



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

Intervention of

H.E. Marc PECSTEEN, Permanent Representative of
Belgium to the United Nations

Open VTC on Children and Armed Conflict at the Security Council

New York, 23/06/2020

Dear Mr. President, dear Secretary-General, dear colleagues,

This year marks the 15th anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005), which established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) and the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

Despite some progress, there is little to celebrate. Last year more than 25,000 grave violations against children in 19 country situations have been verified by the United Nations. The violation of denial of humanitarian access has seen an exponential increase. The steady erosion of International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and respect for civilian lives, in particular of children, continues. The numbers of incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence and of attacks on schools and hospitals do not go down, despite the adoption of action plans. And COVID-19 further exacerbates the situation. We must step up our efforts.

It is fitting that we hold today's open debate under the French Presidency of the Security Council as France was the first Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

Belgium, as the Chair of the Working Group, stepped into the shoes of its predecessors with ambitious goals.

We aim for the Working Group to adopt conclusions on all of the 14 country situations with listed parties within our 2-year term. We agreed with SRSG Gamba to increase the frequency of country reports, shortening the reporting periods and magnifying their relevance.

The Working Group is also synching its agenda with the agenda of the Security Council, making its work more relevant to the rest of the Security Council. This helps to mainstream the topic of children and armed conflict. For example by

linking its conclusions to mandate renewal discussions, by regular VTCs VTC's with Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR's) in the run up to these renewals , or by asking SRSG Gamba to brief the Security Council or its subsidiary organs such as sanction committees on specific country situations.

In November last year, Belgium hosted the two-yearly retreat of all Child Protection Advisors (CPA's) in UN Missions worldwide and organized on that occasion a meeting with the members of the WG CAAC. This illustrates the importance we attach to sufficient child protection advisor capacity of UN Missions, whether they be peacekeeping operations or special political missions.

With a visit Mali last December the Working Group continued its practice of country visits.

Last February, Belgium organized a Security Council debate on CAAC, with an intervention by the King of the Belgians. On that occasion the Council adopted a Presidential Statement calling for the dissemination and use of the UN Practical Guidance for Mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict. In light of the SG's Call for a Global Ceasefire in response to Covid-19, it is more relevant than ever that child protection should be a central focus in ceasefire and peace negotiations.

Mr. President,

Time and again the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict manages to find consensus on the protection of children in some of the most divisive country situations. This indicates the continued strong support for and unity towards the Children And Armed Conflict mandate in the Council. It also illustrates the importance of maintaining its strengths, including the integrity and impartiality of the listing mechanism. Evidence-based listing and delisting, accurately reflecting the data collected and verified by the MRM, according to the formal criteria included in the SG's annual report on children and armed conflict of 2010, is paramount for the strength of this mandate. The listing mechanism provides leverage to the United Nations to work with listed parties to improve the situation of children on the ground and is therefore a precious and powerful tool. De-listing parties prematurely takes away that leverage, including for the Working Group, as it is the basis on which the Group works.

Accountability for all violations and abuses against children is at the heart of the mandate on children and armed conflict. In line with the relevant SC resolutions, the full range of justice and reconciliation mechanisms is to be considered, including national, international and "mixed" criminal courts and tribunals, truth and reconciliation commissions and other transitional justice mechanisms.

Furthermore, we share the concern expressed in the report related to children in detention for association with armed groups, including those designated as terrorist by the Security Council, or on national security related charges. Recruited and used children should be treated primarily as victims and in line with international juvenile justice standards. Detention should be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. We call for the adoption and implementation of handover protocols that ensure the swift transfer of children from military custody to civilian child protection authorities, as well as access to detention facilities for UN and other monitors. Reintegration is key and reintegration programmes must be gender- and age sensitive, include mental health and psychosocial support, education and vocational training, and access to civil registry, identification documents and to justice. Without comprehensive programmes, poverty, the lack of opportunities and stigmatization may result in the recruitment and rerecruitment of children.

We call on all states to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and endorse the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Vancouver Principles, and the Safe Schools Declaration.

Mr. President,

As His Majesty King Philippe said in this Council last February: *The year 2019 marked the end of a very difficult decade for children in conflict zones. It is up to us to act so that the year 2020 is the start of a decade of hope for all children.*

We remain committed.

Thank you.