



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

25
YEARS



Impact of the **COVID-19** pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict

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Executive Summary

One year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper attempts to assess and address its impact on violations against children in situations of armed conflict, based on information gathered mostly from UN Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting on Grave Violations against Children (CTFMRs), as well as from NGO and other UN sources.

First, the paper studies the impact of infection-prevention and control measures on the monitoring capacity of CTFMRs. It finds that, although all monitors experienced severe movement restrictions during the second quarter of 2020, they were able to resume their work after a few months, with some working adjustments. CTFMRs with established monitoring networks and good internet connectivity across the host country coped more easily and resumed their work more quickly, but all CTFMRs reported facing difficulties in monitoring some types of violations remotely: these more sensitive violations (recruitment and use, and sexual violence) were and will continue to be verified retrospectively.

Second, the paper attempts to identify any trends and patterns of violations that could indicate a direct/indirect, negative/positive impact of the pandemic on the rights of children in situations of armed conflict. Despite the fact that CTFMRs are still verifying incidents and that they suspect various degrees of underreporting from victims in 2020, the cross-referencing of documented incidents, unverified reports and general observations from MRM actors (for example on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, or on the evolving agendas of parties to conflict) can provide useful clues to interpret data once it is verified. Indeed, the main suspected trends linked to the pandemic are also the most difficult to document, namely increases in recruitment, sexual violence, and ill-treatment in detention. These will only be confirmed at a later stage, once incidents are verified, and assuming they have not been underreported.

Third, the paper explores the ways in which the pandemic has affected the capacity of CTFMRs and their partners to respond to violations. It finds that capacity was significantly affected when it came to engaging face-to-face with either parties to conflict (for example to develop and implement commitments to end violations) or with affected communities (for example to conduct family tracing and reunification, or initiate reintegration activities for girls and boys separated from armed forces and armed groups). However, most CTFMRs resumed this type of work in the autumn of 2020, and some found ways to continue engaging with armed groups remotely throughout 2020, particularly if dialogue and trust had been previously established. Specific and serious concerns were often expressed about the identification and release of children from armed groups, which for some countries continues to be a challenge due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

The paper concludes by highlighting the different ways in which CTFMRs improved, expanded, or diversified their working methods in order to continue operating through the crisis, but stresses that their work environment remains difficult and uncertain. It proposes a way forward to ensure CTFMRs are supported to fulfil their mandate as efficiently and safely as possible through the rest of the crisis. Recommendations include suggestions on health and safety; human, material and financial resources; political support; and the sharing of lessons learnt and good practices.

Lastly, warning of the likely long-term impact of the pandemic on children's rights everywhere, the paper encourages all concerned actors to continue to monitor and analyse violations through a COVID-19 lens for the foreseeable future and to adapt programmatic and advocacy responses accordingly, as children feel the various repercussions of the pandemic through years to come.



Introduction

Purpose of this paper

One year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper, prepared by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), constitutes a preliminary attempt to assess and address its impact on grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict. It does this in a two-pronged approach by, on the one hand, uncovering trends in violations that can be attributed to the pandemic, and, on the other hand, investigating the overall impact of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic on the capacity of relevant child protection actors – namely, members of UN Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting on Grave Violations against Children (CTFMRs). The ultimate purpose of this research is to draw lessons learnt and propose a way forward to ensure CTFMRs are supported to carry out their mandate as efficiently and safely as possible through the rest of this crisis.

Methodology

Sample

This research focuses on five situations of armed conflict on the agenda of the UN Security Council, representing a quarter of the (current) number of situations of concern in the CAAC agenda.¹ These five situations are: Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Sudan. These were selected according to the following criteria: (i) The situation presented a specific lead to study the impact of the pandemic either on child rights violations² or on the

work of the CTFMR; (ii) The group of countries, as a whole, was representative of the global geographical spread of the CAAC mandate and of the range of violations it covers, i.e. the six grave violations as well as detention; (iii) The CTFMRs in these countries produced sufficient qualitative and quantitative data in 2020 to enable us to conduct some analysis. However, we consider that these five situations provide a wide-enough range of information to exemplify the many ways in which patterns of violations may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methods

Information for this research was collected via the following methods:

- **A 15-question survey sent to CTFMRs** to consult them on “the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict,” and understand the challenges they are facing. (See annex I.) The survey was circulated to all members in the five CTFMRs via the CAAC Focal Points:
- **Interviews with CTFMR co-chairs** in each of the five selected countries for in-depth discussions on the challenges they are facing in both monitoring and responding to violations, and to collect information on recent patterns and trends of violations that they have observed and may be related to the pandemic. Seven interviews with 13 Focal Points were conducted in total.
- **A review of available literature** (reports; press statements; opinion pieces; technical guidance; policy briefs; practitioners’ webinars and podcasts) conveying the types of impact of the pandemic had on the rights of children in situations of armed conflict and recommending mitigation measures. (See bibliography in annex II)
- **Interviews with HQ-level UN and NGO experts** working on CAAC issues, including members

	Afghanistan	CAR	Colombia	DRC	Sudan	TOTAL
Total answers per country	8	10	5	8	2	33
Total usable answers	6	9	4	8	2	29

1 See: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/where-we-work>

2 See: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations>



Photo credit: © UNICEF/UNI320883/Fazel

of the Technical Reference Group (TRG) on the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict (“the MRM”), in order to gather their insights into the broader, policy-level impact of the pandemic.

Structure

This paper is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Impact on Monitoring”, looks at the negative effects of COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control measures (or IPC measures) on the monitoring capacity of CTFMRs. This section relies heavily on quantitative and qualitative survey responses, as well as contextual information provided in interviews with CTFMR co-chairs. Part 2, on “Violations Trends”, reviews data and observations on violations shared mostly by CTFMRs (bearing in mind the monitoring limitations evoked in Part 1) to identify any patterns and trends³ indicative of the impact of the pandemic on the rights of children in situations of armed conflict so far. This relies mostly on CTFMR interviews and a literature review. Part 3, “Impact on Response”, explores the ways in which the

pandemic has affected the capacity of CTFMRs and their partners to respond to violations. This section looks at their level of engagement with parties to the conflict in general (including through the development and implementation of measures to end and prevent violations); it also looks at efforts to release and provide reintegration support to children associated with armed forces and armed groups; and it considers CTFMRs’ wider prevention work, before reporting the ways in which they overcame some of the challenges they faced. Part 3 is based on an analysis of information from CTFMRs (survey and interviews).

Conclusions are then drawn on the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of CTFMRs and on the rights of children in situations of armed conflict. These inform recommendations on ways to address the challenges faced by the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, one year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the recommendations come from CTFMR members themselves, as well as UN and NGO colleagues also closely supporting the MRM.

3 ‘Pattern’ refers to the definition provided in the Secretary-General’s 2009 Annual Report on children and armed conflict - A/64/742-S/2010/181 (13 April 2010): <https://undocs.org/S/2010/181> at paragraph 175, which explains how patterns serve as basis for listing parties (for some violations): “It is a ‘multiple commission of acts’ which, as such, excludes a single, isolated incident or the random conduct of an individual acting alone and presumes intentional, wilful conduct.” In the context of this paper, a pattern therefore refers to groups of violation incidents demonstrating a new intent/rationale on the part of the parties perpetrating them. For example, armed groups attacking health workers because they are afraid that they carry the COVID-19 virus and can spread it to others. The term ‘trends’ refers to increasing or decreasing amounts of reported and/or verified incidents.

1. Impact on monitoring

1.1. How were MRM systems affected?

All CTFMRs interviewed reported that their capacity was hit the hardest at the start of the pandemic, mostly in Quarter 2 (Q2). This was when there was much fear and uncertainty about the virus, and measures such as national lockdowns and repatriation of international staff were rapidly implemented, bringing their activities to a halt. Interviewees reported that, in the face of this sudden, unknown threat, 'everything stopped' around March-April 2020.

