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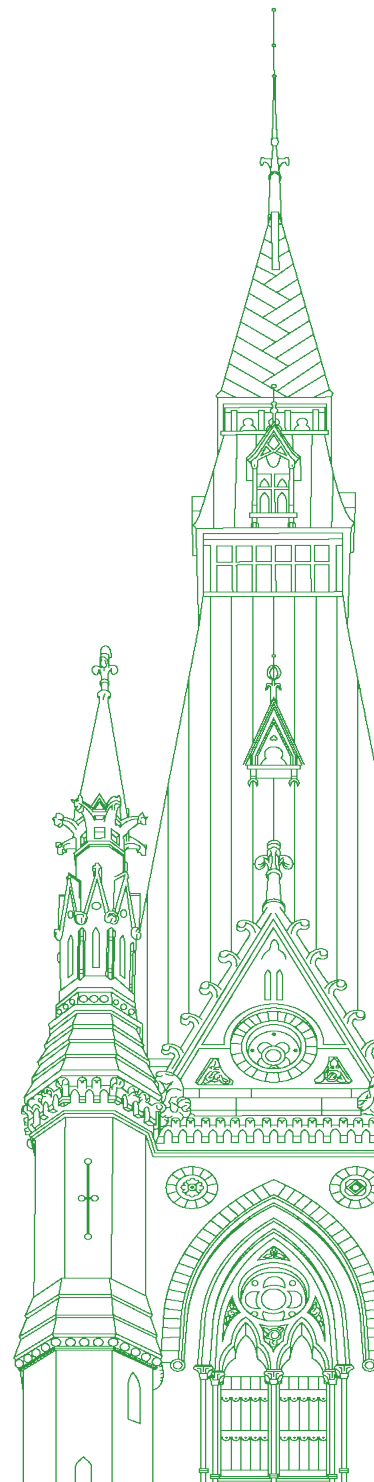
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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1550)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

[*English*]

Welcome to our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 20 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on Tuesday, September 23, 2025, and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Monday, May 25, 2026, the subcommittee is meeting on its study on the human rights situation of children around the world.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members may attend in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation of the floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

From the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, we have Dr. Shelly Whitman, executive director. She is with us by video conference. From the Hudson Institute, we have Zineb Riboua, research fellow. She is also here by video conference. From the Rohingya Maiyafuino Collaborative Network, we have Yasmin Ullah, executive director. From Save Ukraine, we have Mykola

Kuleba, chief executive officer. He is also here by video conference.

I would like to welcome you all. I will give every one of you five minutes for your introduction. I would like to start with Dr. Shelly Whitman.

Dr. Whitman, you have the floor for five minutes. Please do your best to respect the time.

Thank you.

Shelly Whitman (Executive Director, Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security): I will. Thank you very much, Chair.

My name is Dr. Shelly Whitman. I am the executive director of the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. Thank you for this opportunity.

More than half of the world's children are exposed to some form of violence every year. Today, approximately 520 million children, or one in five worldwide, are living in areas affected by armed conflict. For the first time since 2007, Africa now has both the highest number and the highest share of children living in conflict zones.

According to the UN's 2025 annual report on children and armed conflict, the situation is worsening at an alarming pace. In just one year, there were over 41,000 verified grave violations affecting more than 22,000 children, which is a 25% increase compared with the year before.

Conflict alone, however, does not explain this surge. Since 2010, the number of children living in conflict zones has risen by 60%, but the number of verified grave violations committed against them has increased by nearly 373%. This stark discrepancy points to something deeper: a profound erosion of international norms and protections that are meant to safeguard children.

In the most affected countries, we see patterns that emerge: intensified conflict, increased militarization and a breakdown in respect for international humanitarian law. Both state and non-state actors are responsible. Non-state armed groups account for nearly half of all violations. However, government forces are the primary perpetrators of some of the most severe abuses, including the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access.

Meanwhile, children are facing increasingly complex and overlapping forms of violence. The number of children subjected to multiple violations, such as abduction, recruitment and sexual violence, rose sharply. This reflects a disturbing increase in both the brutality and the systemic nature of these acts.

Modern warfare strategies are also playing a role. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas, increasingly destructive weapon systems and the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure have made children more vulnerable than ever. In many cases, children are not just bystanders; they are directly targeted, recruited or exploited for combat. Deliberate violence against children instills fear, causes long-term psychological trauma and forces families into prolonged displacement. Entire generations are being shaped by these experiences.

If we look at the data, there are several types of violations that stand out. In the last year, nearly 12,000 children were killed or maimed. There were close to 8,000 incidents involving the denial of humanitarian access, leaving children without essential services like health care and education. Over 7,400 children were recruited or used in armed conflict, and more than 4,500 were abducted. At the same time, the number of children detained for alleged association with armed groups rose to over 3,000, further stripping them of their rights.

Sexual violence has also increased significantly—up by 35% over the last year, including a disturbing rise in gang rape. These crimes remain vastly under-reported due to stigma, fear of reprisals and lack of access to support services. I should mention that this affects both boys and girls.

Beyond the human cost, the economic impact is also severe. In some countries, the total cost of violence against children reaches as high as 11% of national GDP. In fact, in several cases, these costs exceed government spending on health, sometimes by as much as six times.

