



## Backgrounder: Resolute Support's Role in Helping to Protect Children in Armed Conflict

The long-standing conflict in Afghanistan significantly and disproportionately impacts children in a number of ways. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), child casualties remained at high levels during the first six months of 2017, accounting for 30 percent of all civilian casualties. Attacks on schools and hospitals by the Taliban, Daesh and other terrorist groups pose a serious security risk to children, as well as impeding access to education and healthcare. Poverty continues to push children towards recruitment by armed actors. The Afghan National Police have arrested members of human trafficking rings, saving dozens of children intended to be smuggled into Pakistan to be trained as suicide bombers for the Taliban.

The detention of children on security-related charges and association with armed groups remains an area of focus. The example of sexual violence against boys and young adults in the abusive practice of *Bacha Bazi* continues to be reported in the media while the confirmation of those reports proves to be difficult. Despite formidable challenges, the Government of Afghanistan has recently demonstrated commendable progress towards ending and preventing grave violations against children. These initiatives have included:

- A Presidential Decree criminalizing underage recruitment by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (entered into force in February 2015);
- Tangible steps to prevent child recruitment including the establishment of 32 child protection units (CPUs) in Afghan National Police recruitment centres across Afghanistan, and the endorsement of age assessment guidelines (to date, more than 490 children have been prevented from recruitment by CPUs and the Ministry of Interior has shown commitment to expand the initiative to all 34 provinces in the country);
- Afghanistan signed the Safe Schools Declaration and the Ministry of Education issued directives to stop the use of schools for military purposes;
- President Ghani signed a new revised Penal Code (5 May 2017) into law through a Presidential Decree, with more than 900 articles, that includes a chapter on criminalizing *Bacha Bazi*. The code is an impressive effort to work to end this human rights violation by providing stringent accountability measures and well-constructed legal definitions to support prosecutions.

Promoting initiatives to help protect children in armed conflict is an important priority for the Alliance and the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, in support of the United Nations as the international community lead. In January 2017, General John Nicholson, Resolute Support commander, met in New York with the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to discuss measures, in partnership with the international community, to improve the situation of children in Afghanistan.

Resolute Support seeks to integrate child protection in its work in the following ways:

- The establishment in April 2016 of a senior child protection advisor at RS headquarters in Kabul, working for the commander of NATO and U.S. forces on issues related to children in armed conflict. This appointment, funded by Germany, provides a focal point to ensure relevant initiatives are coordinated with the international community, like-minded organizations such as the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict, and the Child Protection Section of UNAMA.



- The enhancement of pre-deployment and in-theatre training of RS personnel on issues related to children in armed conflict. Relevant instruction is now included in pre-deployment training taking place four times a year at NATO's Joint Force Training Centre in Bydgoszcz, Poland. In addition, children in armed conflict training is provided twice a year to incoming key leaders, and twice a month to incoming advisors to the train, advise, assist mission. RS personnel can also access an online NATO-distributed learning course on Children and Armed Conflict developed with the support of the United Nations in New York.
- The integration of training on children in armed conflict issues into the RS core mission of training, advising and assisting Afghan security forces and institutions. With the support of UNAMA – and in conjunction with the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies – a training course was developed within RS for the top 120 leaders from Afghanistan's ministries of defense and interior.
- The creation of Child Protection Focal Points in each of the RS regions and functional areas.<sup>1</sup> These points of contact provide the means to support related programming and initiatives throughout the country, as well as to monitor and report through the chain of command if any violations related to children in armed conflict including sexual violence are observed by RS personnel.
- The implementation of NATO Standing Operating Procedure 307, that mandates information collection on child rights violations, in a manner similar to the UN Security Council Resolution 1612 "monitoring and reporting mechanism". This instruction was developed in close partnership with the UN to ensure that data collected and shared relates to the six grave violations tracked by the UN. In the event information reported includes violations alleged to have been committed by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, this information is shared with the respective human rights committees in the ministries of defense and interior. Both committees are required to conduct an investigation and to report back to RS on progress and findings.
- The ongoing support of RS staff to various senior Afghan officials and institutions including Afghanistan's Office of National Security Council, to address instances and allegations of human rights abuses of youth in custody.
- Active support for the development of the Child Protection Policy of Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense signed on 2 December 2017 in the presence of high-level representatives of the international community as well as the RS commander. The policy will support the Government of Afghanistan to better fulfil its international obligations with respect to preventing violations and improving the protection of children.

The effective implementation of the Alliance's Children and Armed Conflict policy remains an ongoing priority for RS. The train, advise, and assist mission provides valuable insight into the structures and networks within the Afghan defense and interior ministries, and helps to support UN, international community and Afghan efforts to further implementation of the Child Protection Policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Including North (Mazar-E-Sharif), East (Gamberi), South (Kandahar), West (Herat), and Capital (Kabul)