Save the Children

STOP THE WAR ON CHILDREN



CANADA SPOTLIGHT

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. In Canada and around the world, we do whatever it takes–every day and in times of crisis–so children can fulfil their rights to a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. With over 100 years of experience, we are the world's first and leading independent children's organization–transforming lives and the future we share.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Canadian edition of the Stop the War on Children report was written by Abigail Adams-Gopsill, with support from Emilie Galland-Jarrett and Thea Charlotte Andersen, as well as other colleagues across the Save the Children movement who provided expert comments and review.

© Save the Children 2025
Cover page design: Afarin Alsharif
Graphic design: Torsum Khan, Eva Amdam, and Afarin Alsharif
Copy-editor: Jessica Bryant

This publication is copyrighted but may be reproduced by any method without fee or prior permission for teaching purposes, but not for resale. For copying in any other circumstances, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher, and a fee may be payable.

Want to explore the data we make use of here in more detail? Check out:
data.stopwaronchildren.org/

Save the Children

GLOBAL REPORTS ON THE WAR ON CHILDREN



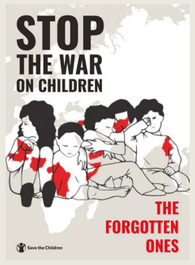
Stop the war on children – security for whom? 2025



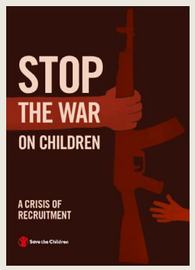
Stop the war on children – pathways to peace, 2024



Stop the war on children – let children live in peace, 2023



Stop the war on children – the forgotten ones, 2022



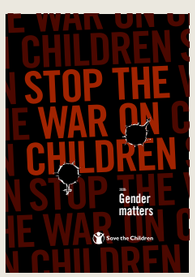
Stop the war on children – a crisis of recruitment, 2021



Weapon of war – sexual violence against children in conflict, 2021



Stop the war on children – killed and maimed, 2020



Stop the war on children – gender matters, 2020

INTRODUCTION

"Many terrible things happen to children if they are not protected. For example, they cannot go alone into the forest, because many are killed there. I wish all children could be kept away from war."

These words, from 13-year-old Dieu Merci*—who lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo— capture the stark reality behind the Stop the War on Children report.

41,763 grave violations against children in conflict were verified last year, a 30% increase from 2023. On average, 78 children a day were subjected to killing, maiming, abduction, recruitment as soldiers, or sexual abuse.

Far from just statistics, these numbers represent an urgent call to action. Countries like Canada have a responsibility to protect children affected by conflict.

The Canadian spotlight of Stop the War on Children examines how Canada is putting its legal and policy commitments to protecting children in armed conflict into practice.

Canada has a long-standing history of leadership on issues affecting children, including the Ottawa Treaty, the Vancouver Principles, and the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict. Yet leadership on paper is not enough, and Canada's actions have not always lived up to its commitments.

With grave violations against children at record levels, and to maintain its global leadership, Canada must turn ambition and values into concrete action. Canada needs to make sure that foreign and defence policies uphold international law, including children's rights, and that aid efforts focus on protecting and supporting children in the most dangerous conflict zones.

This means backing up international commitments with stronger domestic measures, increased financial investment, and a child-centred approach in all aspects of its foreign policy. Canada also needs to do more to enforce the Arms Trade Treaty, consistently monitor and protect children's rights in every conflict, and invest more in child protection programs.

In Dieu Merci's words, "For me, security means protecting people." Upholding this commitment demands global cooperation to ensure that every child is protected and has the opportunity to build a better future.



Danny Glenwright

President and CEO,
Save the Children



*Name changed to protect identity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Save the Children's annual Stop the War on Children report maps states' legal and political commitments to protecting children in armed conflict, placing Canada among the top 48 UN member states that had endorsed all, or nearly all, of the international instruments (treaties, declarations) tracked in the analysis.[1]

This spotlight examines how Canada's commitments on paper have translated into tangible impact. Specifically, it examines the actions Canada has taken to strengthen child protection in the ten countries where children were most affected by conflict through:



1 DEMONSTRATED POLITICAL WILL AND LEADERSHIP



2 FUNDING



3 COMMITMENT TO CHILD-CENTRED ACCOUNTABILITY

The assessment across the three dimensions yields mixed results. Canada demonstrates strong political will and leadership on protection of children in armed conflict, particularly on the international stage. It has championed the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, and continues to hold leadership roles in the Groups of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict at both global and country levels.

