

Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict
Extracts: Syrian Arab Republic

2015 (covering 2014)

190. Conflict continued at unprecedented levels across the Syrian Arab Republic, resulting in massive violations against children. The United Nations verified 2,107 grave violations by all parties to the conflict in major urban and rural areas. ISIL has taken over large parts of the country and used public brutality and indoctrination to ensure the submission of communities; children were specifically targeted. The United Nations had limited capacity to verify information in the areas under the control of ISIL. Sieges and bombardments of civilian areas continued, particularly by Syrian Government Forces, which also hampered the verification of incidents.

191. The recruitment and use of children in combat has become commonplace in the Syrian Arab Republic. While actual numbers are expected to be higher, the United Nations verified that 271 boys and 7 girls had been recruited and used by groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (142), Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) (24), ISIL (69) and al-Nusra Front (ANF) (25). In 77 per cent of the cases, children were armed or used in combat and almost one fifth were under 15 years of age. Boys associated with armed groups were commonly between 14 and 17 years of age, with 17 verified cases under the age of 15. In many cases, children were paid to fight for salaries of up to \$400 per month. The payment of relatively large salaries by ANF, FSA, and in particular ISIL, created an incentive for children and their parents under difficult economic circumstances.

192. Fragmentation of FSA resulted in localized and variable recruitment, training and salary practices. During armed battles, children were used for fighting, attending to the wounded or for recording events for propaganda purposes.

193. YPG/YPJ continued to recruit and use boys and girls, including children younger than 15 years, reportedly taking them to indoctrination and training camps. For example, in March, a 13-year-old girl was taken to Ras al-Ayn for military training and the requests by her parents to see her were refused. In most cases, children were used in combat roles, and repeated allegations of "conscription" policies targeting children were levelled against YPG/YPJ.

194. Reports of the recruitment and use of boys by ISIL and ANF increased significantly. In 25 per cent of verified cases, boys were under the age of 15, including some as young as 8 years of age. ISIL reportedly established at least three child training camps in Raqqa, and hundreds of boys as young as 10 years of age were imprisoned in Aleppo, forced to attend indoctrination seminars and promised salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr's place in paradise and the "gift" of a wife upon joining ISIL. In training and using children for combat roles, ISIL has violated international humanitarian law and perpetrated war crimes on a mass scale. Children were also recruited as suicide bombers and used to perpetrate extreme

violence. For example, in July, four boys fighting with ANF in Dar'a participated in the beheading of four Syrian Government Forces soldiers.

195. A number of pro-Government groups, including Hizbullah, also reportedly recruited children in small numbers. Five boys joined the Popular Committee to support Syrian Government forces in al-Midan, Damascus. Children were also used as human shields and for forced labour. In November, children were among the civilians reportedly forced at gunpoint to be in front of the Syrian Government forces tanks entering the town of al-Sheikh Meskin to secure the Dar'a-Damascus highway.

196. Detention of children by Syrian authorities continued, with 38 verified cases (31 boys, 7 girls), including 15 who were subjected to torture. Children were arrested at checkpoints and schools. For example, in a verified incident in July, a 14-year-old boy from Homs, who had been detained in the State Security Centre, confessed under torture to carrying weapons and attacking checkpoints.

197. Indiscriminate attacks launched in civilian populated areas continued to cause widespread killing and maiming. The United Nations verified the killing of 368 children (184 boys, 66 girls, 118 gender unknown) by Syrian Government forces (221), ISIL/ANF (44), FSA-affiliated groups (24), international coalition airstrikes (4) and unknown parties (75). There were 771 cases of children maimed (420 boys, 142 girls, 209 gender unknown) by Syrian Government forces and pro-Government groups (336), FSA-affiliated groups (296), ISIL and ANF (19), YPG/YPJ (1) and unknown parties (119) across the country. Actual numbers are believed to be much higher.

