

## PRESS RELEASE

### **The West and Central Africa region among the most affected by grave violations against children in armed conflict**

***Over the past five years, the region has consistently recorded some of the highest numbers of UN-verified grave violations against children***

**DAKAR, 23 November 2021** – Since 2005, when a United Nations mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the six grave violations against children was established, West and Central Africa has been the region in the world with the highest number of children verified as recruited and used by armed forces and non-state armed groups and the highest number of children verified as victims of sexual violence. West and Central Africa also has the second highest number of abductions, according to a new UNICEF publication calling on partners to support and scale-up documenting grave violations against children as well as preventing and responding to them.

Since 2016, West and Central Africa has recorded more than 21,000 children verified by the United Nations (UN) as recruited and used by armed forces and non-state armed groups, and more than 2,200 children victims of sexual violence. More than 3,500 children were abducted and more than 1,500 incidents of attacks on schools and hospitals were recorded.

In 2005, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1612 to establish a United Nations mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the following six grave violations against children during armed conflict: 1) killing and maiming of children, 2) recruitment and use of children, 3) abduction of children, 4) rape and other forms of sexual violence committed against children, 5) attacks on schools and hospitals, and 6) denial of humanitarian access.

Since 2005, 1 out of 4 United Nations verified grave violations in the world was committed in West and Central Africa. Last year alone, over 6,400 children (32 per cent of whom were girls) were victims of one or more grave violations in the region.

“Whether children in West and Central Africa are the direct targets or collateral victims, they are caught up in conflict, and face violence and insecurity. The grave violations of their rights perpetrated by parties to the conflicts are unacceptable. They have an adverse impact on their capacity to learn, work, build meaningful relationships and contribute to the development of their communities and countries”, said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa. “UNICEF calls on all parties to conflicts in the region to prevent and end grave violations against children, and to ensure that all perpetrators are held accountable”.

Major humanitarian crises continue to unfold across West and Central Africa. The situation in Cameroon, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and multi-country emergencies, including crises in the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin region, are having devastating consequences on children and communities.

With a surge in armed conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic, 57.5 million children in West and Central Africa are in need of humanitarian assistance, a figure that has almost doubled since 2020.

In response to the spike in children's unmet essential needs, including protection, UNICEF has been working with governments, local authorities and partners to strengthen the monitoring and reporting mechanism, support the release and reintegration of children from armed forces and groups, reunite separated children with their families, provide medical and psychosocial care for conflict-affected children, and provide care for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

"Mental health and psychosocial support for children and adolescents are essential and at the heart of UNICEF's humanitarian response. When provided with the necessary care and psychosocial support, access to schooling and access to livelihoods, children are able to process what they have experienced and rebuild their lives", noted Marie-Pierre Poirier.

Since 2015, over 4.3 million children have been reached with direct mental health and psychosocial support. Furthermore, also over that same period, more than 52,000 children associated with armed forces and groups were reached with support for community integration; nearly 65,000 children received support for family tracing and reunification; and nearly 183,000 women, girls and boys benefitted from interventions to prevent and respond to gender-based violence including case management, legal aid, health care, protection, education and life skills programmes.

Partners, including donors, must intensify their efforts to secure adequate financial and technical resources to ensure that grave violations are reported and verified. Information collected must be used for supporting and designing well-informed prevention and response programming, to protect children, their families and their communities.

**Note to editors:**

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