Domestically, Canada has integrated key legal and political instruments on the protection of children in armed conflict into national legislation, often acting as an early adopter in signing, ratifying, and implementing relevant treaties.[2] However, gaps remain, notably in the implementation and enforcement of the Rome Statute, the Arms Trade Treaty, and political commitments such as the Safe Schools Declaration.

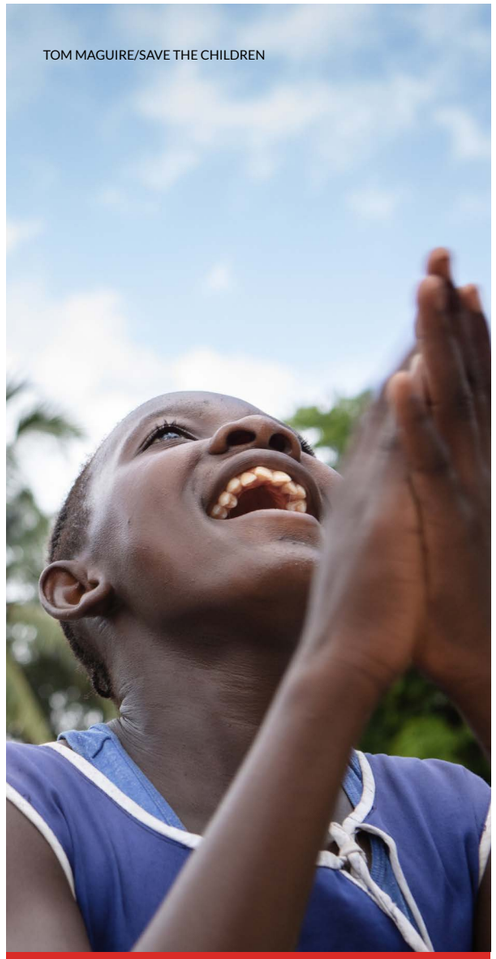
In official messaging, children are often overlooked, except in references to those associated with armed forces and in the context of gender equality. This messaging was also inconsistent, with the child-focused messaging appearing more prominently in the contexts where Canada is most vocal in its condemnation, regardless of the severity of children's experiences.

Canada's commitment to child-centred accountability remains uneven and context-specific. Canada has engaged in accountability processes before international courts in three of the ten conflict contexts most affecting children but has explicitly addressed children's experiences in only one of these cases. In two others, Canada demonstrated a broader capacity for accountability beyond formal court interventions, including through coalition leadership and additional support to investigations.

1 See page 46 here: Stop the War on Children: Pathways to peace | Save the Children's Resource Centre
2 The laws that incorporate international commitments into domestic obligations

A more consistently child-centred approach is reflected in Canada's engagement with the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process[3]: in the latest UPR cycle, Canada referenced the experiences of children in all but three of the ten most affected countries—the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, and Syria.

Canada demonstrates that strong leadership in the development of international legal and political instruments can position a country as a champion for children affected by armed conflict. However, such leadership must be matched by consistent domestic implementation, sustained financial commitment, and child-centred accountability. States seeking to enhance their impact should ensure that ratified treaties are fully implemented, political commitments are translated into action, and the rights and experiences of children are consistently prioritized in public messaging and diplomatic engagement. Increasing earmarked funding for child protection and related programming is proven to safeguard children in conflict settings and embedding child-specific considerations within accountability processes—including international court interventions and UPR submissions—are critical steps toward a more comprehensive and effective protection agenda.



TOM MAGUIRE/SAVE THE CHILDREN



PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN

Canada's funding for child protection remains limited and is declining. Disbursements dropped from USD 9 million in 2023 (1.4% of overall Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) spending), to around USD 2 million in 2024 (0.4% of overall ODA spending), with Canada's ranking falling from 14th to 29th among donors.

3 The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique mechanism of the Human Rights Council that calls for each UN Member State to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years. The UPR provides each State the opportunity to regularly:
- Report on the actions it has taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights; and
- Receive recommendations – informed by multi-stakeholder input and pre-session reports – from UN Member States for continuous improvement.