Despite the scale of the problem, investment in prevention and response remains strikingly low. In 2020, just 0.72% of official development assistance was directed towards ending violence against children. The reality is that ending violence against children is not only a moral imperative. It's also a sound economic investment. Strengthening child protection systems, supporting families, investing in education and well-being help build human capital and foster long-term, people-centred development.

● (1555)

Canada has an opportunity to play a leadership role by championing stronger investment in child protection and its centrality to creating peace and security around the globe.

The Chair: Can you wrap it up please? Time is out.

Shelly Whitman: Please give me two seconds, sir.

Canada can help build a compelling case for action, one that demonstrates both the social and economic returns. It can also help ensure that protecting children is not treated as a secondary issue, but a central one. Ultimately the question is not whether we can afford to act; it's whether we can afford not to. The cost of inaction is

being paid by children around the world every day, and that cost is far too high.

Thank you, sir.

The Chair: I gave 35 seconds instead of two.

Now I would like to welcome Ms. Zineb Riboua to take the floor for five minutes, please.

The floor is yours, Ms. Riboua.

Zineb Riboua (Research Fellow, Hudson Institute): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify. I'm deeply honoured by it.

I must say that the international architecture for protecting children in armed conflict is substantial. The UN Secretary-General has published an annual report on children and armed conflict every year since 1996. The optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child entered into force in 2002. The Security Council, as well, has maintained a monitoring and reporting mechanism for grave violations against children since 2005. Canada has been a consistent supporter of that framework.

What the framework has not produced yet, especially when it comes to the Middle East, is a policy response adequate to the scale and organizational character of the violations taking place. Closing that gap requires understanding the specific actor most responsible for those violations. Children's rights violations in the Middle East are not evenly distributed across actors or causes. The most systematic and sustained violations trace to a single organizing source: the Islamic Republic of Iran, through the IRGC and the proxy network it has built, financed and directed across the region. The evidence is extensive, verifiable and spans four decades.

The Islamic Republic's use of children as instruments of its revolutionary project began during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1982, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that school boys between 12 and 18 could join the Basij paramilitary without parental consent. After a week of rudimentary training, recruits were issued plastic keys, mass-produced amulets painted gold, and told the keys would unlock the gates of paradise if they died clearing minefields ahead of the IRGC infantry. Radio Free Europe estimated that more than 550,000 elementary and high school students were sent to the front. Iranian official figures acknowledge that 36,000 school-aged children were among the war's martyrs. The regime has designated October 30 as Student Basij Day in formal law.

Iran has appeared on the United States' Child Soldiers Prevention Act list every year since 2018 without initiating a single credible investigation, prosecution or demobilization effort, in seven years.

In Yemen, for example, the Houthis movement—organized, armed and directly trained by Tehran—has produced the most extensive documented case of child soldier recruitment in the contemporary Middle East. The UN Secretary-General has included the Houthis in his annual list of parties responsible for grave violations against children every year since 2011.

The subcommittee's mandate rightly identifies poverty, armed conflict, displacement and lack of access to education and health care as root causes of children's rights violations.

In the case under examination, those conditions have been actively deepened by the armed groups responsible for the violations. Lebanon was among the most economically developed societies in the Arab world before Hezbollah's penetration of its state institutions drove the country to collapse. Yemen's humanitarian crisis reflects a strategic choice by the Houthi leadership to prioritize Iranian regional objectives over Yemeni civilian welfare. Addressing root causes in these contexts requires addressing the organizational actors who have a demonstrated interest in perpetuating them.

Canada is well positioned to lead on this issue. The June 2024 listing of the IRGC as a terrorist entity under the Criminal Code, the 2022 designation of Iran as a regime engaged in terrorism and systematic human rights violations, and the long-standing listings of Hezbollah and the Fatemiyoun Division provide a legal and policy foundation that few other democracies, I must say, have matched.

The task now is to ensure that foundation actively informs Canada's multilateral engagement, foreign assistance decisions and diplomatic posture. The children whose rights this subcommittee is charged with looking at and protecting are best served by a policy built on the evidentiary and legal record Canada has already assembled. This is one that names responsible actors, traces organizational chains of command and holds the Islamic Republic accountable for the violations connected to its name and under its direction.

• (1600)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. The time was well respected.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Yasmin Ullah to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Yasmin Ullah (Executive Director, Rohingya Maiyafuinoor Collaborative Network): Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to speak today.

The root cause of the Rohingya children being forced into labour, prostitution and trafficking networks, and even used as human shields in war, is ultimately a failure of states to protect them.

The Rohingya genocide did not end when families crossed the border into Bangladesh. It created opportunities and conditions for an ongoing cycle of exploitation that continues to evolve every day. The same genocide that displaced Rohingya children from their homes has left them vulnerable to trafficking across the Andaman Sea, starvation in Myanmar, kidnapping in the refugee camps and years of limbo without legal status, education or protection.

Today I want to highlight three urgent forms of forced labour affecting Rohingya children.