After the initial shock and often a short hiatus, some level of monitoring resumed. However, confinement, repatriations/rotations, quarantines, self-isolation, remote and alternate working arrangements, and other containment measures taken by governments and UN agencies meant that CTFMRs' staffing and travel capacities for all five focus countries continued to be significantly impacted, and monitoring disrupted, until at least July 2020.

Ability to verify violations

The principal challenge faced by all CTFMRs has been the verification – particularly the triangulation aspect of verification, because it almost always requires travelling to and meeting with sources in person. As mentioned above, the mobility of monitors was severely restricted in Q2 of 2020. In addition, most UN agencies had also reduced their field presence, evacuating their staff and asking them to work remotely (either from the capital or from abroad).⁴ International and local organisations, who are crucial providers of information and contacts for triangulation purposes, also sent staff home. Thus, verification networks were suddenly and significantly disrupted. Assuming that reports of violations

continued to reach them (which was not always the case – see below), monitors were generally unable to identify and meet sources to verify them for most of the second quarter of 2020.

In some contexts when monitors had established solid relationship with local sources, verification could proceed based on telephone communications. But in most other contexts, few monitors were able to switch to remote data collection because of factors including: lack of trust on the part of sources, especially victims/witnesses; a fear of communications being monitored by the authorities and unreliable telecommunication networks. In fact, many remote, rural areas have virtually no network coverage and a physical presence is indispensable to collect information from sources.

In addition, even where telephone verification was possible, it was likely to exclude verification of sensitive violations such as Recruitment and use of children, or Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children – which sources were reluctant to discuss with remote interlocutors. One agency reported that, even with trust previously established with UN monitors, some communities did not feel comfortable engaging in telephone/WhatsApp conversations about such matters.

When travel restrictions eased a little in Q3, some verification with sources started to take place again. However, where verification missions required logistical support, they often continued to be postponed, because for a long time only critical activities were approved by UN leadership – and most human rights/protection activities were not classified as such.⁵ For example, one agency mentioned a particular remote location, where violations can only be verified via helicopter missions. Although, by the time they received the allegations in Q3 it was again possible to travel and conduct in-person meetings, non-critical helicopter missions were not prioritised and they had to postpone verification. This has been a serious concern.⁶

4 This stemmed from a desire to protect staff from the virus, but it was also a conscious effort to ensure the UN – its tentacular missions in particular – did not contribute to the spread of the virus and to additional pressures on the often weak and strained health systems of host countries. One CTFMR reported that their UN country team had taken an extremely cautious approach, noting the likely risk that UN travel in and out of the country could become the cause for the virus entering the country in the first place.

5 Some CTFMRs operated according to strict Programme Criticality Assessments which prioritised the mobility of teams involved in life-saving humanitarian activities; other activities (including human rights monitoring, and broader development activities) were restricted or not allowed.

6 "Humanitarian and protection actors have long advocated for a shift in thinking around this – a need that's been compounded by the COVID-19 outbreak." World Vision, "OPINION: COVID-19 thwarts efforts to release and reintegrate child soldiers" (11 February 2021): <https://news.trust.org/item/20210211115755-59but>

Ability to receive information about allegations

These same factors also contributed to a decrease in amounts of reported violations communicated to CTFMRs in the first place. As mentioned above, many UN field-based staff had left and could no longer act as links between communities and MRM colleagues in capital. And remote contact was often not possible. In one context, a CTFMR member reported that some of their field offices were empty for months during the second quarter. As a result, CTFMR interviewees reported that they had 'lost access to communities' during the critical Q2 and even Q3 period. This impacted the number of allegations they received during that period and, one can legitimately wonder, possibly even beyond, since trust may have been damaged in the process:

- In one situation, some CTFMR agencies are implementing projects in conflict-affected communities and collect information on violations during regular monitoring visits. When the pandemic hit, they were forced to stop their field visits, suddenly losing a major channel for reporting allegations to the MRM. The same CTFMR also reported that, in addition to these logistical challenges, communities were also reluctant to report violations when any type of response was unlikely at a time when many public and NGO services had been suspended.

Another important factor potentially explaining the decrease in the number of allegations communicated by communities is the fact that, in 2020, some armed groups took advantage of the withdrawal of the state to take control of some territories and communities. Three CTFMRs expressed concern that not only intimidation from armed groups would prevent some communities from reporting violations through the MRM communication channels, but also that violations in these very communities were likely to have substantially increased due to the recent irruption of armed groups (not always for reasons linked to the pandemic).

For many CTFMRs, another crucial source of information on violations derives from individual interviews conducted with children released from armed forces and armed groups. However, due to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) activities being interrupted in most contexts, and for most of Q2 and Q3 (see below section 3.2), this type of information source also suddenly stopped.

1.2. Examples of strategies adopted by CTFMR members

Faced with these challenges, all CTFMRs started to find ways to ensure some level of monitoring and reporting in Q2 and Q3 – as demonstrated by the quarterly Global Horizontal Notes sent (sometimes with a delay) to the Office of the SRSB-CAAC throughout 2020.

Monitoring

The degree to which CTFMRs were able to continue their monitoring work was highly dependent on their members' operational capacities prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Agencies that relied heavily on field visits and UN logistical support for their monitoring activities faced much heavier constraints. Agencies that already had remote monitoring systems in place evidently fared much better. (These were often in countries that already faced severe, security-related access restrictions prior to the pandemic.) But many interviewees pointed out that, once the pandemic had started, it was too late to work on developing a remote monitoring network, because this requires intensive trust-building through in-person meetings over time. This explains why attempts to switch to mobile, or WhatsApp or Signal communication could only go that far.

It is important at this stage to clearly differentiate between two types of violations: what some CTFMRs call "public violations", which are instantly and widely reported through social and traditional media, and for which it is relatively easy to identify and reach sources remotely. This is the case with Killing and maiming, or Attacks against schools and hospitals. In contrast, there are violations (Recruitment and use; Sexual violence; Abductions), which are not only a lot less visible when they occur, but also more sensitive to discuss, depending on the context. These were referred to as "sensitive violations" by CTFMR interviewees. They are infinitely more difficult to document, particularly when the victim has effectively disappeared. In that respect, it should be noted that all CTFMRs – even those with no remote verification systems in place – were more or less able to continue monitoring and reporting on public violations, for which there was an abundance of sources, many of which could be reached remotely (hospitals, police, NGOs, etc). Sensitive violations, however, were a challenge for everyone – but agencies with established networks did better (See next page).

Below is a case study illustrating two very different ways in which monitoring was continued by two agencies within the same CTFMR:

- In one context, after an initial two-week period during which staff were asked to work from home, one CTFMR co-chairing agency decided to maintain the bulk of its presence in all its field offices, with alternate work arrangements, in order to be able to continue supporting its child protection projects across the regions. They were able to resume monitoring of some violations but reported that 80% of their team had been infected by COVID-19, along with an important number of NGO and other monitoring partners. Whereas in the same context, another CTFMR agency was able to cope fairly well with mobility restrictions during the difficult Q2-Q3 period because it already had an extensive, remote-monitoring system covering places that were difficult to access. So that agency could simply receive and verify allegations by telephone. The work continued without the whole team being physically in the office or even in the country. Again, the only challenge was to continue documenting sensitive violations by telephone.

Each agency therefore interpreted and implemented government and UN policies to contain the virus on the basis of their own assessment of risks to staff, partners and children. Indeed, COVID-19 prevention measures had to be weighed up against the duty of continuity of care and protection of each agency towards their beneficiaries. Funding also played a

part in this decision, considering some agencies had to redirect funds to fighting the pandemic.

