

Advocating for Children Trapped in the Midst of Armed Conflicts

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Natural and human-made disasters, including civil unrest, terrorism, biological and chemical threats, and war, have affected the world on a recurring basis.¹ These events have caused suffering and misery to populations and have revealed a low degree of self-sufficiency and a high degree of unpreparedness on the part of governments to deal with the consequences.¹ Natural and human-made adversity typically generate public health crises and economic instability,² with lasting negative effects on the socioeconomic status of populations of all ages. These adverse effects affect children, who are among the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society and rarely consulted when communities make decisions that directly affect them.

War is one of the world's most devastating events, requiring short-term interventions and complex long-term recovery planning, articulated in 4 phases—mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery³—that focus on the rights of children who are in vulnerable circumstances and, therefore, at greater risk of harm.

This commentary, authored by members of the board of directors of the European Pediatric Association–Union of National Pediatric Societies and Associations (EPA-UNEPSA), briefly discusses the plight of children exposed to situations of terror and horror during war, including severe loss and disruption in their lives, which can result in the lasting effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Our goal is to raise awareness among pediatricians and public health authorities of the importance of developing programs directed toward the rehabilitation of children affected by war, including social healing and peace culture education, as a key approach to primary prevention of the recurrence of war.

Children Affected by Armed Conflict Are at Increased Risk of Serious Violations of Their Human Rights

EPA-UNEPSA align with the American Academy of Pediatrics in defining armed conflict as any organized dispute involving the use of weapons, violence, or force, whether within national borders or across them, and involving state actors or non-governmental entities. Included in this definition are international wars, civil wars, and conflicts between other types of groups, such as ethnic conflicts.⁴

Armed conflict has escalated over the past decade in several parts of the world, including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Myanmar, pushing millions of children and their communities to the brink.⁵ The number of children affected by armed conflict has risen by over 100% in the past decade.

Some 450 million children—about a quarter of the world's children—live in countries affected by conflict of varying nature and intensity and affected by disasters⁵ (Figure; available at www.jpeds.com). In particular, armed conflict is estimated to have killed more than two million children and physically maimed 6 million more. More than 45 million have been forcibly displaced from their homes, increasing their exposure to severe loss and hardship and making them vulnerable to exploitation and violence.^{6,7} Conflict deprives children of their parents, caregivers, basic social services, health care and education.⁸ Humanitarian organizations, including the World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, estimate that there are currently some 20 million displaced or refugee children in the world as a result of armed conflict.^{9,10} However, the recent armed conflict in Eastern Europe, Ukraine, showed that such events might not take place gradually but happen unexpectedly, therefore, generating complex humanitarian emergencies.¹¹ Children can be caught up in violence while being cut off from essential medical care, clean water and food.

Of the estimated 8 million refugees who fled Ukraine by the end of March 2022, more than 1.8 million children are estimated to have crossed into neighboring countries as refugees and 2.5 million are internally displaced within Ukraine, which is one of the fastest large-scale displacements of children since World War II.¹² Many of them are unaccompanied or have been separated from their parents or family members. Complex humanitarian emergencies affecting children trapped in the midst of armed conflict can result in various types of exploitation that produce profound short- and long-term impacts on children's lives. In this regard, humanitarian organizations have sounded a strong alarm^{9,10} about the trafficking risks faced by children living in Ukraine. These include the sale of abducted children, forced labor, illegal adoption, forced organ donation and various forms of sexual exploitation.¹²⁻¹⁴ Additional issues include the monitoring of children's vaccination status and the possibility for them to use the public health system of the hosting countries.

