

## Call for support to address the multifaceted needs of children suffering the effects of armed conflict

2023 High-Level Pledging Conference for Children in Armed Conflict, Oslo, Norway



A lost generation – drawings from the children of Al-Hol, [Syrian Arab Republic](#). (ICRC)

Ahead of the high-level pledging event in Oslo, Norway, on 5 and 6 June 2023, the ICRC takes this opportunity to present an overview of the concrete steps it is currently taking to address the pressing humanitarian needs faced by children in armed conflict. This document also lays out the organization's longer-term plans to strengthen its multidisciplinary response to the needs of children, with a view to urging stronger support from the international community.

Armed conflict and other situations of violence around the world impose immense suffering and devastation on children and their families and exacerbate their existing vulnerabilities. Many children become casualties or are torn from their families, compelled to flee or left without an identity. For dependents, the loss of a parent or the family's main breadwinner has a material but also psychological impact. Armed conflict and other situations of violence also impede children's access to essential services.

Existing provisions of international humanitarian law (IHL), including the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and international human rights law, grant children special protection. The ICRC has a unique mandate and role to protect and assist victims of a conflict or other violence, acknowledging children as a distinct group with specific needs, vulnerabilities and capacities.

The work that benefits children is an integral part of the ICRC's wider-ranging programming and is carried out in accordance with the best interest of the child. The meaningful protection of children requires a comprehensive and cross-cutting approach from the ICRC: responding to affected children's multifaceted needs but also, as a neutral and impartial actor, engaging with states and weapon bearers in dialogue to promote respect for their legal obligations to protect children, to prevent violations of IHL, and ultimately to reduce the violence children suffer during conflict situations. The ICRC carries out its humanitarian work in close proximity to the affected people it serves, in coordination with other International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement partners, or by itself, due to its continued presence in hard-to-reach contexts, and acceptance fostered throughout such presence.

The contexts where ICRC activities benefit the highest number of children are Burkina Faso, Colombia, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter DRC), Ethiopia, Iraq, Israel and the occupied territories, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, Kampala (regional), the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter Syria), and Yemen.

The suffering experienced by children in conflict and other violence will not be resolved without the solid political and financial commitment of the international community. While the ICRC is already carrying out work to protect and assist these children and their families, more needs to be done in the following domains:

## **1. Preventing harm to children in armed conflict**

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Children, including adolescents, face specific risks in armed conflict and other violence. Given their particular physical and psychological vulnerability, they are entitled to special protections under IHL, including age-appropriate treatment and care. The recruitment of children under certain ages by armed actors is prohibited, as is torture, ill-treatment and sexual violence. Children must under no circumstances be the targets of attacks, unless, and for such time as, they take a direct part in hostilities. Schools – as civilian objects – are protected during the conduct of hostilities, and IHL contains rules designed to ensure that children's education can continue during conflict.

Working closely with states, the ICRC advises them on the domestic implementation of their international legal obligations, including by adopting legislation and other measures to protect children during armed conflict. It supports the development of institutional frameworks or mechanisms aimed at clarifying the fate of missing persons, including children, by providing technical advice to national authorities in this regard and/or by chairing coordination mechanisms between former parties to a conflict. ICRC publications complement these efforts; for example, a report [\*Childhood in Rubble: the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare for children\* \(May 2023\)](#), outlines the harms that children face in urban warfare so that the different actors involved can take action to prevent or mitigate this harm.

Working closely with state armed forces and non-state armed groups, the ICRC engages with them in a bilateral dialogue to support them to take measures to protect children, such as through the development of doctrines and codes of conduct that integrate relevant prohibitions of child recruitment and of sexual violence (including of children), and what to do if a child is captured on the battlefield.

The ICRC plays a very active role in a number of global inter-agency working groups and other forums on children. It is a member of the Paris Principles Steering Group and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, as well as its related task forces. It also helps draft guidelines on inter-agency work to protect children; these guidelines address such issues as unaccompanied and separated minors, the recruitment of children and their release and reintegration.

