding constraints, while damage to civilian infrastructure and displacement continued to create additional needs.

Gaza demonstrates how **food insecurity, displacement, damaged infrastructure and restricted humanitarian access reinforce one another**. Protecting children requires sustained and safe humanitarian access, protection of civilians and essential civilian infrastructure, and continued provision of food, healthcare, water, sanitation, shelter and child-protection services.

4.4.3. Ukraine: Attacks on Civilian Infrastructure and Disrupted Education

The war in **Ukraine** has had a severe and continuing impact on children, particularly through attacks affecting civilian areas and essential infrastructure. In its 2026 report on children and armed conflict, the United Nations verified **1,899 grave violations against 781 children** in Ukraine. These included the killing or maiming of 753 children and **641 attacks on schools and hospitals**. The majority of verified child casualties resulted from explosive weapons with wide-area effects.

Attacks on **energy, water and other civilian infrastructure** have also affected children's access to essential services. Damage to energy systems can interrupt electricity, heating and water supplies, particularly during winter, while disruptions to these systems can also affect healthcare facilities and schools. UNICEF reported that intense attacks during the 2025–2026 winter left millions of families facing interruptions to heating, electricity and water, creating additional risks for children.

Education has been particularly disrupted. Schools and other educational facilities have been damaged or destroyed, while air-raid alerts and security concerns can interrupt lessons even when school buildings remain operational. As of September 2026, UNICEF reported that more than **4,200 educational institutions** had been damaged or destroyed since the beginning of the war. Nearly **4.2 million children** returned to learning at the beginning of the 2026–2027 school year, but many continued to rely on blended or fully online education because of security conditions.

Displacement has further complicated children's access to education. By February 2026, more than **2.5 million children remained displaced**, including children displaced within Ukraine and those living as refugees abroad. Displaced children may face interrupted schooling, difficulties transferring between education systems and limited access to appropriate learning facilities.

Ukraine therefore demonstrates how attacks on civilian infrastructure can create **interconnected humanitarian consequences**: damage to energy and water systems can affect schools and healthcare, insecurity can interrupt education, and displacement can make long-term access to schooling more difficult. Protecting civilian infrastructure and maintaining safe educational opportunities are consequently important components of child protection during prolonged armed conflict.

4.4.4. Democratic Republic of the Congo: Recruitment and Displacement

The **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, particularly its eastern provinces, has experienced prolonged armed conflict involving state forces and numerous armed groups. The escalation of violence has caused large-scale displacement and exposed children to multiple, interconnected protection risks, including recruitment and use by armed groups,

abduction, sexual violence and family separation. In 2026, UNICEF estimated that more than **5.3 million people were internally displaced**, including approximately **4 million children**.

Recruitment and use of children remains a major concern. According to the United Nations, **1,397 children were verified as recruited** in the DRC in 2025, while 1,067 children were abducted. Recruitment can involve children being used as fighters or in support roles, exposing them to violence and other forms of exploitation. The UN reported that grave violations against children remained high in 2025, particularly in the context of intensified fighting in eastern DRC.

Displacement can further increase children's vulnerability to recruitment. When families flee their homes, children may become separated from parents or caregivers and lose access to established protection networks. In South Kivu, for example, intensified fighting in late 2025 displaced more than **500,000 people**, including over **100,000 children**, within a short period. UNICEF also reported increasing concerns about unaccompanied and separated children, who face heightened risks of abduction and recruitment.

The crisis also affects **education and essential services**. In eastern DRC, attacks and insecurity had forced the closure of more than **5,200 schools** by August 2025, depriving nearly **1.9 million children** of access to learning. Prolonged displacement, school closures and the breakdown of community protection systems can reinforce one another, leaving children with fewer safe environments and increasing their exposure to exploitation and recruitment.

The DRC therefore illustrates how **armed conflict, displacement and child recruitment can form a cycle of vulnerability**. Effective responses require prevention of recruitment, identification and safe release of children associated with armed groups, family tracing and reunification, access to education and psychosocial support, and long-term reintegration into families and communities.

4.4.5. Myanmar: Displacement and Access to Humanitarian Assistance

Myanmar has faced prolonged armed conflict and insecurity since the military takeover in 2021, resulting in large-scale displacement and disruption of essential services. By mid-2026,

more than **3.7 million people were internally displaced**, approximately 30 per cent of whom were children. An estimated **16.2 million people, including 4.9 million children, required humanitarian assistance** in 2026. The situation has been further complicated by recurring floods and the **7.7-magnitude earthquake of March 2025**, which damaged homes, schools, healthcare facilities and water infrastructure.

Displaced children face multiple and interconnected risks. Being forced to leave their homes can interrupt education, separate children from caregivers and reduce access to healthcare, nutrition, safe water and protection services. Overcrowded displacement sites and damaged infrastructure can also increase exposure to disease and other protection concerns. UNICEF reports that children in Myanmar continue to face risks including forcible recruitment, exploitation, violence and disruption of education and healthcare.

Humanitarian access remains a major challenge. Ongoing conflict, insecurity, bureaucratic restrictions and changes in territorial control can prevent or delay humanitarian organizations from reaching affected populations. These constraints are particularly significant in hard-to-reach areas, where damaged infrastructure and insecurity can make the delivery of food, medicines, water and other essential supplies difficult. UNICEF has emphasized the need for humanitarian assistance to reach children regardless of their location and continues to work through local and international partners to maintain access.

The scale of need is also affected by **funding constraints**. UNICEF reported that its 2025 Myanmar humanitarian appeal received only 25 per cent of the requested funding, limiting the ability to expand critical humanitarian and earthquake-response services. Despite these constraints, UNICEF and its partners reached millions of people with water, nutrition, education and child-protection assistance during 2025.

Myanmar therefore illustrates how **protracted conflict, displacement, natural disasters and restricted humanitarian access can reinforce one another**. Protecting children requires sustained and safe humanitarian access, flexible delivery mechanisms, support for displaced families and continued provision of healthcare, nutrition, WASH, education and child-protection services.

5. Questions to be Addressed

1. How can governments and humanitarian organizations identify, protect and provide assistance to unaccompanied and separated children when conflict parties restrict humanitarian access?
2. How can UNICEF transform the information collected through the MRM into concrete preventive action?
3. How can children formerly associated with armed groups be prevented from being re-recruited?
4. How can education continue when schools are destroyed, closed or unsafe?
5. How should long-term child protection programmes be funded in protracted conflicts?
6. How can humanitarian organizations reach children in territories controlled by non-state armed groups?
7. How can food assistance, healthcare, WASH, shelter and child protection be coordinated into a single child-centred humanitarian response?
8. What mechanisms should be established when States or armed groups refuse to cooperate with UN child-protection monitoring?
9. How can UNICEF, governments, NGOs and local organizations divide responsibilities so that proposed solutions are actually implemented rather than remaining commitments on paper?

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