

CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN — DECONSTRUCTING THE UNSG REPORT

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The United Nations Secretary-General's (UNSG) report on Children and Armed Conflict in Afghanistan presents a troubling account of the protection environment for children under Taliban rule. Although the total number of verified grave violations declined during the reporting period -1 January 2023–31 December 2025 – the findings reveal a more complicated reality: humanitarian access deteriorated sharply, child recruitment increased, explosive ordnance continued to kill and maim children, and restrictions on education and women's participation further weakened Afghanistan's social and institutional resilience.

The Taliban emerged as the principal perpetrator identified in the report. The UN country task force verified 4,582 violations against 1,993 children between January 2023 and December 2025. Of the verified violations, 3,180 were attributed to Taliban forces, compared with 1,202 attributed to unidentified perpetrators.

This issue brief deconstructs the UN Secretary-General's report, highlighting its key findings, facts and figures, and broader implications.

Political and Security Context

The report situates violations against children within a political environment characterized by the Taliban's consolidation of territorial control, limited internal armed opposition, growing diplomatic contacts, and increasingly restrictive social policies.

According to the report, the period was marked by *“increasing restrictions on human rights, particularly affecting women and girls, and a stable, if weak, economy.”* This assessment captures an important distinction: relative political and territorial stability does not necessarily produce human security, particularly when state-like authorities themselves impose restrictions that undermine access to education, employment, and humanitarian assistance.

The Taliban’s governance structure also remains opaque. The report identifies tensions between officials managing administrative and technical affairs in Kabul and the leadership based in Kandahar. The periodic rotation of provincial governors, police chiefs, military commanders, and intelligence officials further weakens the continuity of negotiations with the UN. Meanwhile, Afghanistan continues to face overlapping humanitarian and economic pressures. Since September 2023, approximately 4 million Afghans have returned from neighboring countries. By December 2025, an estimated 23.2 million people, including 11.7 million children, required humanitarian assistance. The affected population included approximately 3.2 million internally displaced persons and 2.8 million Afghan returnees.

These figures illustrate the magnitude of Afghanistan’s challenge. Returnees arrive without adequate documentation, stable housing, livelihoods, or access to schools and health facilities. Children separated from family members or resettled in areas contaminated by explosive remnants of war face additional risks. Drought, water insecurity, malnutrition, chronic poverty, and limited public-service capacity compound these vulnerabilities.

While the report recorded a 38% decrease in violations compared with the preceding three-year period, the report explicitly acknowledges that its information *“does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed against children in Afghanistan.”* It also notes that decreased funding affected the monitoring and reporting mechanism.

Child Recruitment and Use

The report verified the recruitment and use of 557 boys, some as young as 12, by Taliban forces during the three-year reporting period. Of these, 342 cases were recorded in 2023, 11 in 2024, and 204 in 2025. The total represented an 81% increase compared with the preceding three-year period, when 308 cases were verified. Most of the boys were used in support roles, although the report records that 216 were used in both combat and support roles. Recruitment methods included persuasion by local leaders, relatives, or parents in 185 cases; the method was unknown in 372 cases. The report identifies persistent poverty and the continuing economic crisis as key drivers of recruitment.

Paragraph 35 notes that recruitment continued despite a March 2022 decree by the Taliban prohibiting recruitment of children into security institutions, a May 2022 decree by the de facto Minister of Defense prohibiting minors in the de facto army, and the announcement of a reform commission to demobilize children in October 2022. This discrepancy raises questions about the credibility of internal enforcement mechanisms.

There has nevertheless been measurable progress. The UN reports that 576 boys were released from Taliban forces during the period and enrolled in reintegration programs. These programs included case management, education, and vocational training. However, funding challenges delayed enrolments in 2024 and 2025.