198. Armed groups killed and maimed children by firing mortars mainly in Government-controlled areas. For example, a 7-year-old boy and a teacher were killed and 56 children injured in a mortar attack on the Al-Manar Armenian Catholic School in Damascus in April. Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device and suicide attacks by armed groups accounted for almost one fifth of child casualties. In April, 69 children were killed and injured in a double vehicle -borne improvised explosive device attack in a Government-controlled neighbourhood of Homs.

199. The public brutality and extreme violence perpetrated by ISIL also targeted children. For example, in July, a 15-year-old boy accused of adultery was publicly executed in Manbij, with his parents forced to watch and his corpse left on display for three days. In November, civilians were forced to participate in the stoning of a 14-year-old girl in Dei-ez-Zor. ISIL reportedly encouraged children to participate in public brutality, including holding decapitated heads for public display or playing "football" with them.

200. Aerial bombardment of civilian areas accounted for over 90 per cent of children documented killed and maimed by Syrian Government forces. In an attack in April by Syrian Government forces on the Ein Jalout primary school in Aleppo, 33 children were killed and 40 injured. Barrel bombs accounted for almost one third of child casualties inflicted by Syrian Government forces, including 6 children killed in June in al-Shajara internally

displaced persons camp, Dar'a. Children continued to be killed during ground operations by pro-Government groups. For instance, in July, three children, aged 10 to 14 years, fleeing Suweida were killed by Popular Committee fighters. Children also continued to fall victim to explosive remnants of war.

201. The United Nations received 18 reports of sexual violence against children by ISIL (9), Syrian Government forces (5), Popular Committees (2), FSA (1) and the Kurdish police (1), of which 11 were verified. Forced marriage of girls to foreign fighters became common in ISIL-controlled territory. In July, the father of a 14-year-old girl in Aleppo was tortured for three days until he agreed to have his daughter marry an Egyptian ISIL "Emir". ISIL issued guidance on the treatment of sex slaves, including children, and Yazidi girls abducted in Iraq were moved to and sold in Raqqa. Allegations of sexual violence against children by Syrian Government forces and pro-Government groups continued, with doctors reporting treating raped girls requesting abortions. In January, a 13-year-old boy was "arrested" at a checkpoint by the Popular Committee in Suweida and repeatedly raped over the course of three days.

202. According to the Ministry of Education, 889 schools had been fully (379) or partially (510) damaged by end-2014. The United Nations verified 60 attacks on education facilities by Syrian Government forces (39), ISIL (9), FSA (1), and unidentified parties (11). For example, in October two explosions near the Al Makhzomi and Al Mouhdeh primary schools in Akrama, Homs City, killed 29 children and maimed 27. Families repeatedly reported being too scared to send their children to school. The military use of schools also continued, with nine verified cases: YPG/YPJ (4), FSA (3) and ISIL (2). ISIL appropriated schools for child indoctrination, and in late 2014 all schools in ISIL-controlled Aleppo, Deir-ezZor and Raqqa were closed pending adoption of a "modified" curriculum.

203. By December, 413 medical facilities tracked by the United Nations were partially or fully damaged, while 823 were only partially functioning or not functioning due to shortage of staffing, equipment or use for other purposes. Eighty - six attacks on health facilities and 178 medical personnel killed were reported. The United Nations verified 28 attacks on health facilities and personnel by: Syrian Government forces (17), ISIL (9) and unidentified parties (2). For example, in May, a rocket attack on an FSA field hospital in an abandoned school in Jasem, Dar'a resulted in the death of two children and four medical personnel.

204. Abductions became a prominent tool used by ISIL. The United Nations verified that ISIL abducted and/or imprisoned 463 children, including for use in prisoner exchanges and for recruitment purposes, a number of whom were tortured. In May, 153 Kurdish boys aged 13 to 17 years were abducted in Manbij, Aleppo, while returning home from their school exams. Armed groups also arbitrarily detained children for alleged "criminal" offenses.