First is the trafficking of Rohingya girls into domestic servitude, forced marriage and sexual exploitation. In Bangladesh, children as young as seven have reportedly been recruited as domestic workers. Community reports and international assessments have documented cases of Rohingya girls disappearing from the camps and later being found in domestic slavery, forced marriages or prostitution. Some are trafficked through Myanmar into Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan and India. Survivors describe being confined, unable to contact their families, subjected to violence and sold from one exploiter to another. As humanitarian funding declines and education programs close, the risks facing girls are increasing. Every learning centre that shuts down creates new opportunities for traffickers.

Second is the forced labour of Rohingya boys. In Bangladesh and across the region, boys are often expected to become breadwinners when families lose their parents, livelihoods or access to aid. Children as young as eight are carrying loads weighing up to 20 kilograms as part of their employment, risking spinal cord injury. Others work in construction, fishing, agriculture, restaurants and transportation. Community reports indicate that some Rohingya boys as young as 10 are trafficked into hard labour in neighbouring countries, including Malaysia, where they are subjected to dangerous working conditions, wage theft and exploitation. Many of these children are invisible to authorities because they are stateless and undocumented.

Third is the forced conscription and use of Rohingya boys in armed conflict. The report of the special rapporteur on Myanmar has documented the forced recruitment of thousands of Rohingya men and boys by Myanmar's military junta. Children have been abducted, trained and sent to frontline positions. Some have been used as porters, trench-diggers, guides and human shields. Across Myanmar, 77% of the children conscripted have been documented as being used as human shields. The Arakan Army has also been accused of forced labour, arbitrary detention and forced recruitment of Rohingya boys and girls, including reports of underage girls being abducted in February and April this year. Rohingya children are being trapped between the armed actors, who view them not as children but as tools of war.

These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a broader protection crisis.

Canada has an important role to play. First, Canada should continue to support and expand anti-trafficking initiatives, including programs implemented by the IOM and local partners. These programs save lives through awareness raising, case management, survivor support and community-based protection. Greater involvement of Rohingya-led organizations would strengthen their reach and effectiveness.

Second, Canada should work with like-minded partners to protect critical education and child protection programming. I recognize that Canada alone cannot fill the humanitarian funding gap. However, strategic involvement and investments in education, child protection and health services remain among the most effective tools for preventing child labour and trafficking. Education is not only a development intervention but also a protection intervention.

Third, Canada should continue advocating for greater livelihood opportunities for Rohingya refugees. Families surviving on extremely limited assistance are often forced into impossible choices. When parents cannot feed their children, traffickers step in with false promises of work, marriage or opportunity. Expanding access to legal livelihoods would reduce the economic pressures that drive exploitation and child labour.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you. The time was even better respected.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Mykola Kuleba to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mykola Kuleba (Chief Executive Officer, Save Ukraine): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you.

Save Ukraine, the largest organization I run, is rescuing children from Russia and the occupied territories and creating services that restore their lives after reunification with their relatives. For now, we have rescued 1,343 children. They have been found and rescued by Save Ukraine.

Before this war, Ukraine had over eight million children in its population. Today, on the territory we control, there are about 4.5 million. Half of the country's children are gone: killed, abducted to Russia, trapped in the occupied territories or carried abroad to safety. No European nation in living memory has lost half its children, and the loss compounds. In Ukraine today, for every child born, three people die.

Let me describe what Russia is doing to Ukrainian children in the language of rights, with each one taken from them. A Ukrainian child in occupation cannot see a doctor, attend a class or hold a single document without a Russian ID. Their identity is no longer a right. It is a condition of survival.

Parents who refuse a Russian school are fined, then prosecuted and finally stripped of the parental right to place a child in Russian orphanages. New programs order schoolchildren to identify and report enemy content—anything that contradicts the regime—and require every child to train in flying drones to fight the west with new technologies.

We've just rescued an 11-year-old girl who told me that children in her class were made to watch state films of Russian propaganda showing Ukrainian soldiers cutting open the bellies of pregnant women. Children were crying, but no one was allowed to leave the room.

In the occupation, medicines are reserved for Russian soldiers. Newborns are taken from their parents, and the testimonies of rescued women who gave birth in those maternity hospitals are that

the blood of these newborns was given to the Russian military. Children are interviewed by Russian soldiers in their schools, who torture them with hundreds of questions, including, "How do you feel about killing?" and "Are you ready to kill?" One boy who refused to answer was told that he would be the first taken to the battlefield on Russia's side.

There is a quieter violation, one that we see only once the child is already in our hands. Nearly every young person Save Ukraine rescues today arrives carrying heavy psychotropic drugs prescribed in the occupation for psychiatric conditions that these children do not have. We have too much evidence from the testimonies of children we've rescued from re-education camps and military academies in temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine not to assume that Russia has discovered that a sedated, compliant adolescent does not resist conscription, does not think clearly about escape and does not push back on the uniform pressed into his hands.

With Senator Stan Kutcher, who visited us in Ukraine recently and talked to these young adults, we now work to document the psychotropic medication and its effects and to design mental health treatment that returns a child not only to Ukraine but to himself. Young adults we rescue state that 11 years is a deadline, as they'll then be forced into the Russian army immediately.

● (1610)

In the 19th century, enslaved people followed a secret network north to freedom, and it ended here, on Canadian soil. We've built a modern one. Save Ukraine's underground railroad is the road by which a stolen Ukrainian child is found, reached and carried out of Russia. Canada is the country that helped make it end in safety.