Key activities in 2022 encompassed: confidential and bilateral dialogue with weapon bearers and other relevant stakeholders; IHL training and dissemination sessions with key messages on child protection; and thematic meetings with state armed forces that include issues regarding child protection.

### **Looking ahead: the ICRC's plans for 2023–2025**

The ICRC will promote legal frameworks, policies and practices aimed at better protecting children during armed conflict and other violence. These efforts include ongoing dialogue with states and regional bodies concerning the domestication of their international commitments; urban warfare and its impact on children; and humanitarian diplomacy on specific issues affecting children, including the impact of counter-terror measures on their protection.

## 2. Responding to the needs of children in armed conflict

When conflict or other violence break out, displacement can lead to the separation of the child from his family or caregivers, and children or their caregivers can be wounded or killed, or recruited or detained. Children's access to essential services, especially health care, education, food, water and sanitation, is impeded. Due to their age and maturity, the implications of this deprivation for them are profound and long-term, and they are often highly vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse.

### Protecting children from IHL violations, including child recruitment

Being so close to the frontlines as well as in capitals, the ICRC has a unique position to engage with weapon bearers on the issues concerning children in different violence-affected areas across the world. It discusses, among these issues, the need to protect children from IHL violations (including unlawful child recruitment), obligations to support the reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups, and the impact of counter-terrorism laws and practices on children. These efforts seek to ensure a recognition of the risks of weapon bearers' conduct to children and the development of a response to reduce, prevent and mitigate potential harm. The ICRC also works with these weapon bearers to translate and integrate best practices related to prevention of child recruitment into their doctrines and training.



[Colombia](#). A minor who was being held by a non-state armed group is handed over to the ICRC. IHL grants particular protection to children – protections that non-state armed groups must also provide. (ICRC)

In countries where child recruitment has historically been a major issue, the ICRC works with children formerly associated with armed groups to help them rejoin their communities. In 2022, it helped reunite 102 children associated with armed forces and armed groups with their families and registered 131 new cases. The ICRC's protection dialogue with non-state armed groups also results in the releasing of children who are taken or held hostage by those groups.

Over 50 ICRC delegations support families of children stranded in North-East Syria, and advocate for family reunifications and repatriation, engaging with states involved in the returns of children. Such support seeks to ensure the application of good practices during children's reintegration and to share lessons learnt from across the world.

The ICRC has a multidisciplinary, holistic and survivor-centred approach to addressing the needs of victims/survivors of sexual violence, including children. The approach is outlined in the ICRC's appeal on sexual violence.



[South Sudan](#). Following the request of the local authorities, the ICRC acted as a neutral intermediary and helped facilitate the transfer of 40 children and adults who had been taken during armed hostilities in Upper Nile State in 2022. The ICRC team accompanied them during their journey and stood ready to tend to any medical needs along the way. (O. Emmanuel/ICRC)

## Protecting family links

The ICRC has a mandate under IHL to restore links among separated family members, including by helping unaccompanied and separated children find their families and supporting family members in the search for missing children.

Together with its Movement partners, the ICRC registers unaccompanied children and carries out family tracing activities. It facilitates phone calls among separated family members, thereby contributing to their psychological well-being. Family reunifications are organized according to the best interest of the child and only if all parties – the child and the family – want to be reunited. After children have been reunited with their family, the ICRC checks in on them and assesses their needs and well-being as they reintegrate into their family and community.

In 2022, the ICRC's efforts led to 2,964 unaccompanied children and 4,784 requests to search for missing children being registered. Over 1,400 children were physically reunited with their families, often across international borders (see also above for reunifications of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups). Most ICRC delegations in the world have either registered unaccompanied children or have open cases linked to the search for missing children.