205. By January 2015, 212,000 persons remained under siege, 163,500 of them by Syrian Government forces and 26,500 by armed groups, and subjected to starvation. Children attempting to escape besieged areas were killed by snipers or in minefields. In January, an 11-year-old boy was killed by a sniper while attempting to leave al-Nashabiya, Rural Damascus. Attacks by armed groups on civilian infrastructure left millions of persons, including children, without access to water and electricity. Administrative blockages and

refusals to allow certain items on inter-agency convoys, including surgical supplies, were common and threats and attacks on humanitarian personnel and facilities continued.

206. There were several meetings between the United Nations and the Government's Interministerial Committee on Child Protection, and an expert level group of government and United Nations officials was established to strengthen engagement. In May, the United Nations provided training materials to support the Commission for Family Affairs in conducting child rights orientation for Syrian Government forces; however, this has yet to be implemented. Legislative Decree 22, adopted in June, granted an amnesty for children associated with armed groups, and the Government committed to diverting those children to rehabilitation programmes. However, cases of children detained by Syrian Government forces were verified by the United Nations throughout the year. In all circumstances, children are entitled to benefit from the special status of juveniles in conflict with the law, in conformity with international humanitarian and human rights law.

207. The political and military leadership of both YPG/YPJ and the FSA Supreme Military Council publicly committed to ending child recruitment and use, enforcing disciplinary measures and issuing command orders to that effect. However, the recruitment and use of children by both groups following these commitments continued and was verified by the United Nations.

2014 (covering 2013)

144. The conflict and violence in the Syrian Arab Republic reached unprecedented levels during 2013. Intense bombardments by Government forces on opposition controlled or disputed areas, increased operations by a growing number of armed groups in constantly evolving coalitions as well as the expansion of the control of Islamist groups in northern Syrian Arab Republic led to massive grave violations against children. Hundreds of civilians, including many children, were killed during the chemical attack on Damascus suburbs in August.

145. Numerous armed groups are reportedly recruiting and using children in the Syrian Arab Republic, including several FSA-affiliated groups, the Kurdish People Protection Units (YPG), Ahrar al-Sham, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), Jhabat al-Nusra, and other armed groups. All of the groups actively recruit and use children for logistics, handling ammunition, manning checkpoints and as combatants. Reports indicated that the recruitment of children or pressure to join armed groups also occur among refugee populations in neighbouring countries. Most children associated with FSA-affiliated groups, as young as 14 years of age, indicated that they had received weapons training and 4,000 to 8,000 Syrian pounds pay per month. For instance, a 14-year-old boy who joined the al-Murabiteen battalion of the Falloujat Houran FSA brigade in Bosra al-Sham, Dara'a Governorate, reportedly received a 15 days of weapons training in al-Lajat valley close to Bosra al-Sham. In June 2013, two brothers, 16 and 17 years old, joined the FSA-affiliated Majd al-Islam brigade in Dara'a, where they cleaned weapons and performed security duties. YPG reportedly trained children with adults near Al-Qamishli, al-Hassakeh governorate and used them at checkpoints and in combat. For instance, a 14-year-old boy reportedly recruited in September 2013 was trained in Rassalein, al-Hassakeh governorate, and used in hostilities. Islamist groups such as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham also recruited and used children. A 15-year-old boy reportedly joined Ahrar al-Sham in Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor governorate, in March 2013 and continued to be associated with the group at the time of reporting. A 16-year-old boy reportedly joined Jabhat al-Nusra around April 2013 and stayed with the group for three months. ISIS reportedly used children as young as eight in hostilities. Children fighting with ISIS are reportedly paid like adults (35,000 Syrian pounds, approximately \$200) and undergo both weapons and jihadist indoctrination training.