With the Canadian support that we received in 2024, we have identified 800 full profiles of children whose lives were stolen, and we have rescued 200 of them. Canada has set the example for other countries, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the number of those still waiting to be rescued. Rescue is only the beginning, and we need your support. We built a comprehensive system of recovery for these kids, bringing them hope and restoring their childhoods, but we have to move forward. War is continuing.

Thank you, Canada. Thank you for your support. Let's do more for these kids.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to the first round of questions and answers.

I would like to start by inviting Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the experts for providing horrific testimony as witness to horrific crimes upon children in the context of war.

Ms. Riboua, I'm going to start with you, if I might. You really laid out some of the structural issues in geopolitics and international security and how, fundamentally, they are the sources of this exploitation of children in conflict.

My first question is this: How do great-power politics, rivalries and proxy conflicts, particularly involving the Kremlin, Beijing and Tehran, influence in Sahel, in north Africa and in the Middle East? They affect the rights, the education and the physical security of children in those regions. For example, what patterns do you see in recruitment into militias, in the disruption of schooling or in the use of children in hybrid warfare tactics?

Zineb Riboua: I would say that what Russia, China and Iran have in common is taking advantage of every single opportunity offered to them when it comes to asserting influence and power in places where the west is in decline, retreating or not really engaged. It's been very noticeable, for example, with what the Russians are doing in Sahel in places like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

I would also stress that it's very similar to what is happening in places like Iran and Syria, where the states are still very fragile and where a lot of terrorist groups and groups related to militias—the proxies of the IRGC—take advantage of those states that are very weak, weak to the point where they always need another power so that they can survive, maintain their sovereignty or expand their influence.

This is what I would say is the pattern. It's very noticeable, as I mentioned in my testimony, when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In order for them to maintain a revolutionary state and in order for them to continue their project in the Middle East and beyond, they need to recruit children. They need to recruit students. This is one of the guidelines Ayatollah Khomeini has been preaching for a very long time.

Therefore, what the west should take into consideration, what Canada should take into consideration and what the United States should take into consideration is the alignment of their foreign policy and their advocacy of human rights. They should go together. It is very hard, for example, to counter the exploitation of children in armed conflicts when there isn't a real, staunch and very, I would say, aggressive policy against the IRGC. This is the real gap that all of these adversaries continue to exploit.

• (1615)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you for that.

Digging a bit deeper, can you explain this gap between counterterrorism policy and child protection in terms of why that persists?

Zineb Riboua: I would like to give you the example of Yemen and the Houthis.

The Houthis have been engaging, as I mentioned, in organized and armed conflict directed by the IRGC. They benefited from having access to a lot of aid and humanitarian assistance while they were recruiting children. In fact, the Euro-Mediterranean Human

Rights Monitor documented the recruitment of more than 10,000 children between 2014 and 2021. There were even, more recently, certain reports saying that 1,400 children recruited by the Houthis died on the battlefield in 2020 alone. Because they're still considered by certain states to be a legitimate group in Yemen, the Houthis take advantage of a lot of loopholes when it comes to U.S. or Canadian foreign policy. They can still get aid while perpetuating the same conditions they denounce.

I think Yemen offers a very good example of how certain terrorist groups not only teach and use children in training camps but also benefit from a very dire situation and weaponize it.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: I really appreciate that very incisive insight.

In the darkness of what we're seeing in terms of how authoritarians are working in this region, we're also seeing the promise of initiatives like the Abraham accords and normalized relations between countries like Morocco and Israel. These are providing a different basis for Arab and Jewish harmony.

From your perspective, what are some of the long-term lessons that can be drawn from what might be working?

Zineb Riboua: What is important about the Abraham accords is that they dismantle what makes the recruitment of children and terrorist groups, and even their maintenance, possible and sustainable. The more Israel is integrated into the region—the more western influence is tied to development, economic collaboration, technology and so on—the more people in the Middle East and north Africa can see the benefits. This therefore presents an alternative case to, for example, the IRGC or the Houthis, who recruit children precisely to chant, “Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse to the Jews and victory to Islam.” This offers an alternative to that very teaching and to the case they are making for child recruitment.

I think it especially helps because of Israel's leadership in biotechnology, water management, irrigation and so on. These are technologies that are very much needed in the Middle East region. The Abraham accords have helped promote that. It's also about giving tools to a lot of these states so they can promote the private sector and have jobs available for a very young population, which a lot of terrorist groups prey on as they recruit children.

• (1620)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much.

Mykola, I've had the privilege of working with you for many years and of supporting your organization. Let me ask a quick closing question.

You portrayed the horrific indoctrination and recruitment of Ukrainian children and their exposure to psychotropic drugs. What has the intensity of the international response been with respect to holding the Russian Federation and the Kremlin accountable for these obvious crimes against humanity?

The Chair: You have no more than 10 seconds because we're 33 seconds past.

Go ahead.

Mykola Kuleba: Thank you so much.

Thank you for your support, Majumdar. It's really valuable.