[Democratic Republic of the Congo](#). Over 80 children who had lost contact with their loved ones as a result of conflict were reunited with their families. The search process may take considerable time, but is absolutely essential and invaluable, allowing the ICRC to provide answers to people living in anguish. (ICRC)

## Protecting children in detention

In places of detention, the ICRC works to ensure that children are afforded appropriate care and protection by the responsible authorities. This includes protection from torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Children's needs in detention include early access to their child-specific legal rights, separation from adults unless they are detained as a family unit, and release at the earliest possible opportunity to civilian protection personnel for their protection and integration. Where children are detained separately from adults, and the premises do not meet their basic needs, the ICRC seeks to support the detaining authorities in providing appropriate basic services and living conditions. Where children are detained with adults, purely for lack of appropriate alternatives (for example, very young children with their mothers), or due to lack of action by the responsible authorities to find or provide such alternatives, the ICRC seeks to support these authorities in meeting age-specific needs, pending more child-appropriate solutions.

In 2022, the ICRC visited places of detention that held 14,492 children. Nearly 1,300 children were registered for individual follow-up due to specific needs or a specific concern about their well-being. Some 6,500 children were provided with blankets, recreational kits and other items to improve their living conditions.

With a particular focus on young children detained with their mothers, the ICRC monitored and provided supplemental feeding to cover their specific nutritional needs. For pregnant and lactating women, as well as youth detained individually, the ICRC supported prison authorities in ensuring adequate food supply by providing additional food or strengthening prison food chains.

Furthermore, where adults are detained, children may be missing a mother or father. In certain contexts, the ICRC also enables family members, including children, to visit a detained loved one, notably by facilitating contact between families and the administration in a place of detention, or by supporting travel costs. With ICRC support, around 280 children were able to visit a detained relative in 2022.





[Gaza Strip](#). “I spent all night yesterday thinking of the moment I will finally see my dad again. I wanted to tell him about school, my friends and how difficult life is without him, but also how good of a football player I’ve become,” says Ali. Since 1968, the ICRC has been running a family visit programme that enables people in the occupied territories to visit their relatives in Israeli detention facilities. (ICRC)

## Addressing the health needs of children, including those in places of detention

The ICRC works to reinforce reproductive health, including ante/post-natal care. The ICRC’s involvement in vaccination campaigns (cold chain, transport, supervision), particularly in difficult-to-access areas, benefits mostly children under five, and girls and women of child-bearing age. In certain contexts, the ICRC implements the Community Management of Acute Malnutrition approach to treat young children (under five years old) suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

The ICRC helps provide the necessary mental-health and psychosocial support to victims/survivors of violence, including sexual violence. This includes identifying children who have witnessed or experienced violence so that it can respond to their specific concerns and/or referring them to the appropriate services. ICRC efforts also seek to ensure that children have access to adequate care at primary-health-care centres, hospitals and physical rehabilitation centres. In some contexts, the quality of the curative consultation is reinforced thanks to a digital tool that integrates national health algorithms. The tool was developed by the ICRC and its partner, Swiss TPH (“Almanach”), and is deployed in coordination with health ministries.

In 2022, some 65,800 deliveries of babies took place in ICRC-supported hospitals and nearly 52,000 children received pediatric consultations. Of the 7,477 victims of sexual violence receiving mental-health support in the period covered, 1,362 were under 18 years of age; this support helped them better cope with the psychological impact of their experiences. A total of 79,817 children, of whom 32,882 girls, were admitted to ICRC-run or -supported physical rehabilitation centres. Over 3,140 children in places of detention received health services provided by ICRC staff.



[Afghanistan](#). Children with cerebral palsy can benefit from supportive treatment, such as physical therapy, which is provided free of charge at ICRC physical rehabilitation centres. These treatments improve patients’ quality of life and help them reach their full potential. Though a high number of cerebral palsy patients are being treated at these centres, more than 1,200 children in need of proper care are still on the waiting list. (ICRC)

## Protecting education

Protecting and ensuring access to education during conflict is enshrined in IHL. The ICRC carries out a holistic and multidisciplinary action which aims at preventing attacks on education facilities and personnel from occurring, mitigating the effects of attack on schools, military use of schools, and loss of access to schools. In addition to its dialogue with weapon bearers aimed at protecting access to education, the ICRC has rehabilitated schools near frontlines, distributed learning materials or cash, and raised awareness of mine-risks among children and their teachers.