146. Adults and children released from detention reported that children were still present in detention facilities and suffered treatment tantamount to torture. For instance, a 17-year-old boy accused of participating in anti-Government demonstrations was arrested by Government forces in March 2013, detained in Homs, and subsequently for three months in the Damascus Political Security Detention Centre, where he was repeatedly beaten and forced to remain in stress positions. The boy reported that other children were present in the detention centre. Children were also reportedly arrested and detained in October 2013 during the temporary evacuation of over 1,000 civilians from al-Moaddamiyeh besieged area in Rif Damascus. The Government stated that no children were detained during the evacuation. Several cases of arrest or detention may amount to enforced disappearances. For instance, the whereabouts of

two boys, 16 and 17 years old, reportedly detained by the Syrian Air Force Intelligence in Aleppo in May and June 2013 for alleged cooperation with the opposition remained unknown at the time of reporting. Approximately 1,500 detainees, including children, are reportedly held in the ISIS main detention centre in al-Raqqah. No disaggregated data on children was available. According to the Government, all detained children under 18 are prosecuted in accordance with juvenile law. In addition, the Government states that numerous amnesty decrees have been issued.

147. More than 10,000 children are estimated to have been killed since the outset of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the killing and maiming of children has increased exponentially in 2013. Government forces continued to indiscriminately shell civilian-populated areas, in particular in Homs and Aleppo, but also in Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, Damascus and Al-Raqqah governorates. The use of barrel bombs by Government forces in Aleppo city in December alone led to hundreds of children killed and injured. Children also continued to be killed in ground offensives by Government forces. On 29 January, during the “Al-Queiq river” massacre in Bustan al-Qasr district of Aleppo, at least 10 children were reportedly among those summarily executed. Other massacres were reportedly committed by Government forces in several villages in the Al-Sfera area, south of Aleppo, between April and June. For instance, on 21 June, in Mazrat al Rahib village, at least three children were reportedly summarily executed along with at least 58 men. In early May, a high number of children were reportedly among the hundreds of civilians killed and burned by Government forces in Ras al-Nabaa district of Baniyas town and al-Bayda village.

148. Armed groups also continued to kill and maim children, including through the use of terror tactics and during ground operations throughout the Syrian Arab Republic. For instance, during Eid al-Fitr in July, at least 13 children were killed in a mortar shelling on areas of Zahra, besieged by Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS/Land Liwa al-Tawhid. On 4 August, the end of Ramadan, armed groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al Muhajireen wal-Ansar and Suquor al-izz, allegedly killed more than 200 persons, of whom at least 18 were children, including during executions of entire families in Latakia governorate during the “Barouda” offensive. On 10 September, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham allegedly attacked villages in eastern Homs, killing more than 30 civilians of which half were women and children.

149. While sexual violence against boys and girls in Government-controlled detention facilities has been documented previously, an increasing number of women and girls reported to the United Nations that they were subject to repeated sexual harassment at Government checkpoints. Government forces also reportedly abducted young women and girls in groups at checkpoints or in transport and released them a few days later in their village, intentionally exposing them as victims of rape and subjecting them to rejection by their families. Allegations of sexual violence against boys and girls by Jabhat al-Nusra and other unidentified armed groups were also received. For example, a boy of unknown age and his father were allegedly raped by several members of Jabhat al-Nusra. In another incident, a 15-year-old girl in Al Qoseir was reportedly gang-raped by unidentified armed elements and

subsequently killed by family members for “having lost her sanity” following the event. The general fear of sexual violence by parties to the conflict continued to be stated as a reason for which Syrian families flee the country.

