



**Op-ed by UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process,
Mr. Nickolay Mladenov — Jerusalem, 11 June 2015
Children are not soldiers**

On 8 June, the UN Secretary General published a much anticipated report on Children and Armed Conflict in 2014. Last year saw unprecedented challenges for the protection of tens of millions of children growing up in countries affected by conflict. In Iraq and Syria, over one thousand girls and boys were abducted by ISIL. In one incident in Syria, ISIL abducted approximately 150 young boys on their way home from school exams in Aleppo. It also issued a document justifying the sexual slavery of Yazidi girls abducted in Iraq. In Nigeria, Boko Haram abducted hundreds of girls.

This period was particularly devastating for children in the State of Palestine. The report clearly shows that the Secretary-General is deeply alarmed by the dramatic increase in the number of children killed and injured in the occupied Palestinian territory, where last year 557 children lost their lives. This is the third highest number of children killed in the world after Afghanistan (710) and Iraq (679). No parent should have to bury his or her child, no family should be deprived of the laughter and joy of their children. Behind each of these shocking numbers lies a human tragedy and our prayers and thoughts are with the families of those who have lost their loved ones.

The occupation continues to affect the lives of children on all sides of the conflict. Mohammed, aged 6, and his brother Amir, aged 12, were killed by a drone missile outside their house in Rafah. Daniel, aged 4, was killed by indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza. Both families, Palestinian and Israeli, grieve equally for their children.

One child killed is one child too many...

Sadly, in 2014 children have borne the brunt of the third major military offensive in Gaza in six years. The number of Palestinian child casualties in this latest conflict exceeds the combined number killed during the two previous escalations. In the 50 days between 8 July and 26 August, at least 540 Palestinian children were killed (70 per cent of them under 12), and at least 2,955 Palestinian children were injured; preliminary estimates indicate that up to 1,000 of them will be permanently disabled.

In the West Bank, 13 Palestinian boys, aged 11 to 17 years, lost their lives. On 15 May 2014, two Palestinian boys were shot and killed with live ammunition during clashes with Israeli soldiers near Beituniya Checkpoint. Reports indicate that they did not appear to pose a lethal threat. One month later three Israeli youths were abducted. Their bodies were later found near Halhul in northern Hebron. Most shockingly, almost exactly one year ago Muhammad Abu Khudair was burned alive in an apparent revenge attack for the kidnapping and killing of the Israeli youths. Three Israeli civilians were arrested and charged, including two under the age of 18 years. Of the 1,218 children injured in the West Bank, more than half were under age 12, and 91 per cent were injured during confrontations in Hebron and East Jerusalem.

Children are not soldiers

It is painful to even write these words and these numbers and to think of the devastation wrought upon thousands of families. Children are not soldiers and they should be protected from violence. It does not matter where they live, their lives are equally precious. Their schools should not be put at risk by hiding weapons in them, nor should they be bombed; they should not be recruited to fight, nor should they be abused, threatened or killed.

The report makes unmistakably clear how angry the United Nations Secretary-General is with what happened to the children of Gaza last year. The report is more than just a list, it should be read in its entirety. The UN continues to monitor and document the situation in Palestine and Israel and for many years we have been concerned about the impact of the conflict on children there. This concern is growing.

The staggering number of children killed in Gaza last year cannot remain without consequence. The Secretary-General has issued a very strong call on Israel to take concrete and immediate steps to protect and prevent the killing and maiming of children, including through the review of existing policies and practices and by ensuring accountability for perpetrators of alleged violations. He has also firmly warned that all parties that engage in military action which results in grave violations against children, regardless of intent, will be subject to continued United Nations scrutiny, including through the reporting and listing mechanism established by the Security Council. The Israeli and the Palestinian authorities have an obligation to ensure that allegations of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law are promptly, effectively, independently, and impartially investigated, and that those responsible are brought to justice.

By publishing the report, the UN aims to raise global awareness of the violations and to ensure the accountability of all parties whose actions are documented in the report—with the ultimate aim to stop and prevent human rights violations against children. The shocking facts presented in the report speak for themselves. They are an affront to our collective conscience. In the occupied Palestinian territory, people look to the international community to expend every effort to bring about a just peace on the basis of a two-state solution where Palestine and Israel live side by side in peace and security. It is our responsibility to make this happen so that the children of these lands have the future they are entitled to.

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