There are not enough efforts in the international community because there are still more than a million Ukrainian children in a Russian trap. Putin is a war criminal. We're asking for your leadership in these efforts. You have shown us your willingness to help us find and rescue more kids. Don't wait, please. Move forward. You have a reputation as a country that fights for justice, and we—

The Chair: Excuse me. Wrap it up, please. We've passed the time by more than a minute and a half.

Mykola Kuleba: Can I have one more minute?

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*] seconds.

Mykola Kuleba: I just want to ask you to not stop and to move forward with your efforts and your leadership, and to do your best to bring Putin to justice. We have a lot of evidence. We've rescued, as I told you, more than a thousand kids who testified about war crimes. It's from the top when Putin is just turning all Ukrainian children in occupied territories—

The Chair: Thank you. Probably in the next round of questions you will have more time.

I invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for seven minutes. I will give every one of you a minute extra.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think that last round was nine and a half minutes, but I'm sure we'll get lots of good testimony nonetheless.

I'd like to start off with Dr. Whitman.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today, both online and in person. We're discussing a really important issue around children, and I'm sure that we can all agree that children need protection. They're innocent people who are brought into this world, and whatever we can do around this table to make their lives successful and wholesome is important.

Dr. Whitman, you come from the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. General Dallaire is well known within Canada. He's a very respected hero of our country and somebody who took a very big stand against genocide. He sounded the alarm around children forced into military conscription, into warfare and conflict, and also the impacts of conflict.

You spoke earlier about both state and non-state actors and how they are involved in what we can only call crimes towards children when it comes to warfare.

Can you talk about some of the hot spots that you have seen in the last years or that are currently ongoing with respect to children as it relates to war and conflict?

Shelly Whitman: Yes, absolutely. I think some of the hot spots are definitely places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan as well as South Sudan. In west Africa, we have the situation in Nigeria, as well as the Sahel region.

This is a huge factor to consider also in terms of the questions related to counterterrorism policies and approaches. Definitely the

convergence of those elements coming together makes some of the greatest situations that exist, but I also want to highlight—as I know that the issues of Ukraine and the Middle East have been brought up here—we are also doing a lot of work in Latin America right now.

Colombia is a country in which we've been doing a lot of work, and I have deep concerns about the increase in recruitment and the use of children in Colombia, especially over the last year. There's the impact of Venezuela and the situation related to migrant children and the policies of the United States that have had an impact on that. There are huge dynamics to look at there.

Another country that, of course, Canada has had a long history of involvement with is Haiti. The numbers of children in Haiti who are being recruited, used and subjected to some of the worst situations related to sexual violence are quite incredible to look at.

I want to highlight to you that, while there are many countries we can go into depth on, this is something that is impacting children in almost every corner of the world in some regard.

• (1625)

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly. We heard earlier about international instruments in terms of their importance and their use, and you spoke about international law.

What are the trends you're seeing on the international stage with regard to the respect of international laws that relate to children? If there are negative trends, what is that leading to on the ground with respect to children involved in conflict, forced labour, child labour, sexual exploitation, etc.?

Shelly Whitman: I think it was highlighted a bit by a couple of my other colleagues as well. One of the deep concerns we have is about the implementation of those particular obligations that countries have around the world. I would say that it becomes increasingly difficult when some of the most powerful nations in the world are not observing their own obligations toward children's protection.

It's not insignificant that the United States, as an example, is the country that has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which therefore helps to dictate its lack of engagement on this issue. Last year, the Trump administration also issued a statement saying that it was no longer going to fund and support several of the UN bodies related to children in armed conflict. That includes the UN SRSG for children and armed conflict, the SRSG for violence against children and UNICEF.

When those kinds of things happen, it's very difficult in terms of the allies and the partners of those particular countries. I would also—

Sameer Zuberi: Before we leave the Convention on the Rights of the Child, I was going to ask you about the United States being the only country not to sign on to this convention, which is a critical convention. If I'm correct, it relates to the right to life, survival and development of the child; non-discrimination against children with respect to a number of different categories; respecting the views of children; and working in the best interests of the child. It's interesting and shocking that all the world has yet to sign on to this.

Shelly Whitman: Yes, absolutely.

Sameer Zuberi: Please continue.

Shelly Whitman: From the perspective of the Dallaire Institute, Canada has been a wonderful partner in terms of the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, on which we've collaborated. I want to thank the Government of Canada for supporting the implementation of the Vancouver principles in the seven nations in Africa in which we are implementing this work.

It's critical that there is support for organizations to help countries with implementation, because it's not obvious all of the time what needs to happen in terms of the measures and the support for that. I want to highlight that in terms of a positive trend. There is something positive to be said about supporting organizations and initiatives of that nature.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

In the few minutes that are left, I'll go to Ms. Ullah.

You are a Rohingya. I read a bit in your biography about how you were a child when you had to leave your homeland in Rakhine State, if I'm correct, and about your ordeal.

Can you share, as a young person, how that experience was for you emotionally? Could we have at least one example, so we can appreciate that?

Yasmin Ullah: Thank you so much.

I left my home country when I was three, so I don't remember a lot. Unfortunately, during the 1990s there were a few waves of violence that took place that brought my mother to a decision that she would like to leave the country. While we were displaced in Thailand, we lacked all sorts of protection. We did not have any authority that we could go to in case of violations that happened between the locals and us. There were a lot of things that took place that made me question my own humanity and whether or not I was equal to others.