150. An increasing number of mosques hosting schools have reportedly been shelled during indiscriminate bombardments or directly targeted by missiles. For instance, on 30 July, Government forces shelled the Hamza mosque, recognized as a girls’ school, in Anadan area, north of Aleppo. Nine girls, all younger than 10 years of age, and four female teachers were reportedly killed. ISIS control of school curricula, forcing teachers to introduce their ideology, was a growing concern. According to the Government, armed groups systematically targeted schools, with more than 3,000 being partially or completely destroyed. Hospitals and field clinics also continued to be damaged in targeted and indiscriminate shelling. For instance, in early November, in al-Bab district of Aleppo, Government forces shelled an opposition-run hospital twice, reportedly killing one doctor and two nurses. In March, an FSA brigade attacked the national hospital in Dara’a. According to the Government, 63 hospitals and 470 health centres have been targeted by armed groups. Doctors and medical personnel have also been killed or abducted for ransom by ISIS in northern Syrian Arab Republic. For instance, the whereabouts of two doctors reportedly arrested by ISIS in mid-December 2013 remained unknown at the time of reporting. As at March 2014, 68 of 118 UNRWA schools have been closed owing to conflict. Of 67,000 Palestine refugee children registered in UNRWA schools, 41,500 are currently attending classes. Fourteen UNRWA schools operated as shelters for displaced Palestine refugees and Syrians.

151. The abduction of civilians, including children, became an increasingly prevalent feature of the Syrian conflict, mainly committed by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham. Allegations of mass abductions, sometimes followed by summary executions, including against minority communities, were also received. For instance, a 16-year-old boy was reportedly executed after a month and a half in the custody of Ahrar al-Sham. Approximately 50 children were also reportedly among the 200 persons abducted by several armed groups during the “Barouda” offensive, in August 2013 in Latakia governorate.

152. Active denial or intentional restriction of humanitarian access by all parties to the conflict remained a serious concern. As at 9 January 2014, 242,000 people were estimated to be living in besieged areas. Homs Old City, Darayya, al-Yarmouk Palestinian camp, Moadamiya al-Sham, Eastern Ghouta, including Douma, Arbin, Zamalka and Kafr Batna, were besieged by Government forces. Other localities, like Zahra and Nubul, were besieged by a coalition of Liwa al Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. All besieged areas were cut off from all humanitarian assistance for months in 2013. Increasing reports were received of civilians, including children, dying in areas under siege. In addition, humanitarian access to areas controlled by extremist groups, in particular by ISIS in northern Syrian Arab Republic, was severely impeded and the seizure of goods, as well as abduction and killing of humanitarian personnel was a repeated concern.

153. My Special Representative visited the Syrian Arab Republic and neighbouring countries to assess the conflict's impact on children and discuss the strengthening of the monitoring of grave violations and measures to end and prevent violations by all parties. In 2013, the Government criminalized the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, and on 23 September announced the establishment of the Inter-ministerial Committee on Children and Armed Conflict. My Special Representative also engaged with representatives of the Syrian National Coalition on their commitments in relation to the protection of children in armed conflict. I also note the command order issued by General Command for YPG on 4 October 2013 condemning and prohibiting the recruitment of children.

2013 (covering 2012)

150. The Syrian conflict has entered its third year. The situation for children has deteriorated in all areas of concern. Among the well in excess of 70,000 people estimated to have been killed to date, many thousands are children. Sizeable numbers of children have been killed and gravely injured in shelling and fighting, while thousands more have seen family members killed or injured or have lived through shelling, missile firing and heavy aerial and artillery bombardment of their homes, schools and hospitals by the government forces, resulting in severe psychological distress. The use of terror tactics by armed opposition groups, such as car and other bombs, in civilian areas, including near schools, and the association of children with such armed groups rose sharply over the reporting period.

151. Children in the Syrian Arab Republic continued to be killed, injured and maimed by heavy artillery, air strikes, crossfire and explosive remnants of war as a direct result of the conflict in incidents that occurred in Damascus, Homs, Dera'a and Aleppo, among others. Refugee children inside the Syrian Arab Republic have also been directly affected. Palestinian and other refugee children have been killed, injured, forced to flee their homes and live in need in shelters for internally displaced persons. Government air strikes and bombardment predominated in areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups. Government forces and allied shabbiha militia continued incursions in areas of contested control. On 25 May 2012, government soldiers and shabbiha members reportedly entered El Houleh village, Homs governorate, and killed 100 civilians, including at least 41 children. The local school, where people had sought refuge, was reportedly bombed by government forces in July 2012, resulting in the death of two children.

