

**Background Guide**

**General Assembly 1**

**Topic: Child Soldiers**



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## **I. Introduction to the Committee**

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The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations. It is the organization's central deliberative body. Established in 1945 in the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly has served as the main policy-making organ of the United Nations. The General Assembly is headquartered in New York City. It is comprised of all Member States, and each member state has an equal vote.

The General Assembly also makes key decisions for the UN, including appointing the Secretary-General on the recommendation of the Security Council, electing the non-permanent members of the Security Council, and approving the UN budget. The Assembly meets regularly in sessions from September to December, and thereafter as required. They discuss specific issues through a dedicated agenda, which then leads to the adoption of resolutions. The issues brought before the Assembly range from concerns regarding sustainable development to international disputes over territory, and also global security concerns.

Every one of the 193 members of the United Nations has a seat in the General Assembly, though there are also several non-member observers including the Holy See and the State of Palestine. Seating arrangements in the General Assembly Hall change for each session. During the 77th Session (2022-2023), Belize will occupy the first seat in the Hall, including in the Main Committees (followed by all the other countries, in English alphabetical order). The Assembly's role as an advisory body allows it to recommend courses of action and to refer matters to other United Nations organizations, offices, programs, and commissions. Resolutions passed by the General Assembly are legally non-binding; however, they provide a powerful framework for global change and cooperation. The General Assembly's ability to create subsidiary organizations and delegate responsibility for the management and implementation of international agreements is the foundation of enacting positive change on an international level.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

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Thousands of boys and girls are used as soldiers, cooks, spies and more in armed conflicts around the world. Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties for conflict (UNICEF, 2023). Often referred to as "child soldiers," boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse. Warring parties use children not only as soldiers, but also as scouts, cooks, porters, guards, messengers and more (UNICEF, 2023). Moreover, the use of children for acts of terrorism, including suicide bombers, has emerged in recent years (UN, 2023). Many, especially girls, are also subjected to gender-based violence. This can include rape, sexual violence, pregnancy and pregnancy-related complications, stigma, and rejection by families.

Children become part of an armed force or group for various reasons. Some are abducted, threatened, coerced, or manipulated by armed actors (UNICEF, 2023). Others are driven by poverty, trying to provide income for their families. Recruitment and involvement with child soldiers are a violation of child rights and international humanitarian law.

Children experience many different forms of violence. They may be required to participate in harrowing training or initiation ceremonies (UNICEF, 2023). There is great risk of death, chronic injury, and disability when they become soldiers. They are also forced to take part in torture and killings. Warring parties also deprive children of nutrition and healthy living conditions, or subject them to substance abuse, with significant consequences for their physical and mental well-being (UNICEF, 2023).

Countries such as: Afghanistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen are known for the pervasive use of child soldiers (UN, 2023).

## **History/Past UN Action**

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Within the UN system, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) is in charge of the reintegration of former child soldiers and preparing them for civilian life. This agency protects the rights of children everywhere. They are the world’s largest provider of vaccines, they support child health and nutrition, safe water and sanitation, quality education and skill building, HIV prevention and treatment for mothers and babies, and the protection of children and adolescents from violence and exploitation (UNICEF, 2023). Established in 1946, UNICEF partners with governments, community groups and others to address the drivers of child soldier recruitment and stop violations before they occur. They support the release and reintegration of children who exit armed forces and non-state actor groups each year – providing a safe place for them to live upon release, as well as community-based services for case management, family tracing, reunification and psychosocial support. UNICEF also provides specialized support for survivors of gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2023). They also provide children and families with mental and physical health services and education.

In 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child* on the involvement of children in armed conflict to protect children from recruitment and use in hostilities (UN, 2023). The optional protocol is a commitment that: “States will not recruit children under the age of 18 to send them to the battlefield; states will not conscript soldiers below the age of 18; states should take all possible measures to prevent such recruitment –including legislation to prohibit and criminalize the recruitment of children under 18 and involve them in hostilities; states will demobilize anyone under 18 conscripted or used in hostilities and will provide physical, psychological recovery services and help their social

reintegration; and armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a country should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities anyone under 18” (UN, 2023). This entered into force in 2022 and has now been ratified by the majority of countries.

Human rights law declares 18 as the minimum legal age for recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under both treaty-based and customary international humanitarian law and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court.

In 2014, UNICEF launched a campaign “Children, Not Soldiers” to bring attention to the fact that child soldiers are not to be used in conflict (UN, 2023). It was designed to provide momentum, political will, and international support to stop recruitment of child soldiers. The campaign received support from Member States, UN, NGO partners, regional organizations, and the public (UN, 2023). The UN General Assembly requested regular updates about reports. The campaign ended in 2016.

The reintegration of former child soldiers is a long process, and the Special Representative launched in 2018 the UNICEF the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers (UN, 2023). The initiative aims to bring attention to the issue of reintegration of former child soldiers and encourage action to sustainably address support for child reintegration programs.

### **III. Latest Developments**

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The annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict pays close attention to recruitment of child soldiers. The UN Security Council is trying to develop action plans to address violations against children (UN, 2023). Action plans address a specific situation. For example, an action plan may include the following elements: negotiating an agreement between government security forces and the United Nations to end the recruitment and use of children by criminalizing recruitment, investigating and prosecuting those who recruit child soldiers, appointing child protection specialists, and implementing national campaigns to raise awareness about these issues, and much more (UN, 2023). The most recent Action Plan has been signed in Iraq in March 2023. There are currently 18 action plans under various phases of implementation. Overall, 38 action plans have been signed, including 11 government forces and 27 non-state armed groups (UN, 2023). Of those, 12 parties have complied with their commitment and were later delisted. Four action plans were replaced, and others have ceased to exist (UN, 2023).

Over the past 25 years, countries around the world have worked to minimize the use of child soldiers. The mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict was created in 1996 by the UN General Assembly following the publication of Graca Machel’s report titled the “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” (UN, 2023). The report

highlighted the disproportionate impact of war on boys and girls and identified them as the primary victims of armed conflict. Since then, the protection of children has been firmly placed on the agenda of the United Nations' highest bodies, and countries have become more involved to improve the protection of children affected by war.

#### **IV. Problems a Position Paper and Resolution Should Address**

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The most effective way to protect children is by preventing and resolving conflict and sustaining peace. Addressing challenges of conflict and war is key to building sustainable peace and finding a resolution. Focusing on specific countries and their issues should be addressed as well.

Questions to think about during your research:

1. What is the international legal definition of a child soldier?
2. What are some of the conventions, treaties, and protocols that relate to this topic?
3. What are some of the countries most impacted by child soldiers?
4. How do the experiences of child soldiers in government-sponsored vs. non-state actor groups like militias differ?
5. What are some specific concerns for girl child soldiers?
6. What is DDR?
7. What are ways to decrease the number of child soldiers?
8. What are some examples of successful prosecutions of those who conscript children?

#### **V. Helpful Sources**

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Action Plans: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/action-plans/>

About UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/about-unicef>

Q&A of Child Soldiers by Children and Armed Conflict:  
<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2023/02/questions-and-answers-on-the-recruitment-and-use-of-child-soldiers>

UNICEF Website: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>

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