POLITICAL WILL & LEADERSHIP

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AGENDA


MOHAMMED ZAANOUN/SAVETHECHILDREN

Canada has sought to position itself as a global leader in championing the protection of children in armed conflict[4] and has played a significant role in advancing this agenda internationally. It led the global movement to ban landmines—a weapon that disproportionately harms children—resulting in the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, also known as the Ottawa Treaty. As the host of the Vancouver Principles, Canada has also been at the forefront of efforts to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers. In 2024, the Government of Canada submitted their Pledge on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict to the Red Cross and Red Crescent. According to this report, Canada's sustained engagement has contributed to 18 new endorsements of the Vancouver Principles during this period. Concurrently, the Minister of National Defence released the Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles, providing endorsing Member States with practical guidance on translating the Principles into action.

Canada has also assumed leadership roles in the Groups of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC). In 2005, Canada established—and continues to chair—the Group of Friends at the United Nations in New York.[5] In addition, Canada chairs or co-chairs the Groups of Friends in Colombia, DRC, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, and Sudan.[6] At the New York level, these meetings have raised awareness and developed momentum for child protection within UN Member States, with briefings from civil society organizations. They have led to some global joint initiatives, such as joint statements at the UN Security Council Open Debate.[7] At the country level, these groups support the implementation of an action plan on children and armed conflict.[8] As chair of several of these groups, Canada has convened local interest holders, including diplomatic staff from donor countries, to engage in advocacy with state and non-state parties to conflicts to push for the implementation of the recommendations and conclusions on Children and Armed Conflict outlined by the UN Secretary-General. These efforts have helped keep child protection consistently on national agendas.

4 https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/armed_conflict-conflits_armes.aspx?lang=eng
5 Working with Member States – Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict
6 Canada chairs or co-chairs the Group of Friends in Colombia, DRC, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, and Sudan
7 Statement by the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
Joint Statement - UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
8 Action Plans – Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

INTEGRATION OF LEGAL AND POLITICAL INSTRUMENTS IN DOMESTIC GOVERNANCE

Canada has been actively engaged in consultations on legal and political instruments promoting child protection at the UN level and has been among the first countries to sign or ratify these mechanisms. Of the instruments central to the protection of children in armed conflict, Canada has federal legislation implementing all but the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. However, the successful implementation of these instruments varies.

Canada was the first country to pass domestic legislation to implement the Rome Statute[9] through the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act in 2000[10]. However, Canada has faced criticism for a conservative approach to enforcement, with a limited juridical response to investigations and prosecutions.[11]

Similarly, although Canada acceded to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in 2019, it has been criticized for "under-implementing" key aspects of the Treaty. While the Export and Import Permits Act provides strict regulatory oversight over most arms exports, certain provisions, particularly those under Articles 5, 6, and 7, are either weakly incorporated into domestic law or overlooked.[12] For example, the lack of provisions under ATT Article 6 means that there is no absolute prohibition on exporting Canadian arms that could be used to commit serious violations of international law, including crimes against humanity, attacks on civilian objects, or protected civilians, or other war crimes.

The political commitments of relevance to children affected by armed conflicts are in different stages of implementation. Throughout publicly available policy documents and military guidelines, Canada's primary concern regarding children in armed conflict is the recruitment and use of child soldiers. In 2007, Canada endorsed the Paris Commitments, and in 2017, became the first NATO member to formalize a policy on children associated with armed forces or groups with the release of the *Joint Doctrine Note on Child Soldiers*.[13] The subsequent adoption of the Vancouver Principles builds on and complements the Paris Commitments and has emerged as Canada's priority.

In 2017, Canada endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), committing to integrate its principles into the planning and conduct of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in armed conflict. In 2019, Canada pledged to the Red Cross and Red Crescent that a military directive was being drafted to guide the development of future operations through the SSD lens. As of this writing, the directive is not publicly available.

Canada was also among the first group of states to endorse the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), which recognizes children's particular vulnerability, and was actively involved throughout its drafting and consultation process.[14] The government reported that it had disseminated the EWIPA declaration to Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Department of National Defence, and the CAF, and had nominated a Director for Humanitarian Policy to oversee implementation.[15] Full implementation appears to still be in the consulting and review phase. The Vancouver Principles, spearheaded by Canada, are in the middle stages of implementation in the CAF through a Chief of Defence Staff Directive.[16]


MOHAMMED ZAANOUN/SAVETHECHILDREN

9 Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act
10 Canada and the International Criminal Court
11 Canada and Germany: Cowardice and Courage in Implementation of the Rome Statute | CanLII
12 Canada's Regulation of Weapons Exports: "Under-implementation" of the Arms Trade Treaty | Global Justice Journal
13 Preventing Child Soldiers: How Can The CAF Contribute?
14 State Positions - Canada - Explosive Weapons Monitor
15 State Positions - Canada - Explosive Weapons Monitor
16 This directive identifies six lines of effort: (1) joint doctrine; 2) Child Protection Focal Points; 3) strategic and operational-level processes; 4) training and education; 5) mental health; and 6) Vancouver Principles network) So far, the CAF has succeeded in announcing a Joint Doctrine Note and establishing pre- and post- deployment training for CAF personnel for encountering child soldiers.