Killing and Maiming

The report verified the killing of 446 children and the maiming of 969, producing a total of 1,415 child casualties. These included 1,094 boys, 310 girls, and 11 children whose sex was unknown. Verified casualties numbered 482 in 2023, 543 in 2024, and 390 in 2025. The most significant finding is the overwhelming contribution of explosive ordnance, including explosive remnants of war. Such incidents accounted for 1,128 child casualties, or approximately 80% of the total. The report identifies Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K), and the Haqqani Network for recruitment and use, and for killing and maiming of children, and for attacks on schools and/or hospitals.

These figures demonstrate that the consequences of armed conflict extend well beyond active fighting. Although verified child casualties fell by 28% between 2024 and 2025, the report associates this decline with concerted explosive ordnance risk education in affected communities.

Sexual Violence and Abduction

The UN verified 24 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, involving 8 boys and 16 girls. The cases included 14 instances of rape, 7 of forced marriage, 2 attempted rapes, and one sexual assault. 21 cases were attributed to Taliban personnel and 3 to unidentified perpetrators.

The report recorded a 29% decrease from the preceding three-year period. However, it explicitly warns that sexual violence is underreported because of social stigma. It indicates the difficulty of establishing the true scale of abuse in an environment where survivors may face significant social and personal risks if they report it. The report notes a weak rule of law and perceived impunity, as de facto authorities refer most cases to “*traditional dispute resolution mechanisms*” that prioritize

informal settlement. Abduction was recorded less frequently. This represented a 92% decrease from the preceding three-year period, when 88 cases were verified.

Erosion of Civilian Protection

The report verified 338 attacks on schools and hospitals, including attacks against protected persons associated with these facilities. This total comprised 163 attacks on schools and 175 on hospitals. Of the 163 school-related attacks, 146 were attributed to the Taliban, 15 to unidentified perpetrators, 1 to the Afghanistan Freedom Front, and 1 to Pakistan's armed forces.

The report records a decline from 60 school-related attacks in 2023 to 48 in 2024, followed by an increase to 55 in 2025. This suggests the latter increase may be linked to enforcement of the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, published on 21 August 2024. The report documents 175 attacks on hospitals and protected persons, of which 168 were attributed to the Taliban. These included interference in health activities, restrictions on women health workers, threats against personnel and facilities, and the arrest or detention of health personnel.

Military use of civilian facilities represents another serious concern. The task force verified the military use of 64 schools and one hospital, all attributed to the Taliban. This deprived approximately 32,500 children of access to education. The report also records that 39 schools previously used militarily by the Taliban since August 2021 were vacated during the reporting period.

Denial of Humanitarian Access

The report's most consequential finding is the denial of humanitarian access. The task force verified 2,241 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, compared with 775 in the preceding three-year period—an 189% increase. Of these incidents, 2,227 were attributed to the Taliban and 14 to unidentified perpetrators. In addition, the population of Afghanistan has been facing a multidimensional crisis characterized by recurrent natural hazards and climate shocks among many others.

The restrictions on women aid workers are particularly damaging. The Taliban reiterated the prohibition on women working for national and international NGOs and began strictly enforcing restrictions on Afghan women UN personnel accessing UN offices across the country. The consequences were immediate: women aid workers were removed from assisting Afghan returnees and the United Nations suspended some humanitarian operations.

Girls' Education and Women's Rights

The report treats restrictions on women and girls as a central component of Afghanistan's protection crisis. Girls remain barred from secondary education beyond sixth grade, while women face extensive restrictions on employment, including in humanitarian organizations.

The Secretary-General describes the indefinite suspension of girls' secondary education as "*a violation of their human rights*" and a significant driver of increased vulnerability (paragraph 38). The report links exclusion from education to reduced future employment opportunities, social isolation, psychological distress, and deteriorating mental health. The broader implication is that protecting children cannot be separated from women's rights and participation. This is especially consequential for girls, whose access to education and services may be restricted at the same time.

Taliban–UN Engagement

The report presents a mixed assessment of international engagement with the Taliban. Dialogue has produced practical achievements, most notably the release of 576 boys and their enrolment in reintegration programs. The task force also assisted 767 children—614 boys and 153 girls—with medical treatment, psychosocial support, referrals, and transportation to medical facilities. In addition, 490 stakeholders and child-protection actors, including 124 women, received awareness-raising support on monitoring standards and child protection.