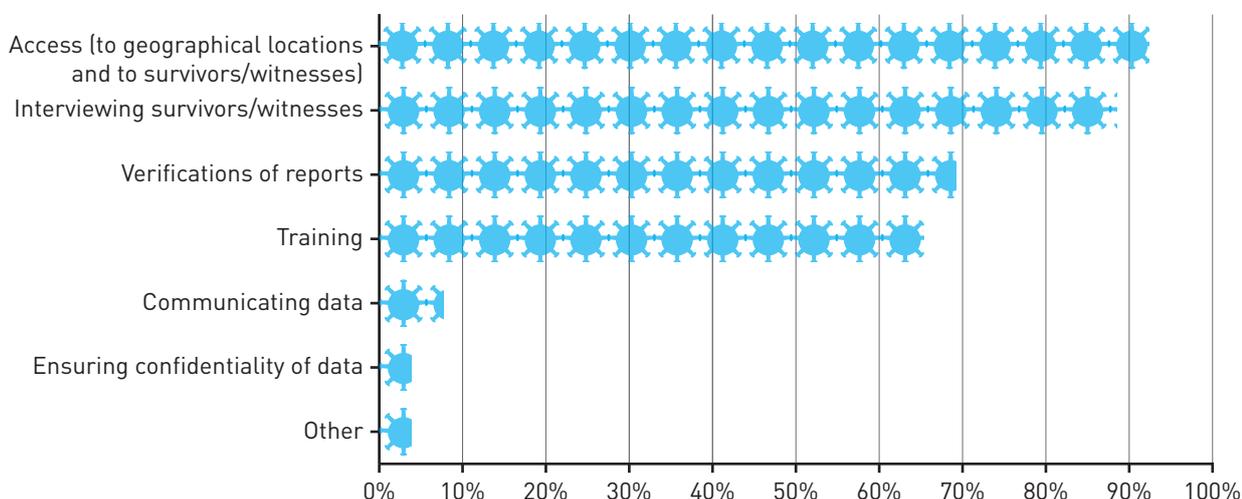
New tools and strategies?

In the face of all these challenges, some CTFMR agencies somewhat adapted and even improved their strategies and working methods – but none of them developed entirely new tools. Most interviewees reported using (or trying to use) more IT – mobile telephones, WhatsApp messaging and web conferencing tools – in order to monitor and verify incidents remotely. However, as explained above, these were often not reliable, nor conducive to sharing sensitive information.

In order to make up for its decreased monitoring capacity, one mission reported improving and systematising data consolidation exercises with other sections. These included consulting Women’s Protection Advisors on sexual violence affecting children. Another one trained other NGOs and community-based organizations in order to leverage their networks to receive more reports on violations.

One agency improved their IMS system as a result of the pandemic. As their database was not accessible to people outside the UN compounds (for security reasons), they worked with an IT specialist to update all of their systems to have secure, remote access for all staff. This improvement had been planned but the pandemic sped up the implementation of that plan, thus significantly increasing the CTFMR’s efficiency in reporting to OSRSG CAAC.

Specifically, how has COVID-19 impacted your ability to monitor, document and verify violations for the MRM? Have the following been impacted?



Results from survey question #9

1.3. The 'new normal'

After the initial shock which disrupted their systems, and a six-month period of adjustment, all CTFMRs did progressively and eventually resume their monitoring activities in the second half of the year, mostly in the autumn, having integrated safety protocols and adopted new working methods establishing a 'new normal'.

Verification resumes

Because verification was almost completely interrupted in many contexts, a significant backlog is expected, with late verifications continuing well into 2021. Even CTFMRs that were able to continue monitoring last year still need to verify sensitive violations. However, none of the interviewees expected this exercise to reverse or create a trend.

One important point to make is that the backlog CTFMRs are currently contending with is proof of how readily they interrupted / postponed verification during all these months. This research has not found any evidence that MRM verification standards were either lowered or adjusted to the changing capacities of monitors and their partners. The upcoming 2020 data is therefore expected to be of the same standards as in any other given year. Whether it will cover as much is another question (see Part 2).

Integrated preventive protocols

Once various restrictions of movement were lifted in the autumn, monitoring activities resumed – including verification missions. Field staff are once again able to do in-person meetings but have to practice social distancing and adopt other safety measures (face masks, hand sanitising and hand-washing). Most monitoring agencies also reported that they were providing preventive equipment to their partners and supporting them in using safe hygiene practices to limit the spread of the virus.

Although national lockdowns have ended (for now), many containment measures are still in place, e.g. staff rotation; quarantine upon return; self-isolation following a positive test; limited internal flights; and remote or alternate working arrangements. These measures do not systematically limit the mobility of monitors, but they continue to limit their general capacity, which in turns continues to take a toll on the well-being of MRM teams.

- One agency in a non-family duty station explained that poor telecommunications networks in their country combined with high levels of insecurity had prevented them from switching to remote ways of working on the MRM. In addition to that, their staff team had de facto been decimated by mandatory quarantines for personnel returning from R&R (the 6-week working cycle being effectively shortened to 4 weeks post-quarantine). And in case of any contact with a COVID-19 case, staff have to go back into quarantine, from which they cannot work. These conditions have a continuing detrimental impact on the workload, morale and wellbeing of MRM staff.

With no vaccination planned yet for many CTFMR countries, these preventive arrangements and protocols are likely to remain in place for a long time.

With regards to CTFMRs meetings (both at principal and technical levels), they quickly and easily became virtual thanks to the web-conferencing equipment enjoyed by most UN offices. This is expected to continue in contexts where infection rates and/or agency policies dictate it, but it does in no way impact the monitoring capacity of the CTFMR. In some contexts, they were already meeting virtually prior to the pandemic.



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2. Violations trends

2.1. Note on 2020 data

CTFMRs consulted for this study all agreed that the data available at the time this paper was drafted may not fully reflect the overall impact of COVID-19 on trends of violations. Neither is it yet fully comparable to 2019 data. Section 2.2. below does its best to elicit the beginning of an analysis of 2020 violations, but there are various layers of challenges at play. First, CTFMRs' total figures for 2020 do not yet allow them to draw final conclusions on increasing/decreasing trends – whether by country or by violation. (See graph below.) This is due in large part to the unknown number of missed allegations following the long interruption of monitoring activities in Q2 and Q3, and to the large number of backlogged verifications.

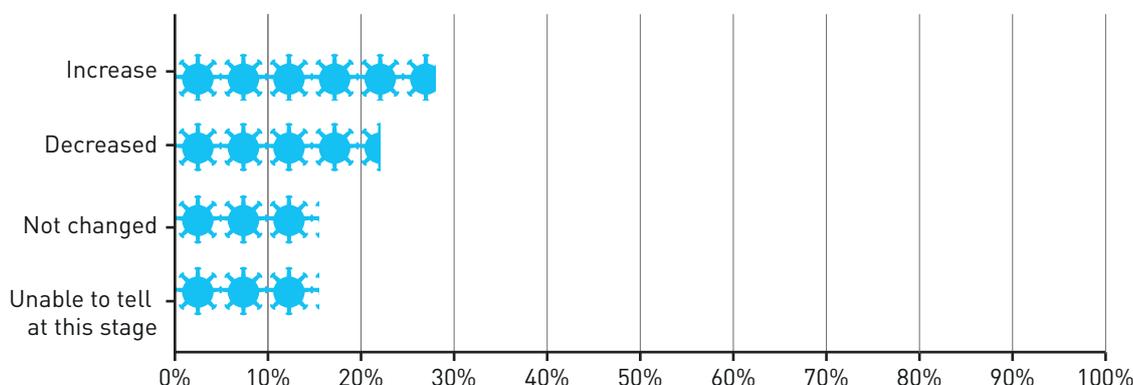
- One CTFMR interviewee explained that, where armed groups have moved into communities, populations are probably not reporting violations for fear of reprisals. So the CTFMR is expecting a surge of allegations at some point in 2021, when the armed groups move away again. When they are received and retroactively verified, they may tell us a story about the impact of COVID-19.
- The same CTFMR reported a 74% increase in the number of documented violations between 2019 and 2020. Although this could suggest a spike

in violations in 2020, especially considering that monitoring was significantly reduced that year, the interviewee explained that this increase actually stemmed from interviews with a large number of children released in 2020 – but recruited in previous years – and who had been victims of multiple violations (abductions, recruitment, sexual violence). These late-verifications inflated the 2020 figures but are in no way representative of 2020 trends (and even less of the impact of COVID-19).

