

Dear colleagues,

I thank the **co-organizers** - Niger, the European Union and Save the Children - for making today's event possible.

I also want to show my appreciation for the distinguished panelists for accepting the invitation to join us. We are honored by your presence.

But most of all, I am looking forward to hearing from the children and youth participants who have agreed to share their personal stories on how conflict has affected their lives.

It is the **fourth year in a row** that Belgium and the EU have seized the opportunity of the UN High Level Week to focus the international community's attention on what we regard as a pressing humanitarian issue.

This year, we decided to highlight the **urgency of protecting children** who are the invisible victims of armed conflict and COVID-19. Too often we overlook them, or we speak about them in their absence.

Today we want to listen to them and amplify their voices.

Colleagues,

Before passing the floor to the EU Commissioner, I wish to develop **three points on behalf of Belgium**:

1. First, the urgency of mitigating the pandemic's impact on children affected by armed conflict.
2. Second, the importance of dedicated child protection capacity in the field.
3. And third, convey my gratitude to the work of child protection staff.

First, the urgency of **mitigating the pandemic's impact on children affected by armed conflict**. Child protection and reintegration services have suffered immensely from the pandemic, with less people in the field due to the restrictions.

Schools need to reopen quickly and safely. Humanitarian access, often reduced to contain the virus, is essential. And engagement with parties to conflict through action plans and dialogue must be intensified with a view to ending and preventing violations against children.

In doing so we need to pay specific attention to vulnerable groups of children, such as girls, children with disabilities and refugee and internally displaced children. We also need to keep in mind that protection is not only about physical health but also about their mental wellbeing.

I also call on all member states who have not already done so to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, the Paris Principles,

the Vancouver Principles¹ and to ratify the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

Colleagues,

Countries in conflict often lack the means to guarantee children's wellbeing and therefore the international community must step up its efforts. This brings me to my second point, the importance of **dedicated child protection capacity in UN missions**. In its decisions on mandates, resources and staffing, the UN and its Member States must ensure UN operations are fit for purpose, including with regards to child protection.

On our side, child protection is a **longstanding policy priority** of Belgium. It has been an honor for my country to chair the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. But as demonstrated today, our mobilization for children did not end with the end of our Security Council mandate.

We are supporting many of the organisations working for children: UNICEF of course, but also OCHA, ICRC, UNHCR and the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

We call on others to support organisations that benefit children.

¹ sur le maintien de la paix et la prévention du recrutement et de l'utilisation d'enfants-soldats

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my final point I want to express my **deep gratitude to all child protection actors**, be it within the UN system, national authorities or civil society.

Almost 25 years since the launch of a UN mandate to protect children affected by armed conflict, we have come a long way.

Amid a global pandemic, the Children And Armed Conflict Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism proved its mettle, monitoring grave violations. In doing so it provides fact-based evidence that allows for accountability for all grave violations committed against children.

Your dedication to protecting children is making a difference in these unprecedented times. You can count on Belgium's support.

Thank you.