I think that a lot of that anger and frustration I grew up with formed me into the person I am today—someone who actually helps to try to address some of the issues that children in displacement experience, especially the Rohingya children.

The lack of protection piece is the key information here. When one state fails to protect our well-being as children—we should be protected, regardless of our nationality—other states actually follow suit. We see this in the cases of Rohingya children across southeast Asia and Bangladesh. That goes into the testimony that I've given today.

Thank you.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for eight minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank all our witnesses for participating in this important study.

Ms. Ullah, can you explain the main structural factors that make Rohingya children particularly vulnerable?

[*English*]

Yasmin Ullah: Thank you so much.

In the refugee camps, of course, these children are already vulnerable in the sense that, outside of the refugee camps, they're not quite documented. Some of them may carry a UNHCR card, but that does not go very far when it comes to whether they are protected by authorities outside. A lot of times, in both southeast Asia and Bangladesh, when kidnappers are allowed to come inside the camps and go in and out and nobody bats an eye, it provides this very easy opportunity for traffickers to come in and do whatever they need.

A lot of the situations we documented were these children being kidnapped in the tens and in the hundreds every day. They would be taken to a port in Teknaf, in the area nearby. Parents would be contacted, and later on they would be asked for a ransom. A ransom would be demanded of them, and it was either that or the children would be trafficked to Malaysia for forced labour.

A lot of parents would have to scramble in order to find money to be able to release their children. A lot of times, when parents are in these circumstances, the authorities tend to not do anything to respond, because it happens so much and, at times, authorities are involved in a lot of these trafficking rings.

Again, to highlight it for the subcommittee, the trafficking of the Rohingya is a network, and a transnational network at that. It involves authorities across the region, including in Bangladesh, ASEAN members and other countries, allowing these people to move around.

When international backlash happens, there is a tendency to try to investigate minimally and shut down the backlash. However, for these children, especially for young girls, oftentimes when they're trafficked, they're sent to different ports. They don't always travel from one port directly to the next country. They're stopped in different places. In a lot of those cases, young girls are particularly vulnerable to being sexually exploited. Traffickers tend to do this not just in these ports but also on the boats. When these girls get to their destination country, which is most likely Thailand or Malaysia, they're then sold to brothels or passed on between exploiters, one after another.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There seems to be a marked difference between what Rohingya girls and boys are likely to experience in situations of vulnerability or exploitation. You talked about this in your opening remarks.

I'm not saying that one situation is better than the other, but what I understand from your comments is that there really are two different realities depending on a child's gender—whether they are a girl or a boy.

Do I have that right?

• (1635)

[English]

Yasmin Ullah: A lot of times, the boys are being used as human shields in armed conflict. They're basically abducted from the camps to be used by both the junta and the Arakan Army, and in this case, they're fighting against each other.

When both are using Rohingya children—men, boys, girls, everybody—as human shields, the people who die in the battlefields are most likely going to be Rohingya. Even though this is not a conflict that we want to involve ourselves in, we're unfortunately roped into this.

For the girls, it's taken a very sexual and gender-based violence approach. A lot of times, when women are trafficked outside of the camps, that's it. Parents would not be able to contact them. If they're allowed to contact them, it would be for ransom, or they would have already been sold to brothels and into other forced labour kinds of work.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You also said that Canada has an important role to play. Several other witnesses talked to us about Canada's role.

Unfortunately, Canada is currently following in the footsteps of other countries. The U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, several European countries and Japan, which has drastically cut its international aid budget, come to mind.

Like other countries, Canada cut its budget by \$2.5 billion this year. To what extent does this international aid budget cut affect organizations—especially organizations like yours—that often have to make do with very little, but that still have a significant impact on the ground when they can get this funding?

Would it be appropriate to alert people—perhaps people in the government—and tell them that, right now, these cuts are extremely detrimental and are having a real impact on the ground?

[English]

Yasmin Ullah: Absolutely. I will give one example, just to ensure that we don't go over time.

We had to intervene in a case of six Rohingya women and girls who were impregnated by a trafficker who brought them to Indonesia from Bangladesh. After being unfortunately sexually violated on the boats, they arrived in Aceh, Indonesia—which is unfortu-

nately under sharia law—pregnant. These six women and girls had to access health care and other measures to save their lives.

Unfortunately, there was no other organization that was able to provide that as it was outside of their own measured funding that they're given. We stepped in with only \$5,000 U.S. in order to sustain them for the entire year. We were not able to help them gain access to abortion or other reproductive health measures to ensure that they were no longer pregnant, but we were able to help them carry the children to term.

Unfortunately, a lot of these trafficking issues also impacted them. We no longer have contact with them, because of the lack of funding and resources.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

[English]

The Chair: You have one more minute.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Ms. Riboua, you represent a reputable organization that is known for its advocacy and intellectual rigour in addressing problematic international issues.

One thing you talked about was the state of Israel. I am not given to ideology; I look at issues based on facts. I believe I have a reputation for that. I look at what happened with the conflict in the Gaza Strip. Obviously, Hamas has been responsible for clear human rights violations. Hamas absolutely must be rooted out of the Gaza Strip.