Second, CTFMRs members have admitted that, at this stage, they are generally unable to tell whether any increase or decrease in numbers of violations is due to fluctuations in their capacity to monitor and verify violations (or even the capacity/willingness of communities to report them), or if it reflects a new pattern of violations (e.g. on the behaviour of a party to conflict). And if they are confident it does reflect a new pattern, they are not necessarily able to ascertain whether this pattern can be attributed to COVID-19 or not.

- One CTFMR identified an increased pattern of attacks against schools in a particular location, by a particular party to conflict. They explained that the buildings seemed to be attacked because they are a symbol of central government, and that they are often empty when attacked. But are they attacked now because schools are currently empty? Would they be attacked anyway? That CTFMR could not tell whether this was a pattern that could be in any way related to COVID-19.

Have you observed any change in the volume of reports of violations since the start of the pandemic?



Answered: 26 Skipped: 2
Results from survey question #8

Lastly, if (as is reasonable to expect) 2020 figures are the result of a combination of the above factors, would we even be able to analyse the reasons behind a trend – knowing that an increase in violations could be cancelled out by a reduced capacity to monitor them? It is useful to keep all these considerations in mind as we try to unpack and cross-reference available information from 2020 to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rights of children in situations of armed conflict. This is what section 2.2. attempts to do.

2.2. Observations on how COVID-19 may have impacted violations

At the time of writing, data for 2020 may not yet fully reflect the situation on the ground, nevertheless, single incidents, unverified reports, risk assessments, and observations on the behaviour of parties to conflict can all provide excellent clues to those attempting to identify emerging patterns and trends of violations against children affected by armed conflict resulting from the pandemic. The sections below compile these clues, by violation, based on material gathered from CTFMR and NGO interviews, survey responses, as well as desk-based research:

Killing and Maiming

Global 2020 figures reflect a decrease of killing and maiming incidents overall compared to 2019, including for the group of five focus countries (although three of them showed upward trends.) Killing and maiming figures are the most likely to reflect the reality on the ground, because, as previously stated, it was one of the least challenging violations to monitor in 2020. However, despite these known trends, none of the CTFMRs were able to clearly identify the link between the trend and

COVID-19. At the level of each country MRM, any increase or decrease in incidents was more readily attributed to the country's internal conflict dynamics.

However, based on incidents documented and observations shared by CTFMR members and other interviewees, potential patterns and trends for data on the killing and maiming of children in 2020 could include: (i) An increase in incidents (all violations) in areas that armed groups have taken control of, following the withdrawal of the State⁷; (ii) Reversely, a downward trend in areas that have been vacated by armed forces or armed groups, or where armed forces/groups have confined themselves to their barracks during national lockdowns. And (iii) An increase in killing and maiming incidents by parties to the conflict enforcing containment measures. Indeed, both armed forces and armed groups have been accused of perpetrating abuses, including in conflict-affected communities, in the process of enforcing prevention and control policies. In Colombia, Human Rights Watch has thoroughly documented a vast array of abuses (including killings) committed by armed groups against people who, they decided, failed to comply with prevention procedures they had put in place.⁸ The UN reported hundreds of these incidents in the DRC.⁹

Recruitment and use of children

The vast majority of interviewees flagged the high risk of increased recruitment and use of children resulting from the health crisis. A combination of the closure of schools and Child Friendly Spaces (some of the most protective environments for children) and loss of family income leading to extreme poverty may inspire armed groups to prey on children's increased vulnerabilities while also incentivizing children to join armed groups (or engage in other forms of hazardous labour). Once again, the withdrawal of State and humanitarian actors in some conflict areas

7 In some countries, there seems to have been important shifts in geographical exercise of power due to the pandemic. When analysing 2020 data on violations, it is important to consider the broader security dynamics of each and all contexts following the COVID-19 outbreak. Many interviewees were concerned about the withdrawal of States' military and civilian presence from much of their territories. As armies were redeployed to enforce containment measures, schools and other public services were being shut down, leaving populations much more vulnerable to violence – particularly as humanitarians were also reducing their field presence (see section 1.1.). On the other hand, faced with an evident surge of activities from non-state armed groups, many interviewees hypothesized on the likelihood that some armed groups may have felt empowered by the institutional vacuum created by national lockdowns and the weakened state presence in many areas, subsequently ramping up their operations to gain territorial control and advance their agendas. This has been put forward as a possible explanation behind spikes in Killing and Maiming, Recruitment and Use, Attacks on schools and Hospitals, and any increase in Recruitment and Use and Sexual Violence (as yet unproven due to late verifications).

8 Human Rights Watch, "Colombia: Armed Groups' Brutal Covid-19 Measures Killings, Threats, and Social Control" (July 2020): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/15/colombia-armed-groups-brutal-covid-19-measures>

9 UN Joint Human Rights Office in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNJHRO), Analysis of the human rights situation in May 2020: https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2032766/unjhro_-_analysis_of_the_human_rights_situation_-_may_2020.pdf.

compounds this vulnerability, particularly if armed groups now reign supreme. The risk also includes underage recruitment by some armed forces.

However, there is no evidence of an increase in recruitment yet, and the widely shared concern about an increase in recruitment was almost always presented as an assumption, sometimes based on allegations received. As explained above, recruitment and use was very difficult to document and verify for most CTFMRs, even those with remote monitoring networks. Allegations can sometimes only be verified months (if not years) after the fact (when children are separated). When verification could be done, no conclusive information has yet linked the incidents to the pandemic.

One CTFMR observed an increase in allegations of abductions and recruitment and use of children by a particular armed group because national security forces had withdrawn from the group's strongholds after the start of the pandemic. The allegations have not yet been verified.

Deprivation of liberty

Although little evidence is available to date, it is important to pay attention to how COVID-19 has impacted children deprived of their liberty for actual or alleged association with parties to conflict. Often held in crowded, unsanitary conditions, with little information on the virus and how to protect themselves from it, and with extremely limited access to health care, children in detention are at serious risk of being infected by the

virus. In the occupied Palestinian Territory, Defence for Children International-Palestine Section reported that at least three child detainees had contracted COVID-19 while in Israeli prisons.¹⁰

They may also be exposed to isolation policies constituting ill-treatment, possibly amounting to torture¹¹, as exemplified by the case of a boy in Afghanistan who committed suicide after being placed in solitary confinement when prison authorities believed he had contracted the virus.¹² Other prevention measures, such as social distancing, can have similarly devastating impacts on the already fragile mental wellbeing of children deprived of liberty. For example, Palestinian children in Israeli prisons have reported that time spent outdoors had been reduced;¹³ while research by Human Rights Watch revealed that family visits had generally been limited. The organisation also expressed concerns that many prisons now restricted children to their cells for 23 or more hours a day – amounting to solitary confinement.¹⁴

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, many agencies, including UNICEF and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action¹⁵, have called on governments to release children, due to their extreme vulnerabilities, and to contribute to limiting the spread of the virus in those settings. According to Human Rights Watch, many releases did happen, but release orders in Afghanistan and (initially) Iraq failed to include children detained for terrorism or national security offences, including association with armed groups.¹⁶ It is feared that children may be detained in similar conditions in many other conflict situations.

10 Defence for Children International-Palestine Section, Year-in-Review: Violations against Palestinian Children Unremitting in 2020 (31 December 2020): https://www.dci-palestine.org/year_in_review_despite_covid-19_violations_against_palestinian_children_unremitting_in_2020. Extract from the report: "Several Palestinian children detained since the outbreak told DCIP that Israeli soldiers did not take precautionary measures to reduce the spread of the virus and did not wear masks or gloves. The children were not medically examined or tested for COVID-19 upon arrival at Israeli facilities and were placed inside rooms, including with other children, that did not contain cleaning supplies, hand soap, or adequate ventilation."