In 2022, the ICRC addressed the issue of safe access to education benefiting tens of thousands of children in numerous contexts. The ICRC rehabilitated 134 education facilities supporting 539,523 children and their teachers. It also distributed cash grants and learning kits to several thousand children. The ICRC reached over 15,000 children and teachers with risk awareness and safer behaviour training, helping them better understand and respond to risks associated with conflict and thereby ensuring their safer access to education.



[Ukraine](#). “I want to go to school because I want to learn everything about this world.” Sofia suffered from multiple shrapnel injuries from an ordnance explosion. Despite around 50 pieces of shrapnel remaining in her body, she is an energetic and inquisitive child who spends hours studying online. The ICRC’s core activities focus on areas where few other humanitarian actors have access. These include the distribution of cash and learning materials for the most vulnerable children so they can continue their education, risk awareness and safer behaviour training, and the provision of construction materials so communities can repair schools damaged by hostilities. (ICRC)

## Looking ahead: the ICRC’s plans for 2023–2025

The ICRC will seek to maintain and further develop its expertise in its existing programmes that identify and respond to children’s needs in a holistic and appropriate way, focusing on their protection and the provision of health services. This will particularly be the case for delegations where significant numbers of children are registered or where specific protection concerns affect a large number of children. Building on its multidisciplinary expertise, the ICRC is also strengthening its capacity to achieve protection outcomes through assistance, by designing and providing assistance designed to protect livelihoods, reduce risks and avoid recourse to negative coping strategies that disproportionately impact children.

For example, the ICRC’s Economic Security programme plans to focus on: household income generation to help reduce youth enrollment in armed groups; supplemental nutrition projects to contribute to children’s development and education; and distributions of food, seed, or cash assistance to enable self-sufficiency and reduce displacement, thereby keeping children in school.

In 2023 and 2024, the ICRC’s data disaggregation framework will be implemented, with a view to building the organization’s capacity to operationalize data collection, analysis and usage of data disaggregated by sex, age and disability.

The ICRC commits to the continued development of its child protection capacity building offer, to ensure that all staff have the necessary knowledge and skills in their work with children affected by armed conflict. To do so, it will continue to develop bespoke and comprehensive e-learning modules on the topic. Trainers will be trained to ensure that child protection is mainstreamed in the ICRC’s onboarding and learning offers.

### 3. Equipping the ICRC to work with children in contexts of armed conflict

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The ICRC is committed to ensuring that its employees, operations and programmes do not cause harm to children. In pursuit of this commitment, the organization adopted a comprehensive Child Safeguarding Policy in 2022. This policy establishes clear standards of conduct for all staff members and outlines responsibilities for its successful implementation across all programmes and support functions. Its main objective is to ensure that adequate systems and safeguards are in place to prevent and respond to concerns related to the dignity and well-being of children, in particular with regard to harm resulting from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, employing children for labour that is hazardous or exploitative, and engaging in behaviour that is discriminatory or in violation of a child's privacy rights.

#### Looking ahead: the ICRC's plans for 2023–2025

The ICRC commits to rolling out child safeguarding policies, procedures and training. This will entail mapping risks across programmes, identifying high-risk delegations, and analysing existing operational strategies and guidelines for potential gaps regarding child safeguarding. Child safeguarding considerations will be embedded and mainstreamed in the ICRC's programmes and crisis response mechanisms, where relevant, and will be included in agreements between the ICRC and its operational partners. These initiatives will require the ICRC to build its staff's abilities to implement child safeguarding practices. For instance, communication campaigns and training tools will ensure that ICRC personnel are aware of relevant standards that must be observed when interacting with children.

The ICRC also intends to enhance the capacity of its Ethics, Risk and Compliance Office's Investigation Unit to observe a victim/survivor-centred approach when responding to misconduct allegations involving children, including through child-sensitive trust building and interview methods.

#### Funding Call

The suffering experienced by children in armed conflict and other situations of violence will not be resolved without the solid political and financial commitment of the international community.

