

DRAFT STATEMENT

Open Debate

Children in Armed Conflict: Attacks against Schools as a Grave Violation of Children's Rights

Thursday 10 September 2020

It is my honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the A3+1: South Africa, Tunisia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Niger. We begin with a word of thanks to the Special Representative of the Secretary General, Virginia Gamba and UNICEF's Executive Director Fore for their thoughtful briefings. Our discussions, today, happen in the context of the global commemoration of the first international day to protect education from attack.

It is, therefore, normal, in these circumstances, that we listen to the voices of the victims of this phenomenon, and whose distress tell us that it is time to act.

Hadiza and Rimana, two young Nigerien women, whose poignant testimonies remind us how urgent it is to heed to the call of the Secretary General for a global ceasefire and that of the African Union to "Silence the guns" and why we must continue to protect schools from attacks and prioritize quality education for all children, with particular attention to children most gravely affected by the horrors of conflict and violence.

Hadiza and Rimana, you can rest assured that we have listened to you and that your message gives us additional reasons to act.

Dr. Marika Tsolakis, representing the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks, the information you have just shared with us has allowed us to measure the impact of attacks on schools on the education of children, especially girls.

When access to education is taken away from a child in a situation of conflict, it is a tragedy which also takes away what most children desire and have a right

to, the possibility to learn and expand their imagination in a safe and secure environment. All too often in situations of armed conflict, schools and persons entitled to protection who are connected to schools are subject to attacks and threats of attacks – which is why it is critical that we assess progress made since the adoption of the seminal Security Council resolution 1998 (2011), and subsequent related resolutions and to renew our commitment to provide a safe and secure learning environment to all children.

The A3+1 recognizes the important developments in the protection of schools and persons entitled to protection who are connected to schools, from attacks and threats of attacks, globally, including the signing of an Action Plan to refrain from attacks on schools between an armed group in the Central African Republic and the Office of the SRSG on Children in Armed Conflict. Such positive developments should be emulated in other conflict situations in the pursuit of protection of schools and persons operating in such environments.

We welcome the efforts by the government of Mali to effectively implement commitments from the Safe Schools Declaration; the extension of the COVID-19 pandemic related distance learning to children affected by conflict in Burkina Faso; and the international collaboration by UNICEF, UNESCO, the GCPEA, national governments and regional bodies.

As the world grapples with adapting to education in the difficult context of the global pandemic, more emphasis is required to ensure that quality education is delivered to children including those in vulnerable situations such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, children with disabilities, and children separated from conflict and undergoing reintegration programmes.

We are concerned by the particular vulnerabilities affecting girls in conflict-affected contexts, which, in addition to social constraints, has acutely impacted the girl child's education. In many parts of the world, the effects of attacks against schools is even more acute for girls: girls are significantly less likely to return to school following lockdowns and destruction to school infrastructure. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries, and they are also more likely to suffer sexual and gender-based violence on school routes. Special attention needs to be paid to the issue of violence and trauma suffered by girls in armed

conflict, with a view to better define the means and strategies to deal with what is often one of the most hard-won aspects of protecting schools.

In the absence of swift and comprehensive actions, reduced access to education due to conflict, insecurity and COVID19 will have dire consequences. The Presidential Statement adopted today focuses specifically on the targeting of schools within the broader consideration of the protection of children in armed conflict and calls for efforts to address the adverse effects of attacks against schools among which child labor, child recruitment as well as forced and child marriage.

Girls such as Rimana who briefed the Security Council today tell us that a different story is possible in places such as the Sahel region where groups terrorist specifically target schools. We all remember the tragedy of the girls of Chibok, Nigeria, taken away from their education and from the affection of their families by fanatics of the Boko Haram terrorist groups.

Between April 2017 to December 2019, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger witnessed a six-fold increase in school closures due to violence. In the first seven months of 2020 alone, there have been over 90 incidents of attacks on education in the central Sahel. In parts of the region, the insecurity situation has led to a worrying pattern of school closures: as of December 2019, it was reported that more than 3,300 schools were closed due to insecurity, disrupting the education of more than 650,000 children in the three countries of the Central Sahel. Worldwide, 75 million children and adolescents have their education disrupted by conflict or security crisis in 35 conflict-affected countries.

If armed terrorist groups attack schools, including in the Sahel region, it is because they know that schools are a powerful force for peacebuilding. Schools are a source of knowledge and enlightenment; they provide a sense of normalcy; where children can realize their potential and hope for the future while the ideology of violence carried by terrorist groups feeds on ignorance and obscurantism. Educated children are the spearhead of a strong society. They are the pillars of a strong nation.

National governments and regional governing bodies must commit to effective expansion of legislation, policies and actions that are child-focused, gender-responsive and in line with International Humanitarian Law and the UN

Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols on Children in Armed Conflict. They must further commit to respect the civilian character of schools. Such a mechanism, to be effective, should involve, in addition to states, all other relevant partners. Monitoring and reporting on grave violations will be fundamental to reducing attacks on schools.

There is urgent need to increase resources and build capacity among teachers and students to support appropriate face-to-face, online, and hybrid teaching and learning, so that no child is left behind. Without accurate data, our efforts would be incomplete – which is why we ask affected Member States to conduct a mapping of schools that have been subject to attacks and to take immediate measures to rehabilitate and repair these schools and restore children’s safe access to schools with the continued support of UNICEF and other relevant UN entities.

The A3+1 prioritizes quality education as a key mechanism of security for all people. These rehabilitation and reconstruction operations are, in our opinion, the best response to strengthen the role of schools as a vector for the promotion and consolidation of peace, because, as we said earlier, it is through education that we combat obscurantism, fanaticism, but also terrorism.

We conclude the joint A3+1 declaration with an important announcement: Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, joining 104 countries that are signatories.

I thank you.