11 UN Special Rapporteur on torture Juan E. Méndez stated: "Considering the severe mental pain or suffering solitary confinement may cause, it can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment when used as a punishment, during pre-trial detention, indefinitely or for a prolonged period, for persons with mental disabilities or juveniles." United Nations, "Solitary confinement should be banned in most cases, UN expert says" (18 October 2011): <https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/10/392012-solitary-confinement-should-be-banned-most-cases-un-expert-says>

12 Watchlist, Factsheet: COVID-19 and Children in Armed Conflict (September 2020): https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2406-watchlist-factsheet-covid_final.pdf

13 Save the Children, "What it Means to be a Palestinian Child in an Israeli Prison in Coronavirus Times" (15 May 2020): <https://www.savethechildren.net/blog/what-it-means-be-palestinian-child-israeli-prison-coronavirus-times>

14 Human Rights Watch, "Detained Children Left Out of Covid-19 Response – Step Up Releases from Jails, Prisons" (14 May 2020): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/14/detained-children-left-out-covid-19-response>

15 UNICEF, "Children in detention are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and should be released" – Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore (13 April 2020): <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-detention-are-heightened-risk-contracting-covid-19-and-should-be-released>; Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of their Liberty (April 2020): <https://alliancecpa.org/en/child-protection-online-library/technical-note-covid-19-and-children-deprived-their-liberty>

16 Human Rights Watch, "Detained Children Left Out of Covid-19 Response – Step Up Releases from Jails, Prisons" (14 May 2020): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/14/detained-children-left-out-covid-19-response>

Rape and other forms of sexual violence

The impact of the pandemic on the incidence of rape and other forms of sexual violence disproportionately affecting girls is a certainty for all interviewees combined but, paradoxically, its extent remains largely unknown. Indeed, all five CTFMRs reported a sizeable increase in allegations but said they had not yet been able to verify a good proportion of them and so far, 2020 numbers are similar to those for 2019. CTFMRs have therefore not yet been able to identify new patterns and trends, but they all expect a considerable surge in incidents for 2020 when allegations are verified, although this could possibly be played down by substantial underreporting.

Indeed the suspension of community-based child protection and essential services, reduced mobility, and increased isolation (which all tend to disproportionately affect women and girls), as well as other factors (explained in Part 1) are likely to have physically prevented many victims and survivors from reaching out. In addition, lack of access to safe and adequate response services, combined with a fear of stigma and reprisal, may have acted as dissuasive factors. For example, in Iraq, where its services to survivors of sexual violence were severely disrupted, the International Rescue Committee noted a total absence of complaints from women and girls for a period of almost two months, in Q2, while the organisation was transitioning to telephone-based support.¹⁷

However, remote monitoring and support services were progressively set up in many situations, and allegations did reach CTFMRs again and now need to be verified. It is difficult to know if they will significantly alter existing trends. As reports are verified throughout the first few months of 2021, it will be useful to bear in mind that: (i) Even more than usual, incidents may only represent the tip of the iceberg, and (ii) A significant proportion of incidents may not necessarily be conflict-related, but that it may be challenging to unpack each trend in a context where all child rights violations have dramatically increased (not just MRM violations). Many interviewees hinted at this fact, explaining that the pandemic had unleashed a host of sexual and gender-based violence incidents against children



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(including rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, early marriage, domestic violence, trafficking), perpetrated a variety of actors, including parties to the conflict.

Attacks on schools

Three CTFMRs reported an increase in the number of attacks on schools. Two attributed it to an intensification of conflict that was unrelated to the pandemic. For the other CTFMR, there were two interviewees: they both agreed that the attacks were due to a flare up of inter-ethnic conflict in a particular region, but one believe it is entirely unrelated to COVID-19, while the other hypothesized that government forces were probably slower in launching a counter offensive due to COVID-19 restrictions – supporting the theory that the prolonged absence of the State's authority due to COVID-19 can lead to increased violations.

In a context of increased militarisation of society and shifting military power dynamics, it is not unreasonable to assume that attacks on schools

¹⁷ The International Rescue Committee, "New Data Shows a Decrease in Women Being Able to Report Incidents of Domestic Violence in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries" (7 May 2020): <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/new-data-shows-decrease-women-being-able-report-incidents-domestic-violence-fragile>

may have increased for reasons that are at least indirectly related to the pandemic. This assumption is supported by recent research conducted by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) and which shows a dramatic spike in attacks on education in the Central Sahel region during the January-July 2020 period, despite challenges to monitoring and reporting, and despite school closures between March and May 2020 – both due to COVID-19.¹⁸

None of the CTFMR interviewees reported a decrease in attacks on schools, 2020 trends will depend on the type of attacks pre-COVID, and the motivation behind the attacks. When they are politically motivated (against the State) or ideologically motivated (against education), it is logical to expect them to continue. When school buildings happen to be a casualty of conflict among others, it is logical to expect the number of attacks to follow conflict trends (see above). However, in contexts where students are attacked in or on their way to schools, a downward trend is likely to take place, since schools were closed for a great part of 2020.

At the time of writing, no COVID-related pattern or trend had yet been observed on the military use of schools, but some interviewees expressed concern that armed forces and armed groups would be taking advantage of schools being closed and move into school buildings for the long term. One such incident, in Sudan, was reported by Human Rights Watch in July 2020¹⁹. According to the organisation, a girls' primary school had been taken over the previous month and used as a training base by armed men from Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The school had been temporarily closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the RSF occupation prevented it from reopening for exams.

There may also be some underreporting due to the above-mentioned continued presence of armed groups within communities that need to report

violations. One interviewee also expressed concern that communities may not necessarily report cases of schools being taken over by armed forces or armed groups if the schools were closed and empty at the time, and if there was no harm or damage done. There is concern that this would not be perceived as a violation at all.

Attacks against healthcare

Incidents of attacks against health facilities and personnel reported by CTFMRs in interviews were not obviously linked to COVID-19. However, publicly reported information from independent organisations reveals some obvious links between such attacks and COVID-19:

- There were many attacks by members of armed groups (and communities that support them) who were afraid of being infected with COVID-19 by medical personnel. In Colombia, the ICRC has documented a significant spike of violence against healthcare facilities and personnel in 2020, which it partially attributes to the perception that the presence of medical teams in the community can facilitate the spread of the virus. The organisation denounces the stigma faced by health care workers and has launched a campaign to combat disinformation about their work.²⁰
- As mentioned above, armed forces or armed groups also committed abuses in the process of enforcing infection-prevention and control measures. In Colombia, Human Rights Watch has thoroughly documented a vast array of abuses (including killings) committed by armed groups against people who, they decided, failed to comply with prevention procedures they had put in place.²¹

18 Global Coalition to Protect Education under Attack, *Briefing Paper: Supporting Safe Education in the Central Sahel (2020)*: <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/supporting-safe-education-in-the-central-sahel>

19 Human Rights Watch, "Sudanese School Closed by Pandemic, Kept Closed by Armed Forces" (29 July 2020): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/29/sudanese-school-closed-pandemic-kept-closed-armed-forces>

20 ICRC, "The world is upside down: a campaign promoting respect for health care in Colombia": <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/world-upside-down-campaign-promoting-respect-health-care-colombia>; ICRC, "600 violent incidents recorded against health care providers, patients due to COVID-19" (18 August 2020): <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-600-violent-incidents-recorded-against-healthcare-providers-patients-due-covid-19>; See also Insecurity Insights, "Attacks on Healthcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic" (June 2020): <http://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Jan-May-Fact-Sheet-COVID-19-and-Conflict.pdf>, which reports this type of incidents in two more countries: India and Mexico.

21 See Human Rights Watch, "Colombia: Armed Groups' Brutal Covid-19 Measures Killings, Threats, and Social Control" (July 2020): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/15/colombia-armed-groups-brutal-covid-19-measures>.



Photo credit: © UNICEF/UNI367307/Fazel

Denial of humanitarian access for children

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the monitoring and verification of denial of humanitarian access for children, because restricting movement/access became necessary a prevention strategy on the part of governments, armed groups and even humanitarian agencies, in many situations of conflict all around the world.

Measures to stop the spread of the virus and protect the population resulted in reduced movement of humanitarian goods and personnel, both nationally and internationally, and significantly reduced timely access to humanitarian assistance for conflict-affected children.