In accordance with the mandate granted to it by states, the ICRC will continue to invest in the range of programmes and activities aimed at preventing violence, protecting and assisting children that we are already undertaking in many delegations across the world.

In particular, as demonstrated by the statistics, the ICRC's cross-cutting activities around the world benefit children directly. Focusing on contexts with a high level of impact on children, the ICRC will prioritize activities in Burkina Faso, Colombia, Central African Republic, the DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Israel and the occupied territories, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, Kampala (regional), Syria, and Yemen. The budget allocated to children in these contexts is estimated at 180,000,000 Swiss francs annually, for the years 2023 to 2025.

The ICRC urges donors to come forward with contributions to support its current and future funding needs to respond to the needs of children caught in armed conflict. It also encourages them to come forward with further contributions to the ICRC's Appeals 2023 for its operations worldwide.

For further information, please contact the ICRC's Resource Mobilization Division.

## ANNEX I - Global Protection Figures for 2022

	Total
<b>Civilians</b>	
<b>Red Cross Messages (RCMs) and other means of family contact</b>	
RCMs collected from separated children	2,142
RCMs distributed to separated children	1,294
<b>Reunifications</b>	
Separated children reunited with their families	1,425
Of whom demobilized children reunited with their families	102
<b>Tracing requests</b>	
New persons sought in the reporting period who were minors (<18 years old) at the time of disappearance	4,784
Tracing requests for minors (<18 years old) still being handled	41,285
<b>People deprived of their freedom</b>	
<b>ICRC visits</b>	
Minor detainees (<18 years old) in facilities visited by the ICRC	14,492
Minor detainees (<18 years old) monitored and visited individually	1,418
Of whom registered during the reporting period	1,291
<b>RCMs and other means of family contact</b>	
Minor detainees (<18 years old) visited by their relatives with ICRC support	279



## ANNEX II - Global Assistance Figures for 2022

		Total	Children	% Children
<b>Civilians</b>				
<b>Economic security</b>				
Food consumption	People	5,926,336	2,338,776	39%
Food production	People	8,093,176	2,638,990	33%
Income support	People	1,778,584	462,417	26%
Living conditions	People	4,985,641	1,699,754	34%
Capacity-building	People	65,542	12,341	19%
<b>Water and habitat</b>				
Water and habitat activities	People	52,986,519	17,407,375	33%
<b>Primary health care</b>				
Curative consultations		9,575,835	2,900,717	30%
Children <5 years old receiving a polio vaccine	People		1,294,962	100%
Children <5 years old attending growth monitoring consultations	People		2,125,659	100%
<b>People deprived of their freedom</b>				
<b>Economic security</b>				
Food consumption	People	86,136	1,332	2%
Living conditions	People	372,890	6,517	2%
<b>Water and habitat</b>				
Water and habitat activities	People	365,719	12,438	3%
<b>Wounded and sick</b>				
<b>Hospitals</b>				
Total number of paediatric admissions			51,199	100%
Weapon-wound admissions			51	100%
Non-weapon-wound admissions			23,468	100%
Total number of inpatient admissions in ICRC-supported hospitals		344,166	57,512	17%
Number of babies delivered in the hospital			65,804	100%
<b>First aid</b>				
Participants of first-aid training (aggregated monthly data)		57,226	23,004	40%
<b>Physical rehabilitation</b>				
People who benefited from ICRC-supported projects	Aggregated monthly data	319,665	79,817	25%
Of whom weapon-wounded people <18 years old		34,102	2,077	6%
Of whom victims of mine and explosive remnants of war		22,656	685	3%
<b>Services at physical rehabilitation centres supported regularly</b>				
Prostheses delivered	Units	17,557	1,907	11%
Orthoses delivered	Units	119,219	54,000	45%
Walking aids delivered	Units	50,685	5,530	11%
Wheelchairs or postural support devices delivered	Units	5,530	2,012	36%
<b>Mental health and psychosocial support</b>				
People who received mental-health support		27,877	4,566	16%