These efforts demonstrate that engagement can generate tangible humanitarian outcomes even in a restrictive political environment. However, the report identifies serious institutional obstacles. The Taliban have not aligned their definition of a child with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The formal juvenile justice system remains deficient, and children continue to face corporal punishment. The absence of adequate child-protection laws, formal justice mechanisms, and victim-assistance services further limits accountability.

Implications for Pakistan and Regional Stability

The report is directly relevant to Pakistan because developments in Afghanistan have a direct impact on the country. It links humanitarian challenges inside Afghanistan to rising security challenges across the border and regional insecurity.

For Pakistan, the policy challenge is to address legitimate security concerns while minimizing harm to civilians and avoiding a cycle in which cross-border operations deepen instability. For the Taliban, preventing attacks originating from Afghan territory and engaging constructively in verifiable

security arrangements are important elements of regional responsibility. These objectives need not be treated as mutually exclusive.

While an absence of conflict can reduce immediate harm to civilians, its durability depends on agreed procedures for investigating alleged violations and preventing renewed escalation. The report's findings highlight how Afghanistan's multidimensional crisis and protection challenges also affect regional security, particularly by adding to its existing challenges with Pakistan.

Policy Recommendations

The report's findings point to the need for a coordinated approach that combines immediate protection measures with longer-term institutional reform. The following recommendations draw on the Secretary-General's proposals while identifying practical priorities for implementation.

1. The UN should maintain its monitoring and reporting mechanism and secure reliable access to children in detention facilities, recruitment centers, schools, and hospitals.
2. Donors should provide predictable funding for verification, protection services, and survivor support.
3. Reintegration programs need sustained financing, educational opportunities, vocational training, family support, and psychosocial care. Independent follow-up is necessary to reduce the risk of re-recruitment.
4. The Taliban should define a child as every person under 18, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the relevant international obligations identified in the report.
5. The Taliban should revoke restrictions that prevent Afghan women from working. Aid agencies should be able to assess needs and deliver assistance without arbitrary interference.
6. Parties to the conflict should avoid the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and take effective precautions to minimize civilian casualties.
7. The suspension of girls' secondary and higher education should be lifted, and schools should be protected from military use and coercive interference.
8. The Taliban should restore specialized juvenile justice mechanisms, permit independent access to children deprived of liberty, and ensure that detention is used only as a last resort.

9. Victims of sexual violence should have access to confidential reporting, medical treatment, psychosocial assistance, and justice.
10. Pakistan and the Taliban authorities should pursue a functioning ceasefire-monitoring mechanism, reliable communication channels, and procedures for investigating alleged civilian harm.
11. Regional facilitators can support negotiations.

Conclusion

The UNSG report presents a sobering assessment of the protection of children in Afghanistan. The decline in the overall number of verified grave violations is encouraging, but it does not outweigh the report's evidence of persistent recruitment, extensive harm from explosive ordnance, attacks on educational and health facilities, and a sharp increase in the denial of humanitarian access. The child-protection crisis in Afghanistan is not solely a consequence of armed conflict; it is also shaped by governance choices that restrict rights, obstruct humanitarian operations, and weaken accountability. The report's findings expose a major gap between the Taliban's formal commitments and their implementation.

The central policy implication is that Afghanistan's child-protection crisis requires measurable changes in Taliban conduct, sustained international monitoring, protection of humanitarian space, explosive ordnance clearance, and accessible education and reintegration programs. International engagement has produced some tangible results, but its effectiveness remains limited by the lack of institutional accountability and the authorities' continued restrictions on fundamental rights.

The critical issue, therefore, is not simply whether the Taliban can maintain territorial control. It is whether the authorities can translate territorial control into institutions that can protect vulnerable populations. The report findings suggest that this transformation has not occurred and that the Taliban's cooperation remains selective and insufficiently institutionalized.