There may be an argument that, where measures (from state and non-state actors) were excessive or misguided, they could possibly amount to denial of humanitarian access. Claiming that the COVID-19 crisis was becoming a protection crisis, the International Committee of the Red Cross called on parties to conflict to allow for dialogue and make exceptions in their containment policies for humanitarian actors. This is particularly crucial prior to any upcoming vaccination roll-out.²²

22 "Dialogue with armed group is more critical than ever, on the same issues, how restrictions can be lifted to facilitate the movement of people and goods to areas that require urgent humanitarian needs. Many groups have implemented different types of restrictive measures that range from the imposition of parallel curfews, street patrols to awareness campaigns on COVID-19 and on distribution of aid as well as protective equipment. They have taken also initiatives on quarantine-like measures, but sometimes measures are counter-productive. Hence need to engage. Dialogue also important because when we talk about when the vaccines will be ready we need to think how those vaccines and they will reach the most vulnerable." ICRC, "COVID-19 crisis is becoming a protection crisis" (28 May 2021): <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/covid-crisis-becoming-protection-crisis>

3. Impact on response

3.1. Impact on engagement with parties to conflict for prevention purposes

A total of 86% of survey respondents said that their ability to work with parties to the conflict on developing and implementing commitments to end child rights violations had been reduced with the pandemic. (See graph below.) Aggregated information from survey responses and interviews indicates the wide range of activities that CTFMRs had to postpone:

- Signature of agreements with armed groups
- Dissemination of Action Plans among military and security forces
- Training / capacity-building of State military and security forces on human rights and international humanitarian law
- Standing meetings with State military and security representatives to follow up on child rights violations
- Missions to meet with armed groups and monitor their implementation of Action Plans and Road maps
- Training of commanders of an armed group that had signed an Action Plan and Roadmap
- Sensitizations/trainings on children's rights for Child Protection Focal Points designated by armed groups

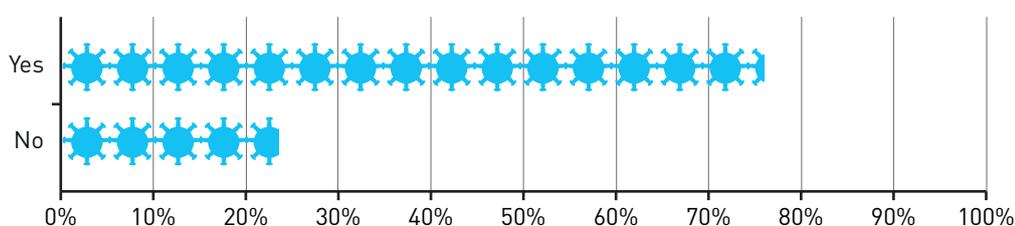
- Screening exercises, of both state and non-state forces (see section 3.2)
- Missions to meet with armed groups who were ready to engage with the UN on ending grave violations of children

Movement restrictions and a reduced presence of field staff were the main reasons for the suspension of these activities. And remote meetings were not an option considering many armed groups were based in areas with poor internet connection, mobile coverage or even electricity. By March 2021, some of these activities had resumed, or were about to resume. But, as one CTFMR mentioned, even when restrictions of movement were eased, they faced different challenges like prioritisation systems for mission logistical support or working around an upcoming national elections timetable.

However, again, some CTFMRs were able to find creative solutions to continue engaging with armed groups despite COVID-19 restrictions. For example, one CTFMR was able to build the capacity of almost 90 child protection NGO members on monitoring grave violations. Other CTFMRs (not included in the five focus countries for this research) shared their successes with similar endeavours. Below are a few examples:

- One CTFMR member agency actively working on signing agreements with armed groups reported that, between March and August 2020, a few signing opportunities had to be postponed due to the pandemic. "Signing ceremonies" take place in the location where the group is based, in the presence of a UN official who signs the document

Has the pandemic impacted your ability to engage with parties to conflict or work with them on developing/implementing Action Plans and other commitments to end and prevent violation against children? (It could be in a positive or negative way)



Answered: 25 Skipped: 3
Results from survey question #8

along with the armed group commander. The solemnity of the event, witnessed by the community, makes the agreement more visibly binding. This explains why remote ceremonies would defeat their purpose. However, a different type of ceremony was successfully piloted for one of the smaller community-based armed group the agency is engaging with. As the group is based in location that is difficult to access, a local UN Consultant was allowed to travel to them by road and represented the UN during the signing ceremony, which was also witnessed by several child protection actors working in the area.

- One other CTFMR explained that it was able to implement many follow-up activities with an armed group who had signed an Action Plan in 2019, by moving the activities online. This was possible because (i) The group had decided to self-isolate in their barracks and was no longer engaged in military operations – they were therefore available to engage on prevention; (ii) They were based in an urban area, with a reliable internet connection; and (iii) A solid dialogue and trusting relationship had been established with them. Through hours-long Zoom meetings, rapid progress was thus made through 2020 on activities such as: Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on age assessment; training on children’s rights and international humanitarian law; the establishment of a complaint mechanism; exit procedures SOPs, etc. The project exceeded its objectives for the year and came under budget since no travel was involved.

3.2. Impact on the release and reintegration of children

With regards to DDR activities, 75% of survey respondents said their efforts to identify, release and provide reintegration support to children associated with armed forces/groups had been impacted. Aggregated information from survey responses and interviews gives us specific clues on how, and to what extent:

- **Screenings/separation of children** were not possible in Q2 but screening missions started again in Q3. Many interviewees reported how frustrating it had been to finally receive a green light from armed group, and not be able to organise a screening in response. In one context, screening missions are only resuming now, March 2020.
- **Interim Care Centres (ICCs):** following global guidance on ICC²³, one agency reduced its use of such centres to avoid crowded living conditions increasing the risk of infections. Newly separated children were directed towards family-based care (see below).
- **Drop-in centres and Child Friendly Spaces** closed at the same time as schools in many (if not most) contexts, depriving children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups of essential day-time rehabilitation activities for months. They reopened when schools reopened, sometimes as late as February 2021.
- **Family reunification** was delayed in many situations during Q2 and beyond because, due to COVID restrictions, (i) work to prepare communities for the return of children had to be paused; and (ii) children could not travel from ICCs (especially when their homes were far away).²⁴ In one of the five focus countries, reunification only started again in Q3, with Q4 showing the highest numbers of reunifications as a result of catch-up work.
- **Economic reintegration support** for children formerly associated with armed forces/groups was significantly delayed for large numbers of children recently separated from armed forces/groups, as agencies were unable to set up new reintegration projects (they were mostly able to continue implementing existing ones). This delay affected hundreds of children in one context, because needed supplies like livestock, seeds and sewing machines could not reach the children for months. So far, the project only reached 600 of the 1,500 target beneficiaries; it will resume in 2021.

23 Save the Children, COVID-19 Guidance for Interim Care Centres (updated in April 2020):

https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17468/pdf/covid-19_guidance_for_interim_care_centres_final.pdf

24 Interview with UNICEF HQ. This concern was also expressed by World Vision: “[I]n South Sudan family tracing and reunification work was paralysed – with former child soldiers who were released immediately prior to the coronavirus outbreak unable to travel home for months.” World Vision - International (Vanessa Saraiva), “OPINION: COVID-19 thwarts efforts to release and reintegrate child soldiers” (11 February 2021): <https://news.trust.org/item/20210211115755-59but>

Restrictions on the movement of goods and people, as well as a reduced presence of field staff were major factors explaining the disruption of these DDR activities and services. (Although some interviewees mentioned additional external challenges such as military operations.) Many of these types of activities and services also involve large gatherings and/or close social contact, which were prohibited during much of Q2 and some of Q3 in many contexts.