152. The use of heavy weaponry and the alleged use of cluster munitions in heavily populated areas resulted in child and other civilian casualties. In a village near Ar Raqqa, survivors alleged that dozens of cluster munitions had been dropped on their homes over a period of days in March 2013. A witness recounted seeing two boys, aged 9 and 13 years, suffer injury and the loss of their hands and limbs when they picked up unexploded cluster bomblets. Further reports were received of cluster munitions being used in Hamah, Ar Rastan, Mohassan, Aleppo and Idlib. Although government forces were allegedly responsible for most of those casualties, opposition groups have also reportedly acquired and used heavy weapons against the civilian population.

153. The United Nations also received reports of opposition armed groups engaging in terror tactics, such as car and other bombings, near schools and in public places, resulting in the death of and injury to children and other civilians. It was not possible to attribute responsibility for specific incidents that led to child casualties, owing to the nature of the operational structure of armed opposition groups in the Syrian Arab Republic and the lack of access for the United Nations to carry out investigations.

154. Detention, torture and ill-treatment of children for alleged association with the opposition continued to be a worrying trend. In that regard, there were a number of accounts of sexual violence against boys to obtain information or a confession by the State forces,

largely but not exclusively by members of the State intelligence services and the Syrian Armed Forces. Child detainees, largely boys and as young as 14 years of age, suffered similar or identical methods of torture as adults, including electric shock, beatings, stress positions and threats and acts of sexual torture. For example, a 16-year-old boy from Kafr Nabl, Idlib governorate, reported witnessing the sexual assault and killing of his 14-year-old friend while in detention. According to witnesses, a number of children continue to be held as ransom for parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to force them to turn themselves in to the State authorities.

155. Information was received that the national armed forces used children as human shields. In an incident in May 2012, the national armed forces reportedly raided the local primary school in As Safira, Aleppo governorate, took hostage 30 boys and 25 girls between 10 and 13 years of age and walked them in front of their forces in order to flush out a local Free Syrian Army unit that had recently taken the town. There were also a number of allegations of use of children between 15 and 17 years of age by shabbiha members in village incursions in Hamah governorate in January 2013.

156. The United Nations has received a growing number of reports of use of children by armed opposition groups, such as the Free Syrian Army. From accounts received, child association with the Free Syrian Army is often linked to an older relative facilitating recruitment or in instances in which the child has lost all members of his or her family. It is also linked to the fact that there is no central recruitment authority among the Free Syrian Army and that many forces are clanbased or village-based. Consequently, children, on average between 15 and 17 years of age, have been used in both combat and support roles, such as food and water portering and loading bullets into cartridges. A former Free Syrian Army combatant of Kafr Zeita village stated to the United Nations that children as young as 14 years were largely used for loading bullets, delivering food and evacuating the injured. Medical staff reported treating boys between 16 and 17 years of age injured in combat who were associated with the Free Syrian Army. For example, a 16-year-old boy receiving medical treatment for wounds suffered in the Salah-ad-Din neighbourhood of Aleppo recounted that he had spent three months with a Free Syrian Army unit. He had been injured in fighting against government forces in the first week of March 2013. It should also be noted that accounts stated that some Free Syrian Army units, including in Dayr Az Zawr city, had rejected children who had approached them to join or had released associated children when so requested by their families.

157. The United Nations received information suggesting that schools and hospitals were targeted by the Government. Reports were also received of schools being used and damaged by armed opposition groups. A total of 167 education personnel, including 69 teachers, were reported to have been killed as at the end of February 2013, while 2,445 schools were reported to have been damaged. Some 2,000 schools are being used as shelters for internally displaced persons. In some areas, children have not attended school in more than 18 months. Palestinian children residing in refugee camps in the Syrian Arab Republic are equally affected by the conflict. The education system in particular has been severely affected. As at

April 2013, 69 of 118 UNRWA schools were closed, with only 23,700 of more than 67,000 enrolled pupils attending classes.

