



**STATEMENT OF DR ALHAJI SARJOH BAH, DIRECTOR OF  
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, ON THE OCCASION OF THE  
MINISTERIAL AND HIGH-LEVEL OPEN SESSION ON THE  
PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE  
OF CHILDREN IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA**

**4 - 5 DECEMBER 2023**

**BANJUL, THE GAMBIA**

1. The AU has adopted several normative instruments to facilitate the structural prevention of conflicts. These instruments relate to human rights, good governance, and the fight against corruption. Collectively, they provide a consolidated framework of commonly accepted norms, standards, and principles whose observance can significantly reduce the risk of conflict and consolidate peace on our continent.
2. Specifically, the African (AU) has made significant progress in its efforts to prevent and respond to grave violations against children in the context of armed conflicts.
  - Key legal instruments and mechanisms have been developed, for example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) and its monitoring body (the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child), ACERWC General Comment on Article 22, Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children and the Model Law on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts.
  - Two *lex specialis* policies on child protection in AU Peace Support Operations and mainstreaming child protection in African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have been adopted in 2022. These policies provide a roadmap on how to mainstream child protection in all peace-making and

peace-building processes. They also provide a roadmap on how to ensure that child protection is integrated into AU PSOs and that PSOs play a role in the protection of children in situations of conflict.

3. The second strand of work is about the **prevention** of child rights violations within the theatre of conflict.

4. Over the years, the AU has put in place several mechanisms and tools as strategies for the PSOs to implement the strategic policies and/or frameworks designed by the HQ. These mechanisms are mission-specific, taking into account the specificities of each mission. Some of the mechanisms include:

- The protection of children in situations of conflict programme under the the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department to mainstream child protection in the whole conflict cycle grounded on four pillars:
  1. **Voice and visibility**
  2. **Coordination,**
  3. **Accountability** and
  4. **Capacity.**
- The Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts (AP CAAC) a platform of AU Member States has been successfully established and operationalised as a high-level advocacy, support and advisory mechanism.
- Mainstreaming child protection in AU PSOs including in mission-relevant documents. Troop and Police Contributing Countries (PCC/TCC) invest in training programs for law enforcement, military personnel, and judicial officials to ensure a deep understanding of child protection laws and best practices in preventing, investigating, and prosecuting crimes against children in conflict situations.
- A harmonised curriculum for child protection in AU PSOs has been developed, piloted and approved. Persons trained so far include AUC Staff members, AU Mission Leaders and child protection experts for deployment to AUPSOs.
- Development of Standard Operating Procedures on the treatment of children in conflicts and issuance of Force Commanders Directives on the treatment of children in conflicts captured by AU troops.

- The AUC is currently putting in place the selection and screening modalities to screen violators from being considered for future AU and UN mission deployments.

5. The third strand of AU interventions is focused on **Response and Remedial efforts**

- A Crisis Line where allegations of violations of child rights can be reported has been established,
- Activities of the CCTARC have been incorporated and the best interest of the child is considered when children in situations of conflict are arrested, with a significant focus on the rehabilitation of child survivors of grave child rights violations.

Despite these efforts, there are still challenges which need to be addressed in order to promote the rights and welfare of children in situations of conflict. These include limited resources, the low implementation rate of Decisions of key policy organs, and a lack of accountability against perpetrators.

**Recommendations:**

**African Union**

- i. Strengthen collaboration between the AU, RECs and RMs and T/PCCs in child protection in conflict situations, in addressing both preventative and responsive programmes.
- ii. Continental Early warning systems should mainstream child protection to ensure that indicators of potential violations against children in conflict are embedded therein and dedicated budget for child protection in conflict situations is provided.

**Regional Mechanisms and Regional Economic Communities**

- i. Adapting and implementing the two AU Child Protection Policies within their respective peace and security architectures by providing oversight and developing accountability mechanisms for the implementation of these policies.

- ii. Comprehensively deliver training to respective stakeholders. Training is essential to not only equipping personnel with the necessary knowledge and skills to address child-protection issues during PSOs, but to also shift attitudes by providing a space for introspection and the internalisation of child rights norms, principles, and values.
- iii. Provide the AU PSC with updates on the implementation of the Policies.

### **AU Member States**

- i. Ratify and domesticate key legal instruments for the protection of children in conflict situations, undertake law reform measures and adopt contextually based child protection architectures to serve as the first level of protection of children in conflict situations.
- ii. African leaders should put an end to impunity by strengthening national and continental judicial institutions and ensuring accountability in line with the principles of collective responsibility and non-indifference.
- iii. Meaningfully involve children in the process of demobilising, disarming and reintegration (DDR).
- iv. Children are to be provided with services such as family tracing and reunification, psychosocial support, basic health care and access to formal and vocational education. This may address the challenge of re-recruitment of children.
- v. T/PCCs should embark on thorough screening and vetting processes, including background and criminal checks of all civilian, military and police personnel during pre-deployment verifications.

If the cycle of abuse in the context of armed conflict is to be broken, more must be done to shatter the culture of impunity for those who commit these crimes. Ensuring that there is no safe haven for perpetrators is a critical element of post-conflict reconstruction and a deterrent in conflict prevention efforts. The AUC will continue its engagements with the RECs/RMs and Member States to enhance protection for children in conflict situations.