However, many DDR activities could stay the course: (i) Children continued to receive care in ICCs; (ii) Existing economic reintegration activities, like vocational trainings, were maintained as they did not involve group gatherings; and (iii) Desk-based activities pertaining to DDR planning went ahead as normal. For example, in one context, SOPs on age verification were jointly developed by the CTFMR co-chairs. And (iv) Some screenings and releases did go ahead:

- In one context where the CTFMR was able to continue screening new army recruits after each military recruitment drive. In the same context, CTFMR members were able to separate children from at least one armed group during the critical Q2-Q3 period, with help from locally-based staff and partners.
- In another context, CTFMR agencies were able to separate hundreds of children from at least four armed groups throughout 2020, as a successful conclusion of ongoing and productive dialogues held prior to the pandemic. Screenings were done in small batches of recruits due to restrictions on gatherings, and therefore took longer than usual. Agency staff, partners, recruits and anyone participating in the process were using face masks and hand sanitizer.

Finally, it is worth noting a positive development brought about by the pandemic, consisting of a shift away from institutional care of children separated from armed forces and armed groups in at least one of the focus countries separated:

- In one context where the number of children in ICCs was reduced, UNICEF increased its recruitment and use of foster families to provide interim care to children release from armed



Photo credit: © UNICEF/UNI336338/Oatway

groups. This option was already used, for example in places where there were no ICCs, but it was increasingly relied upon in 2020 as a positive risk-mitigating alternative. This can be considered as a positive coping strategy, as family-based care is more apt to provide the type of support needed by these children, and to prepare them for social reintegration and family reunification.²⁵

3.3. Impact on wider prevention work

Worryingly, one CTFMR had to put on hold the development of a crucial National Prevention Plan on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict – a much-needed project that had received strong impetus from a visit from the SRSG-CAAC prior to the pandemic. On a smaller scale, most CTFMR interviewees shared that their general CAAC prevention work (sensitisation, training, capacity-building at government, NGO or community level) had to be curtailed. In all contexts, the UN and governments had imposed precise limits on gatherings, which reduced the number of

25 Save the Children, Policy Brief: Institutional Care: the Last Resort (2014): https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17468/pdf/covid-19_guidance_for_interim_care_centres_final.pdf; and Child Soldiers International, What The Girls Say: Improving practices for the demobilisation and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo (June 2017): <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5949032a4.pdf>

participants or beneficiaries of this type of in-person activities. Generally, numbers went from 30-40 to a maximum of 10-15 (20 in one context), depending on the size of the room and whether the event was held outdoors. This significantly slowed down this type of longer-term work, which forms the bedrock of robust and sustainable prevention.

CTFMR interviewees shared some of the strategies they used to go around this problem, essentially switching to distance-methods whenever possible:

- On the occasion of the 12 February, International Day Against the Use of Child Soldiers, one CTFMR member decided to produce and disseminate video messages, and their head of agency did an interview on the radio. On that day, they used to organise largescale sports and music events to reach as many people as possible, so that was another way to conduct outreach, perhaps even further afield.

- One agency produced radio spots to sensitise armed groups, community leaders and parents on the potential repercussions of the pandemic on the rights of children affected by armed conflict. The broadcasts warned against particular risks to which children may be exposed and advised communities on how to prevent them. They were disseminated throughout the country for most of the year. That same agency also prepared messaging on the impact of the pandemic on children, which it shared with UN and NGO child protection partners to promote prevention activities and ensure they were consistent and coordinated.



Photo credit: © UNICEF/UNI336351/Oatway

Conclusions

Impact on CTFMR monitoring capacity

The exact impact of the pandemic on the monitoring capacity of CTFMRs cannot be determined at this stage, but it was contingent upon the differing operational systems of each CTFMR: those with solid field presence, established monitoring networks and good internet connectivity across country coped more easily.

This impact fluctuated as countries adapted their responses to varying levels of threat and corresponding official prevention and control advice over the course of the year. Indeed, most contexts followed a three-phase trajectory: (i) A relatively short period of severe disruption resulting from the initial shock about this unknown threat, at the beginning of Q2; (ii) A period of learning and adjustment lasting about six months in Q2 and Q3, during which MRM activities resumed but capacity was still reduced – particularly for verification, which was a challenge across all CTFMRs interviewed when it came to “sensitive violations”. This period demonstrated the resilience and resourcefulness of the MRM as a whole, with CTFMRs getting back on their feet and improving, expanding or diversifying their tools, methods and networks in order to be able to fulfil their mandate. For some CTFMR members, COVID-19 restrictions were seen as a particularly challenging addition to a host of access constraints they have been facing for years. And finally, (iii) A return to mobility and a “new normal” in the autumn of 2020, with protocols allowing all aspects of monitoring to function, including verification of all violations – albeit in an environment which remains challenging, stressful and uncertain. In that sense, it is not surprising to see that the largest group of aggregated recommendations from CTFMR surveys and interviews was about increasing human and financial resources.

It is also worth noting again that, in most contexts, it is almost impossible to disentangle the restrictive effects of the pandemic from other important

factors that frequently hamper the work of CTFMRs, particularly security. In fact, nearly all five focus countries saw some form of intensification of violence in 2020 – none of these were related to COVID-19 but they impacted their monitoring capacity in a major way. Other CTFMRs had to contend with considerably disruptive events such as peace negotiations, national elections, and the start of a mission drawdown.

Impact on violations and need for long-term response

For all the reasons stated above, any final conclusions on the impact of the pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict will require a follow-up research once CTFMRs are satisfied that they have verified all backlogged reports of violations. At that point, it could be useful to widen the consultation to additional situations in the CAAC agenda. This would build upon the analysis provided in Part 2 to allow us to clearly see trends and patterns of violations specifically linked to the pandemic and its ramifications. The recommendations below encourage CTFMRs to continue to analyse 2020 violations through a COVID-19 lens, in order to adapt responses to violations and learn from this crisis.

In that respect, it is crucial to reiterate two important points guiding future analysis. First, any increase in CAAC violations resulting from this health crisis, once identified, should be considered within a broader context of increased vulnerabilities of children to many violations and abuses as a result of the pandemic.²⁶ The COVID-19 crisis is threatening to undo many recent gains in the fields of protection, human rights and development by exposing children and their families and communities to a host of renewed risks including economic insecurity and poverty; exposure to exploitative and hazardous relationships; increased social isolation; and reduced access to services and humanitarian assistance. Many violations are interdependent, and responses should therefore not be siloed.

Second, this socioeconomic impact is likely to last for years. For example, children who were pushed to join armed groups out of extreme poverty could remain

26 E.g. increase in domestic violence (being subjected to or witnessing violence) due to being confined in domestic environments; sexual violence leading to adolescent pregnancy and early marriage (or early marriage as a coping strategy for loss of family income which then results in sexual violence); increase in harmful traditional practices (FGM and early marriage); exposure to hazardous and exploitative forms of labour due to children being sent away for work as coping strategies for loss of family income; loss of education due to long-term school closures (with girls not going back); reduced access to health services, justice, etc.



Photo credit: © UNICEF/UNI367271/Fazel

in their ranks for several years and if released, they would be a high risk of re-recruitment. Girls may never be given the opportunity to go back to school when they reopen, because they had to earn an income or be married off to support their families. The impact

on children will be multi-faceted and long-lasting: we will need to continue monitoring and documenting it, and adapting programmatic and advocacy responses accordingly, as children progress through the various repercussions of the pandemic.²⁷

27 See analysis by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action: "In addition, new challenges present themselves as containment measures are alleviated and mobility and community interactions are restored. As children and families move from response to recovery, the child protection measures will also shift. COVID-19 is a dynamic and uncertain disease: it will not necessarily stay in the recovery stage but, in many communities, it will force children, families, and child protection actors back to the response stage and then again back to recovery. This type of back and forth movement strains individuals and communities in new ways and requires agility, adaptation, and living with the unknown", and Alliance recommendations in Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic (May 2020): https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/the_alliance_covid_19_tn_version_2_05.27.20_final_2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37184:

Recommendations

Below is a list of measures designed to alleviate the problems currently faced by CTFMRs in fulfilling their mandate, and thus help them cope with this and potentially future crises. Many recommendations come from CTFMR members themselves; some arose from interviews with other UN and NGO actors involved in the MRM, or from recent CAAC programmatic guidance on COVID-19. This is not an exhaustive list:

All MRM actors must be able to operate safely and securely:

- Measures designed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infections for MRM staff should be developed in consultation with them, bearing in mind the resulting workload potentially falling on skeleton teams.
- All in-country MRM staff should be vaccinated as soon as feasible, particularly in peacekeeping settings, where the national health systems of host states are not in a position to procure and assist with vaccinations.
- All in-country MRM staff should be provided with suitable equipment to work from home if necessary and offered regular opportunities for wellbeing checks.