158. Reports indicated that schools continued to be bombed, shelled and raided by government forces. On the other hand, several parties to the conflict were responsible for using schools for military purposes. There are numerous incidents of government forces entering schools and using them either as a temporary base or as a detention facility. The Free Syrian Army allegedly used schools in a number of areas as bases, makeshift hospitals and, in some instances, ammunition storage and detention centres. In one example, Free Syrian Army elements in Kafr Zeita, Idlib governorate, used two classrooms of the Al Shahid Wahid Al Jusef High School as barracks for a number of days while children were attending classes.

159. The United Nations received further information that hospitals and makeshift hospitals had been bombed and, in some cases, specifically targeted by government forces, allegedly because they housed wounded Free Syrian Army elements. Reports have also been received of government forces entering hospitals and arresting young men and boys suspected of being Free Syrian Army sympathizers. In one instance, eyewitnesses stated that men and boys who sought assistance at the Kendi State Hospital in Aleppo were arrested for association with the opposition before entering. The hospital also housed a government sniper position. Attacks or threats of attacks against medical personnel, in addition to reprisals for medically assisting those suspected of links to the opposition, were also documented.

160. As noted in my report on sexual violence in conflict (A/67/792-S/2013/149), United Nations monitors received credible allegations of sexual violence against women and girls, in particular during raids conducted by the Syrian military in Homs and other areas, but also in detention facilities or at checkpoints. The United Nations is also concerned about allegations of abduction and rape of women and girls by armed opposition groups in cities, villages and neighbourhoods perceived to be in favour of the Government.

161. The conflict has also created an environment in which it has become extremely difficult to reach affected populations for humanitarian purposes. Medical care remained inadequate in contested areas, with many children succumbing to their wounds for lack of proper or timely attention. Lastly, fighting continued to force populations to leave their homes, with the latest United Nations figures indicating that there are more than 1.3 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and 4.25 million persons displaced inside the country, half of whom are children.

162. My Special Representative was invited by the Government to assess first-hand the conflict's impact on children, to discuss strengthening the monitoring of grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic and to better advocate child protection. During her visit, she met relevant ministers, the United Nations country team, civil society members, internally displaced persons and children. In this regard, I welcome the Government's commitment to cooperating with the United Nations in monitoring grave child rights violations and to establishing an interministerial committee on children affected by conflict. The Government has also informed my Special Representative that it will take measures to

ensure the education of displaced children and to rebuild destroyed or damaged school facilities. My Special Representative was also able to reach out to Free Syrian Army commanders in Homs and Rif Damascus governorates regarding their responsibility to respect international humanitarian law and prevent association of children with their forces. In addition, I am encouraged that my Special Representative received a communication from the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in which it committed itself to collaborating with the United Nations to halt and prevent the recruitment and use of children.

2012 (covering 2011)

119. The United Nations has received reports of grave violations against children in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and throughout the reporting period, continuing into 2012. In response to the need for United Nations verified information, my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict sent a technical mission to the region to conduct interviews with victims and witnesses in refugee camps, villages and hospitals in the region in March 2012. In almost all recorded cases, children were among the victims of military operations by Government forces, including the Syrian Armed Forces, the intelligence forces and the Shabbiha militia, in their ongoing conflict with the opposition, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Children as young as 9 years of age were victims of killing and maiming, arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, and use as human shields. Schools have been regularly raided and used as military bases and detention centres. Information obtained by the technical mission is in line with the findings of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

120. Interviews with former members of the Syrian Armed Forces and the intelligence forces indicated that civilians, including children, were targeted by Government forces if they were residing in villages where members of FSA or other armed opposition groups were believed to be present or where deserters were hiding, or if they were seen fleeing the country seeking refuge. In one instance, a former member of the Syrian Armed Forces stated that, during protests in Tall Kalakh in December 2011, he was given an order by his commander to shoot without distinction, although the soldiers were aware that there were women and children among the protesters. During the armed break-up of the demonstrations, the witness saw three girls between approximately 10 and 13 years of age who had been killed by the Syrian Armed Forces. In another similar incident in Aleppo in the fourth quarter of 2011, a former member of the intelligence forces witnessed the killing of five children in a secondary school during demonstrations.

