Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict: 20 Years After the Adoption of OPAC

Joint Statement by the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

New York, 25 May 2020 – Today marks the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC). In this juncture, the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, H.E. Smaïl Chergui and the Co-Chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights, Mr. David Lega join their voices with the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba to urge all outstanding Member States to sign and ratify the OPAC and fulfill the promise made to children two decades ago that they would not be involved in armed conflict. The adoption of OPAC was a milestone and within the past 20 years has contributed to releasing more than 1.45 million boys and girls from armed forces and armed groups and preventing the recruitment and use of more millions of children.

Since its adoption, the Optional Protocol has become a lighthouse to guide the efforts of States in ending and preventing the involvement of children in armed conflict and to counter the long-lasting effects conflict has on children. “As we mark this anniversary, we must pause and remember what the world was like before OPAC’s adoption,” said the three officials. “We must also take time to note its remarkable achievements and enormous potential for the next decade. Indeed, the Decade of Action calls to accelerate sustainable solutions to the world’s biggest challenges; eradicating the recruitment and use of children allows countries to focus on the actual needs of children such as education, healthcare and future livelihood opportunities.”

While OPAC paved the way for countries to ensure that children were not taking part in hostilities, its relevance and implementation in today’s world continue to be critical, especially as countries are seeking to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The protection of conflict-affected children should be an active part of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus to ensure that the vulnerability of children is addressed before, during and after conflicts. Ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children is only the first step: supporting the sustainable reintegration of released boys and girls into their communities is essential for their future, but also for the future of the entire society.

“As we mark OPAC’s 20th anniversary, we urge Member States that are not yet parties to OPAC to become one, and to do so on behalf of their children and countries future,” said the three officials. “We also urge State Parties that have ratified OPAC to implement the obligations contained in this treaty and ensure that they do not remain dead letters. By ratifying the OPAC, Member States commits to align their legal frameworks with international standards, pursue accountability for violations of children’s fundamental rights and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. With only 17 Member States
that are yet to become a party to this important treaty, it is evident that universal ratification is more achievable than before,” they said.

“The next twenty years must reflect the translation of OPAC’s commitments into tangible actions. We must ensure that children are not only freed from the threat of recruitment and use but are also provided with options to enjoy a better future and not left without support or subsistence; conflict-affected children need our support in every aspect of their growth. The Optional Protocol should thus remain our beacon and serves to remind us that if children are not allowed to be children and forced into taking part in hostilities, we have not only failed them but have betrayed our own hopes for a brighter future.”

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**Note to editors:**

Adopted by the General Assembly on 25 May 2000, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict entered into force on February 12th, 2002 and is a commitment that States will not recruit or conscript children under 18 to take part in hostilities.

As we speak, 170 States have become parties to the optional protocol; 17 countries have not ratified or acceded the Optional Protocol, while 10 have signed but not ratified it.

Read more about the Optional Protocol here:  

List of states parties to the optional protocol:  

List of countries that have not signed or ratified:  