ZAID SHAKER/SAVE THE CHILDREN

PRIORITY IN OFFICIAL MESSAGING[17]

In official messaging from the Prime Minister's Office and GAC, children are often overlooked, and references to them vary in consistency across contexts. Children are referenced most frequently in messaging on Ukraine, with particular emphasis on unaccompanied and separated children taken to Russia. In these statements, Canadian officials have taken a legalistic tone, often referencing specific accountability mechanisms and Canada's leadership in child protection. A similar tone is taken in relation to Myanmar, with explicit reference to the specific impact of the violence on children, including the death toll. Children are referenced less frequently in relation to the conflict in Gaza, with Canada emphasizing humanitarian aid and civilian protection while giving limited attention to accountability or legal mechanisms. Consistent with its leadership on the Vancouver Principles, Canada has primarily focused on children associated with armed forces or groups, and across parties to the conflict, in Central African Republic (CAR), the DRC, Mali, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria. The unique experiences of children are often subsumed under the broader category of "women and girls," particularly in peacebuilding and development contexts. Overall, children are often absent from Canada's official messaging on these crises, and when mentioned, references to accountability mechanisms for children in conflict and the tone are inconsistent across contexts.



CRISTINA BAUSSAN/SAVE THE CHILDREN

17 Through a scrape of all official statements, news releases, read outs, backgrounders, and speeches from the Prime Minister's Office and Global Affairs Canada, over 150 sources were identified that referenced at least one of the target countries in addition to a set of key words [child, children, boy(s), girl(s)].

FUNDING

While Canada is not the largest contributor to funding for child protection, it has consistently directed the majority of its resources to some of the top ten conflict countries where children were most affected. Over the assessment period, Canada reported more than USD 15 million in funding specifically for child protection to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).[18] In 2023, the bulk of this funding was allocated to Syria, the occupied Palestinian territory and Ukraine; in 2024, to Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Syria.

There is a declining trend in Canada's child protection funding, from just over USD 9 million in 2023 (1.4% of overall spending), to around USD 2 million in 2024 (0.4% of overall spending). In this period, Canada fell from the 14th to 29th largest donor for child protection. This decline in funding is leaving children at risk at a time when their need for protection in conflict is unprecedented. Humanitarian organizations, such as Save the Children, are forced to prioritize one crisis over another and scale back life-saving programming. This, in turn, worsens global insecurity, instability, and poverty, laying the ground for future crises.



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

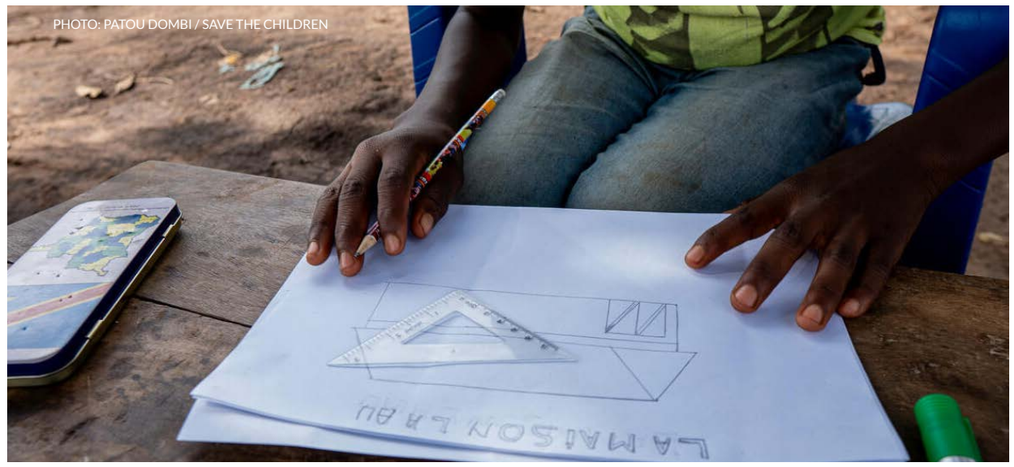


PHOTO: PATOU DOMBI / SAVE THE CHILDREN

18 https://fts.unocha.org/donors/2928/countries/2025?f%5B0%5D=destinationGlobalClusterIdName%3A12%3AProtection%20-%20Child%20Protection

COMMITMENT TO CHILD-CENTRED ACCOUNTABILITY

ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUSTICE MECHANISMS

Out of the ten conflict countries where children were the most affected, Canada has been involved in the International Criminal Court (ICC) and International Court of Justice (ICJ) cases concerning Ukraine, Syria, and Myanmar. In the cases of Ukraine and Myanmar, Canada has also demonstrated accountability beyond formal court interventions and statements, for example by leading coalitions and providing extra support to investigations.