121. The grave violations continued into 2012 and although this is beyond the reporting period, the gravity of the incidents requires their inclusion in the report. Witness accounts described a particularly grave incident in the village of Ayn l'Arouz in the Jabal Azzawiyah in Idlib province. On 9 March 2012, Syrian Armed Forces, together with the intelligence forces and the Shabbiha militia, surrounded the village for an attack that lasted over a period of four days. Government forces entered the village on the first day and killed 11 civilians, including three boys aged between 15 and 17 years. Thirty-four persons, including two boys aged 14 and 16 years, and one 9-year-old girl, were arrested for interrogation about the suspected presence of deserters. Eventually, the village was reportedly left burned and 4 out of the 34 detainees were shot and burned, including the two boys aged 14 and 16 years.

122. There is no evidence of Government forces formally conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 18 years. However, the Syrian Armed Forces and its associated Shabbiha militia used children as young as 8 years on at least three separate occasions within the reporting period. In the incident mentioned above in the village of Ayn l'Arouz in March 2012, a witness stated that several dozen children, boys and girls ranging between the ages of

8 and 13 years, were forcibly taken from their homes. These children were subsequently reportedly used by soldiers and militia members as human shields, placing them in front of the windows of buses carrying military personnel into the raid on the village.

123. The United Nations collected dozens of accounts of eyewitnesses of both children as young as 14 years of age who were tortured while in detention, as well as former members of the Syrian Armed Forces who themselves were forced to torture or witness torture. The Shabbiha militia was also involved in the detention and torture of children, especially during military operations and often in makeshift detention cells in schools. Most child victims of torture described being beaten, blindfolded, subjected to stress positions, whipped with heavy electrical cables, scarred by cigarette burns and, in one recorded case, subjected to electrical shock to the genitals. At least one witness said that he had seen a young boy of approximately 15 years of age succumb to his repeated beatings. Children were detained and tortured because their siblings or parents were assumed to be members of the opposition or FSA, or they themselves were suspected of being associated with FSA. On one occasion, in May 2011, a 15-year-old boy was taken into custody by intelligence forces in the municipal building in Jisr Ash-Shughur and repeatedly beaten with heavy electrical cables during interrogation. The boy stated that there were at least 20 other children his age or younger held in detention.

124. The United Nations has received some credible allegations of the recruitment and use of children by armed opposition, including FSA and other armed groups, although FSA has a stated policy of not recruiting any child under 17 years of age. Various sources reported on young children association with FSA carrying guns and wearing camouflage uniforms. My Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict reminded all parties of their obligations under human rights and international humanitarian law.

125. The United Nations recorded multiple accounts of the use of schools by Government forces, including the Syrian Armed Forces, the intelligence forces and the Shabbiha militia as military staging grounds, temporary bases, detention centres, sniper posts and centres for torture and the interrogation of adults and children. Several witnesses stated that the intelligence forces and the Shabbiha militia had gun emplacements installed on the roofs of schools while students were attending. Accounts also indicated that, on a number of occasions, children were killed or injured by Government forces during military operations on school grounds, and schools were looted and burned as retribution by Government forces in response to student protests.

126. Reports also pointed out that, during the reporting period, hospitals were struck by heavy artillery by Government forces. Aside from the conduct of military operations that prevent civilians from accessing hospitals, reports also indicated that injured persons, including children and their families, were afraid to seek medical treatment out of fear of reprisals by the Government for suspected association with the opposition. Similarly, reports were also received of medical workers being intimidated and threatened by Government forces for having provided or being suspected of providing medical assistance to members of the opposition.