Ms. Whitman told us earlier that 50% of human rights violations were committed by non-state armed groups and that several governments also violate human rights.

Would you agree with me that, objectively speaking, Israel has violated the human rights of children in the Gaza Strip, or do you think I am mistaken in saying so?

[English]

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please, because the time is up.

• (1640)

Zineb Riboua: I think, for the sake of the testimony, what I was answering was whether the Abraham accords and the integration of Israel were actually helping people in the Middle East and, especially, eliminating poverty and child recruitments to precisely the groups that you have mentioned, such as Hamas. I would add Palestinian jihadi groups as well.

Therefore, to understand the region, I think the Islamic Republic has played an enormous role not only in violating the rights—

The Chair: Please wrap it up. You only have a few seconds. Nine minutes have already passed.

Zineb Riboua: The Islamic Republic of Iran is the one responsible for a lot of those violations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now Ms. Vandenbeld will take the floor for five minutes, please.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, all of you, for very alarming testimony about the situation of children.

I want to ask, particularly Dr. Whitman, about child soldiers.

Before I do that, I'd like to come back, Ms. Ullah, to a question that you just answered about sexual violence and the lack of support for sexual and reproductive health and rights.

What happens to the babies who are born into these situations? It seems, if we're talking about children, the teenage girls are being forced into situations where they're having children, and then we have another generation of children. What is happening to those babies?

Yasmin Ullah: It's very unclear at the moment what happens to all of them. In some cases, we have contact with these families. A lot of the time, not only are these women and girls who have given birth to these children shunned from their families, but the children are also shunned. We have a lot of unaccompanied minors within the refugee camps and across southeast Asia whom we are working very hard to try to support.

A lot of the time, we are also leaving the protection work or the mitigation work to the national domestic policy. I think that there is a better way to go about doing it. Canada is situated in a better place, as a donor country, to be able to push for more collaboration. There needs to be an ASEAN-wide policy toward refugees, even if a country has not ratified the refugee convention.

Anita Vandenbeld: That's very good advice. Thank you for that.

I do want to go to you, Dr. Whitman, because you did mention the Vancouver principles and some of Canada's leadership. I know the Dallaire Institute has done incredible work on child soldiers. We know, and we just heard from the previous answer, that when it's children who are involved, this is not just about individuals. It's about the next generation and the entire society.

What can be done for the rehabilitation of the child soldiers? I know that some of the other witnesses talked about children being forced into conflict roles. How does one recover from that if an entire generation has been forced into such violence?

Shelly Whitman: Rehabilitation and demobilization efforts are extremely important. They're one part of the puzzle that has to be addressed.

In terms of rehabilitation, quite often there are not enough resources. We don't have enough mental health support workers or psychosocial support workers. The funding is often short-term. It needs to be longer-term. We also need more longitudinal studies to truly understand the long-term impacts. There are some colleagues I've worked with, like Myriam Denov from McGill, who have done some incredible work in Sierra Leone for a long time. Generally,

the resource issue is a major issue, and it's going to be even more of an issue given the comments we've just heard about the reduced funding.

While that's really important, there are examples, such as the places in Colombia we are working with, where there are state-funded organizations and institutes that have longer-term approaches to rehabilitation. They're also trying to focus on prevention at the same time, ensuring that those children who have had the experience of being in the armed groups are also helping to ensure that others aren't. Here I want to say that some of the most powerful individuals I've worked with have used that experience for good, which helps in a very important way for their own healing too.

• (1645)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

Turning to Ukraine, Mr. Kuleba, obviously it's a different situation there because not only do you now have children being forced into conflict roles, but they are also being forced to fight against their own people. I know Canada has done quite a bit on the returns, but I'd ask you that question about the mental health of those children once they are returned and how we can ensure their reintegration afterwards.

The Chair: Make it a quick answer, please. You have 10 more seconds.

Mykola Kuleba: Thank you so much.

It's a really important question because many of these children have been indoctrinated, radicalized and programmed. That's why we now have this deprogramming program and the deradicalization programs on the ground, as this is a huge threat for these kids. We have psychologists, case managers and social workers who work 24-7 with these kids. I can give you—

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Kronis to take the floor for five minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

From the various testimonies, we've heard a lot about how children get caught up. We've heard about slavery. We've heard about trafficking. We've heard about forced pregnancies, child soldiers, abuse, forced labour and kidnapping, the fact that children often get passed on, the isolation and the separation from families. We've also heard a little bit about what happens after they're returned.

I'd like to use my time to give each of you about a minute to speak to what life is like for a child who is caught up in this. There's no way to have people here, but historically, this isn't a new phenomenon. Child soldiers are not a new phenomenon, but there is a lot that's changed because of the digital age. The experiences are different. The long-term effects are different. It's much harder to easily get back and be absorbed. I'd like to give each of you a chance to speak to that.

Yasmin Ullah: Thank you so much.

It's very difficult to try to explain such an encompassing experience as being a Rohingya child living in such restrictive conditions. I remember having different conversations with a lot of young men and young women in the camps across Bangladesh and across southeast Asia. They describe the experience as being drowned and not being able to swim. I think that's probably the best way I could describe being a Rohingya child, stuck in limbo.