From publicly available court documents, Canada has placed limited emphasis on children in the ICC case concerning Ukraine.[19] However, Canada has taken several actions outside of the courtroom to support the protection of children in Ukraine. At the request of the ICC Prosecutor, Canada provided a voluntary contribution and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) agents to support the ICC's investigations.[20] Canada also co-chairs the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, launched in 2024, which seeks to reunite unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine taken to Russia, with their families and communities. This coalition was established following the ICC's arrest warrants against President Putin and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights for war crimes, including the unlawful deportation and transfer of children. Canada highlights the ICC's rulings in its description of the coalition.[21] In addition, Canada has launched the BringKidsBack Communications Network and announced packages of support for children at risk in Ukraine.

In 2023, Canada and the Netherlands initiated proceedings at the ICJ in Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic). On 16 November 2023, the Court indicated provisional measures.[22] While children were largely grouped within the broader "women and girls" category, the proceedings gave special attention to their unique experiences in detention and to the lower threshold for trauma experienced by children.

In the case of Myanmar, Canada placed notable emphasis on the experiences and protection of children, referencing them over 35 times in the joint declaration of intervention to the ICJ.[23] These references underscored the unique experiences of children in conflict, including their lower threshold for harm and special considerations required in the case of genocide. Canada has also been an active supporter and funder of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, a UN initiative committed to ensuring justice for victims of international crimes in the country and holding petrators accountable.[24]

19 https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/03/canada-to-refer-the-situation-in-ukraine-to-international-criminal-court.html
20 https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/trnsprnc/brfng-mtrls/prlmntry-bndrs/20221007/13-en.aspx
21 https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflits/crisis-crises/ukraine-children-enfants.aspx?lang=eng
22 Joint application instituting proceedings
23 https://www.icj-cij.org/index.php/node/203299
24 https://iimm.un.org/en/funding

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL'S UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR)

Canada is an active participant in the UPR process. In the latest UPR cycle, Canada referred to the experiences of children in all but three of the ten countries where children have been most affected by conflict: the DRC, Sudan, and Syria. Throughout its statements, Canada made broad recommendations, such as calls for unimpeded humanitarian access and the protection of human rights, which can indirectly improve child protection. However, the distinct experiences of children in armed conflict were often overlooked.


PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

While these general recommendations are valuable, they could be strengthened by explicitly addressing the specific risks and needs faced by children.

In line with the Trudeau government's commitment to a Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), Canada placed strong emphasis on addressing gender-based violence against children— including female genital mutilation, and child, early and forced marriage — in Burkina Faso, Mali, Myanmar, and Somalia.[25] In the CAR, Canada recommended that the government take stronger action to combat child trafficking.[26]

Although children were not mentioned in Canada's submission to Ukraine's UPR, they featured prominently in Canada's comments for Russia.[27] In advance of Russia's review, which was completed in December 2023, Canada submitted a list of questions regarding the number of children transferred from Ukraine to Russia under various circumstances. Their primary recommendation was to "cease the war of aggression against Ukraine, which has had a devastating impact on human rights, and immediately stop the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children." This explicit call to action highlights Canada's capacity for principled and visible leadership on protecting children in conflict.

The UPR for Israel was conducted in June 2023 and therefore does not reflect the full assessment period. However, in its review, Canada recommended that Israel "end the practice of punitive home demolitions, which disproportionately affect women, children and the elderly."[28]



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

25 Burkina Faso, Somalia, Mali, Myanmar
26 Central African Republic
27 Russia
28 Israel

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis of Canada's commitments and actions for children in armed conflict, Canada's leadership is genuine but conditional. The country has demonstrated a clear ability to leverage its diplomatic influence and resources to advance justice for children in international fora —particularly through its engagement on Ukraine, the Groups of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict, and efforts to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

However, there remains significant room for Canada to strengthen its leadership as regards consistency and practical implementation. Its credibility as a champion for children in conflict is defined both by what it promotes, but also by what it consistently funds and implements, regardless of political cost or media visibility. Canada possesses the diplomatic, legal, and financial tools to lead; the challenge ahead lies in applying them with greater consistency, ambition, and accountability.

