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**71<sup>st</sup> session of the General Assembly**

**Statement H.E. Peter Thomson,  
Informal Meeting to Commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
the Mandate on Children and Armed Conflict**

Ms. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General,

Ms. Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a tragic reality that in situations where armed conflict breaks out, and law and order breaks down, it is our children who are the main bearers of the devastating consequences of war.

Among the incomprehensible horrors that take place in the chaos of warzones, unconscionable crimes, violations, exploitation, and abuse are perpetrated against the most vulnerable members of our societies – namely our children.

The decision by the General Assembly 20 years ago to adopt resolution 51/77 was a landmark development in our global efforts to improve the protection of children in conflict situations.

Following the devastating findings of the report of Graça Machel, Resolution 51/77 heralded the start of a new consensus among Member States, on the need for dedicated attention, advocacy and coordinated effort, by the international community, to address the particular vulnerabilities and violations faced by children in conflict-related situations.

Resolution 51/77 built on existing General Assembly efforts to protect the rights of children, including through the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol, and the annual Rights of the Child resolutions. And it established the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

Over the two decades that have followed the creation of this mandate, the achievements secured by successive SRSGs are clear. More than 115,000 child soldiers have been released from armed forces and groups, thousands of former child soldiers have received dedicated reintegration services, and accountability for perpetrators of violations against children have increased.

To this end, I would like to recognize the work of Graça Machel, and successive Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, Olara Otunnu, Radhika Coomaraswamy, and Leila Zerrougui, for their dedicated leadership and service to the protection of children in armed conflict over the years.

Excellencies,

While today we mark the progress that has been made over the last 20 years, it is also a stark reminder of the scale of violations that continue to be perpetrated against children in conflict situations across our world.

The six most common violations continue unabated, including recruitment and use, killing and maiming, acts of sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.

Indeed, in recent years, the number of grave violations perpetrated against children have, in many conflict-zones, increased rather than decreased.

As we embark on the third decade of the mandate, it is clear that far more needs to be done.

More needs to be done to protect the 250 million children living in countries and areas affected by conflict. We must help the 17 million refugee children for whom physical insecurity, discrimination, and a lack of access to basic services, compounds their vulnerability.

More must be done to end indiscriminate attacks in populated areas, and to protect children from targeting by violent extremists.

More needs to be done to ensure that the 75 million children, across 35 countries, who have had their education disrupted due to conflict or emergency, are able to access quality schooling.

And more needs to be done to increase access to health, trauma and other basic services to children affected by armed conflict, taking into account the particular needs of girls. The list of moral imperatives goes on.

More needs to be done to support former child soldiers gain the skills they need to reclaim their lives and reintegrate into their communities.

More must be done to promote international humanitarian and human rights law, and to ensure accountability for violations of the rights of children.

And, perhaps most importantly, more must be done to end conflicts, and to support conflict prevention activities that build resilience and stability in local populations, reduces their risk to violence and exploitation, reaps lasting economic and social benefits, and ultimately, sustains peace.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides us with the universal masterplan to achieve just that.

Through implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, we will be able to realize a world where the human rights of all people are promoted and protected. We will live in a world in which all people are able to live in peaceful and inclusive societies, in which extreme poverty is eradicated, climate change is combated, prosperity is grown and shared, the environment is protected, and where children are able to grow up free from violence and exploitation, with full access to quality education.

For this future to be achieved, we must stay true to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We should begin by ensuring that all stakeholders work coherently and cooperatively to protect the rights of children in conflict.

In scaling up investment in SDG implementation, we should be vigilant that adequate, predictable and sustained financing is being provided for child protection programming, advisors and services.

Excellencies,

Our children are our future. We have a moral responsibility to come together and protect them during their hour of greatest need.

In closing, let me leave you with the story of Deng Adut. Deng was born in South Sudan and conscripted to become a child soldier at the age of 8.

In describing his experience later in life Deng said – and I quote – “As they took me away from my home and family, I didn’t even understand what freedoms I had lost. I didn’t understand how fearful I should have been. I was young. I was ignorant. I lost the freedom to read and write. I lost the freedom to sing children’s songs. I lost the right to be innocent. I lost the right to be a child. In place of the love of life I was taught to love the death of others. I saw too much abuse and death among my friends during the war. I sustained physical abuse from my superiors. I was a child soldier and I was expected to kill or be killed.”

Following the war, when Deng moved to Australia at the age of fourteen, he described himself as “an illiterate, penniless teenager, traumatized physically and emotionally by war”.

In Australia, Deng was able to attend school, obtain a Law degree and a Masters’ degree. He became a lawyer, and this year was nominated for Australian of the year.

Deng’s story is one of millions that lay bare both the horrors of war and the potential of all children to succeed if only given the opportunity.

Let us give them that opportunity by pursuing the protection of children in armed conflict as a high priority in our commitments to peace and security, sustainable development, and a human rights priority.

I thank you.