In-country MRM staffing capacity should be sufficiently robust to cope with crises:

- There should be a minimum number of staff officially mandated to support the MRM within each CTFMR, so as to ensure the continuation of activities when/if MRM focal points are sick, quarantined, trapped abroad or on R&R.

- Consideration should be given to the importance of having permanent child protection expertise in all UN field offices in order to support monitoring activities and adequately carry out the MRM mandate, particularly in contexts with vast and inaccessible conflict-affected areas to monitor, and including in contexts that are consolidated.
- Measures should be put in place to ensure that there is no gap in CTFMR capacity in contexts affected by mission downsizing.

Child protection funding should rapidly be adapted to emerging, crisis-related needs:

- Funding should be made available for MRM activities that have become more costly as a result of IPC measures, such as trainings or screening exercises, which need to be done in batches (for social distancing purposes) and for which personal protective equipment needs to be distributed in large quantities.
- Funds should not be diverted from essential child protection and MRM activities to support COVID-19 prevention and response interventions.
- Efforts to coordinate the mobilisation and distribution of emergency funds (e.g. the Global Humanitarian Response Plan),²⁸ should continue to include and channel support directly to child protection agencies, based on mandates and capacities.

28 See: WHO: <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/news-and-events/news/GHRP-revision-july-2020/en>; for an NGO perspective on the GHRP see for example; World Vision: "As we welcome the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, much more still needs to be done" (17 July 2020): <https://www.wvi.org/stories/world-vision-view/we-welcome-un-global-humanitarian-response-plan-much-more-still-needs-be>

IT tools should be upgraded to better serve the needs of CTFMRs:

- All staff working on the MRM should be adequately equipped to work remotely at a moment's notice. Depending on their existing capacity and office location, this could involve some training and distribution of portable modems and mobile telephones.
- CTFMRs should be able to use online information management systems which enable remote, safe, confidential and timely incident-monitoring.²⁹ In the meantime, they would benefit from MRM-specific guidance and support on remote monitoring from UNHQs, most aptly provided by the MRM Technical Reference Group (TRG).
- Efforts should be made to improve access to internet and digital communication services in conflict-affected communities in order to facilitate the work of community-based organisations and improve access to victims and survivors. Where this is not possible, the use of satellite phones could be considered.

Many if not most MRM activities should be considered critical and supported as such:

- MRM activities should benefit from higher prioritisation levels in country-led Programme Criticality Assessments. Data on grave child rights violations in situations of armed conflict feeds into decision-making at the highest UN levels and directly informs dialogues with parties to the conflict. It should be considered essential to inform critical humanitarian responses, especially in contexts where access by child protection and human rights actors has generally been reduced.
- Screening missions to separate children from armed groups should always be considered life-saving and critical in all contexts.

Options for increasing and diversifying monitoring channels should be explored:

- Where relevant and feasible, existing practitioners' networks (e.g. UN clusters and sub-clusters) should be mobilised and trained to report child rights violations to CTFMRs, as they have extensive field presence through their broad memberships.
- Where relevant and feasible, community-based organisations (e.g. women's or religious associations) should be mobilised and trained to report information on allegations to local child protection focal points, for use by the CTFMR. Any potential risk involved in these activities should be regularly reviewed and acted upon.
- In contexts with non-integrated UN missions, UN country leadership should explore ways in which mission monitors could nevertheless contribute to the MRM, particularly in emergency and other exceptional situations when CTFMRs' monitoring capacities are severely disrupted.

Lessons learnt and good practices should be shared among CTFMRs:

- Beyond the present paper, information should be regularly documented and shared about the challenges CTFMRs have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the solutions they designed and implemented to cope with these challenges.
- Information on any confirmed trends or patterns of violations emanating from COVID-19 should also be widely shared, to alert all MRM situations about developments that could also affect them, and to assist them in their data analyses.
- A long-term, collaborative approach is needed to identify and respond to trends and patterns of violations resulting from this unprecedented health crisis, as the full impact of this pandemic on children's rights is likely to last for years to come, bearing in mind that the most vulnerable to additional abuse/violations will include separated, displaced and refugee children; children deprived of liberty; girls; and children with disabilities.

²⁹ Databases such as Primero offer crucial advantages for monitors whose access and movements are restricted. For example, they remove the need to compile or circulate data internally because they use an internet Cloud for data storage – speeding up the triangulation process. They also allow use in low internet connectivity areas, because they can be used offline (for example in remote villages) on hand-held devices, and data later synced to the Cloud through a secure internet connection. For more information on these and other Primero functionalities, see: "COVID-19 Case Management with PRIMERO: An easy and secure digital solution for social services and case management during COVID-19": <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/20ead74b-de5e-4cfd-9892-2beb89343b1b/Primero-Coronavirus-Brief-final.pdf>; and GBVIMS Steering Committee, Case Management, GBVIMS/GBVIMS+ and the COVID-19 pandemic [March 2020]: http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/GBV-Case-Management-GBVIMS-GBVIMS-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic_GBVIMS_March_2020.pdf

Annex I: Survey questionnaire

OSRSG-CAAC consultation on the impact of COVID-19 on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict

1. Which situation of concern are you working in?

- Afghanistan
- CAR
- Colombia
- DRC
- Sudan
- Other (please specify)

2. In your CTFMR, is your agency involved in data collection?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please explain)

3. Are you still based in your CTFMR country (duty station), or are you working remotely because of COVID-19?

- In CTFMR location
- Working remotely
- Other (please specify)

4. In your context, have you observed any change in patterns of violations since the start of the pandemic? (Think about the nature, number and trends of violations).

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, could you give 1-2 examples and explain what you think may be the reason(s)?

5. Would you recommend sending questionnaires to community representatives to ask for their views on the impact of the pandemic on children, and on how communities coped with the virus and resulting containment measures?

- Yes
- No
- Comment

6. Have you noticed any negative coping mechanisms on the part of communities / armed groups, resulting in MRM violations? (e.g. increased child recruitment due to school closures and loss of family income)

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, could you share information, backed up by data?

7. Have you noticed any positive coping mechanisms on the part of communities / armed groups, resulting in fewer violations? (e.g. development of any home-based learning tools benefitting children who cannot normally go to school)

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, could you share information, backed up by MRM data?

8. Have you observed any change in the volume of reports of violations since the start of the pandemic?

- Increased
- Decreased
- Not changed
- Unable to tell at this stage

If you have answered “Increased” or “Decreased”, what could be the reason(s)?

9. Specifically, how has COVID-19 impacted your ability to monitor, document and verify violations for the MRM? Have the following been impacted?

- Access (to geographical locations and to survivors/witnesses)
- Interviewing survivors/witnesses
- Verification of reports
- Training
- Communicating data
- Ensuring confidentiality of data
- Other

Please elaborate on your response(s) above

10. Have you developed new strategies and tools to monitor, document and verify violations to cope with movement restrictions and new health/safety rules?

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, have they been successful? Can you share them? And would you consider sharing them with other CTFMRs?

11. Has the pandemic impacted your ability to engage with parties to conflict or work with them on developing/implementing Action Plans and other commitments to end and prevent violations against children?

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, could you describe how?

12. Has the pandemic impacted your ability to engage with parties to conflict and work with them to identify and release children from their ranks? (It could be in a positive or negative way)

- Yes
- No

If you have answered “Yes”, could you describe how?

13. How has your organisation’s overall capacity to work on MRM violations been impacted by COVID-19? (Think about funding; human resources; or resources being redeployed due to the COVID-19 response)

14. On the basis of the above, what support would you need to be able to continue your MRM work efficiently? (Be as specific as possible.)

15. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Thank you.

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