Building on this analysis, the following recommendations outline key steps Canada can take to translate its commitments into consistent, sustained action for children affected by armed conflict.

1. POLITICAL WILL AND LEADERSHIP

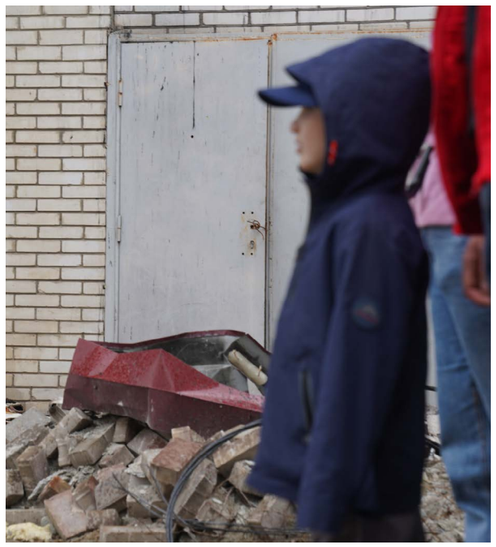
Canada has demonstrated strong leadership through initiatives such as the Vancouver Principles and Ottawa Treaty. This same level of commitment to implementation is needed for the Arms Trade Treaty, particularly closing several loopholes that allow for the potential transfer of arms that could be used to violate international law and risk harming children. We recommend that Canada strengthen the domestic application of Article 6 of the ATT and close the loopholes that permit the direct or indirect export of Canadian arms that could be used to commit international crimes.

2. FUNDING

At a time when children's needs are great than ever, funding for child protection is declining. We recommend that Canada increase funding to child protection programming, with particular attention to the ten countries where children are the most severely affected by conflict. Canada should also support enhanced funding and the inclusion of child rights experts in Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms (MRMs) and investigative tools used in international justice processes.

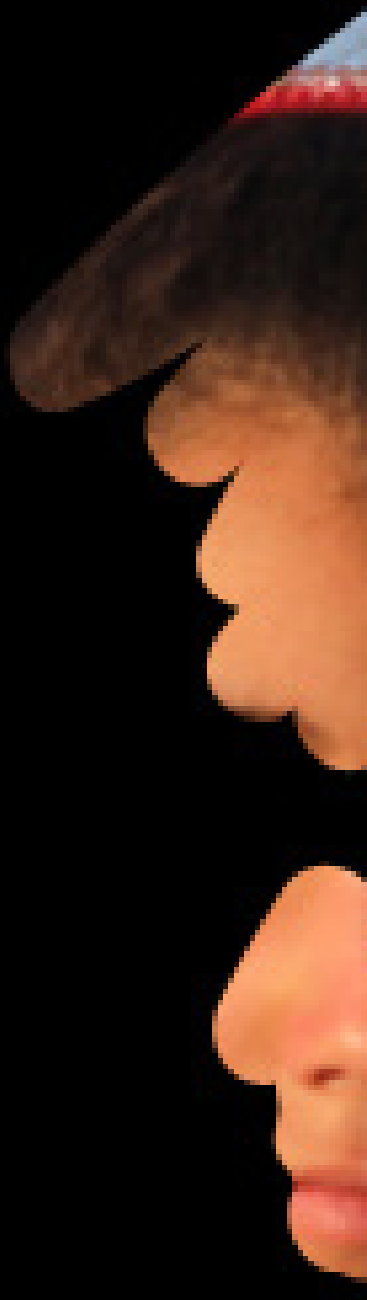
3. COMMITMENT TO CHILD-CENTERED ACCOUNTABILITY

Commitment to Child-Centered Accountability: Through its engagement in the conflicts in Ukraine and Myanmar, Canada has demonstrated that it can take a clear, active stance and highlight the distinct experiences and needs of children affected by armed conflict. We recommend that Canada adopt a consistently child-focused approach to its foreign policy—applying the same standard in all contexts, whether in official government messaging or when engaging with international justice and accountability mechanisms such as the ICJ, ICC, or the UN and UPR.





The house of Manal* and her family in Yemen.
PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN



data.stopwaronchildren.org

Save the Children