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Protecting Displaced Children

When these children are moved across borders, the risks of their human rights being violated multiply. Neighboring and affected countries must ensure the immediate identification and registration of unaccompanied and separated children fleeing conflict, once they have been allowed access to their territory.¹⁰

Under international human rights and humanitarian law, governments and all parties involved in conflict have an obligation to protect the rights of displaced children. Authorities responsible for protecting displaced children should be made aware of their rights and ensure their protection through strengthening national and local institutional capacities to address internal displacement. Part of the blueprint for an effective protection strategy is the designation of national institutional focal points to address internal displacement.¹¹ This includes offices dedicated to addressing the plight of internally displaced children and ensuring that all relevant national authorities, including the military and police, receive adequate training that effectively empowers them to deal with such emergencies in the short and long term. States should provide safe spaces for children and families immediately upon crossing borders, and link them to national child protection systems.¹¹ As the current emergency also calls for rapid expansion of the capacity of emergency assistance agreements with selected caregivers, as well as other services for child protection, including against gender-based violence, and family tracing and reunification mechanisms.

As demonstrated during the recent armed conflict that erupted in Eastern Europe, children also may be exposed to mishandling of their plight. For example, children displaced across borders without their families and temporarily under various forms of foster care by local or external authorities or other community-based care are often offered critical protection. However, adoption should not occur during or immediately following emergencies. Instead, every effort should be made to reunite children with their families, as such reunification is in the best interests of the children.^{15,16}

Special attention also should be paid to children living in institutions and boarding schools. Although humanitarian evacuations may, in particular circumstances, be a life-saving effort to ensure the safety of these children by relocating them to neighboring countries or beyond, it is essential that, in the best interests of the children, extraordinary measures be taken after obtaining the consent of the family or guardian.

Fostering Resilience in Children Affected by Armed Conflict and Displacement

Several studies have emphasized that a child's ability to manage their well-being, develop resilience and adapt to and cope with adverse events is the product of highly complex processes that result from the interplay of risk and

protective factors at individual, family, community and sociocultural levels. Children and adolescents who have experienced significant adversity, such as armed conflict, are at risk of failing to cope.² Resilience processes have been extensively articulated.¹⁷ They are therefore both historically and culturally determined and the result of long-term planned educational programs. The reshaping of life resulting from adversity brings significant challenges because of the need to adapt to new circumstances. Therefore, understanding the complex pathways and processes by which children adapt to adverse conditions and recover from stress and trauma is critical to developing effective interventions to support the well-being of youth affected by conflict and displacement.¹⁸

Caring for Children After Armed Conflict Ends

Disasters affect children differently from adults. Specific short- and long-term needs characterize children's lives after armed conflict ends. They include, tracing of family members, reparation and social reintegration, psychosocial rehabilitation programs, participation in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs. In this regard, EU countries are pursuing the creation of a forum to follow up on the Paris Commitments,¹⁹ focusing on coordinating and facilitating international support for such programs. In particular, reintegration of children through investments that aim to adopt an inclusive approach, prioritize family reunification, and provide support, including financial support, to enable full reintegration into civilian life.

Conclusions

By protecting children from harm in armed conflict, we keep hope alive and commence the preparation of children to forge a peaceful future for themselves and their countries. By acting together, pediatricians, allied child health care providers, public health professionals, researchers, and policymakers can effectively address the impact of armed conflict on children as a critical and priority issue, and insist with national and international leaders that protecting children during armed conflict is the cornerstone of our shared humanity.^{20,21} EPA-UNEPSA is fully committed to advocating for children, protecting them from violence, abuse, and exploitation, and providing the services necessary to help every child, of every age, everywhere, overcome armed conflict with hope for a better future. ■

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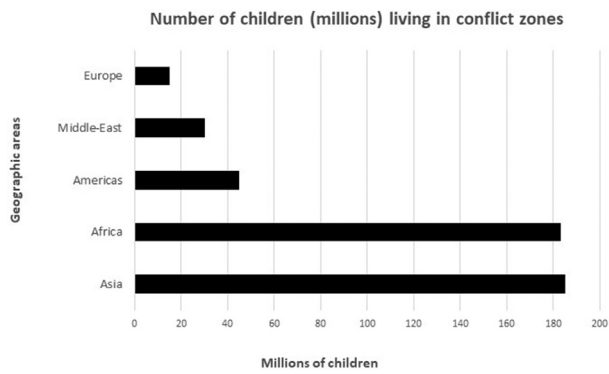


Figure. Geographic distribution of 450 million of conflict-affected children. Data elaborated by the EPA-UNEPSA working group on social pediatrics.