Thank you.

Tamara Kronis: Can we have someone on the screen....?

Shelly Whitman: I'll start.

I want to give you an experience from Mexico. I was speaking with some children who were in cartels. They were about 12 or 13 years old. What I found incredibly disturbing was the lack of hope that they had. I always say to everyone that when children express this lack of hope, then that is where we have a lot of work to do because they won't see a pathway out. I think this is something around the world that we have to take note of.

I also want to highlight that in terms of their experiences, they're looking to all of us to listen to their experiences and act on them. Right now, we're not doing enough action. We need to demonstrate more fully how important they are, in order to be able to address some of the biggest global challenges we have in this world.

Tamara Kronis: Go ahead.

Zineb Riboua: First of all, thank you very much for the question. As a researcher, I have had the opportunity to speak to a lot of people who fled to different countries, from the Middle East and north Africa.

One thing that constantly comes up is about how the indoctrination is deep—the psychological campaigns. Obviously they were children, so it's very hard to escape that. However, the idea that they could think beyond the barriers, especially the ones we can see with jihadism and terrorism, for example, and that these are the only ways one can find happiness and can prosper.... I think that psychological barrier, that cognitive warfare that is being done to children, is very important to combat.

It can be combatted in different ways. Having a good, more comprehensive strategy is one of those ways. Obviously, expanding and giving alternatives to the families, to those who send their children, is also one of the ways that I think about.

• (1650)

Tamara Kronis: I want to make sure Mr. Kuleba also gets a chance.

Just for the people who are watching this at home, what is it like for these kids?

Mykola Kuleba: I will tell you about the kids who have been rescued. Russian soldiers go into kindergartens handling weapons with five- and six-year-old kids. There are many children telling us that they're not schools anymore. They are military schools. Russian soldiers come in, and they have special military lessons for these children. Children are dressed in military uniforms. They're taking these kids to military camps from the age of 12. From age 14, they're sending them to military academies. They're telling all of the children who are 16 and 17 years old that 18 is the conscription age. It's the deadline. It's a deadline because all of them understand they will die on the battlefield.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kuleba, in November, the Ukrainian National Resistance Centre confirmed the existence of plans to use children as cheap labour and as a propaganda tool. In particular, it is reported that teenagers deemed troublesome by the occupying forces are forced to go to labour camps.

If possible, can you explain to us what these labour camps are like and how this can be considered forced labour?

[*English*]

Mykola Kuleba: It's more about re-education camps and military camps. Russia has these camps for children from occupied territories, and thousands of children go there.

There was one 15-year-old girl who testified that, first, thousands of these kids were brought to a warehouse packed with military uniforms for children. They took them to dig trenches. Many children are digging trenches in occupied territories. It's normal work for these kids. One 12-year-old boy said that Russian soldiers took him, every day, to dig trenches. Every night, he went back to dig it back.... I don't know this English word. It wasn't normal for him, though, because he didn't want to dig trenches for Russian soldiers.

In these military camps, they are not only handling weapons but also throwing grenades. They're destroying tanks. They're managing drones. During their months in the military camps, Russian soldiers are giving them certificates for the Russian army. It's not only for labour. It's more about the militarization of these children and using them as the spoils of war.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much for your response, Mr. Kuleba.

Ms. Ullah, one issue people don't talk about enough is public opinion among populations that interact with the Rohingya, populations such as ordinary citizens of Bangladesh or Thailand.

Is their perception of the Rohingya people positive or negative, and how is that currently affecting Rohingya children—both boys and girls?

• (1655)

[English]

Yasmin Ullah: Thank you so much for raising that.

Our organization has been working really hard to try to reverse some of the hate narratives that have happened. What we found in our study, since 2024, was that the kind of hate speech that emerged within southeast Asia, in the past two to three years, echoed the exact kinds of hate narratives that the Myanmar military junta used leading up to the Rohingya genocide in 2017—it was to justify it.

Unfortunately, this has caused a lot of the public opinion to shift towards deportation of the Rohingya and pushing back the Rohingya. We saw a few boats arrive at the shores in Aceh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and they were pushed back. That resulted in children's deaths because they were dehydrated. These boat journeys take from about two weeks to two months. A lot of times, some of these boats were also lost. The engines died, or the traffickers ran away. People are exploited on board the boats while they're traveling on the high sea. Later on, they're met with protests from the locals, saying that they're not welcome, even though they're genocide survivors.

States often lean towards public opinion. I've had a chance to sit down with policy-makers from the current ruling party in Malaysia, who told me to talk to China and the Myanmar military junta to see how many of us they will take back because they can no longer receive or take care of Rohingyas in the country. That's the level of hostility that has existed in southeast Asia.

Again, as I've mentioned, the ASEAN does not have a one-size-fits-all or refugee policy that is encompassing enough to accept and integrate the Rohingya or other refugees into southeast Asia. That actually causes a lot more problems because it leaves a lot of people in the public confused about when they're going to leave and how they're going to continue living alongside locals. I think that is the root cause of all of this hate speech. A lot of politicians also use it as a way to win elections, to securitize and to show up as heroes.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to ask one last question. It will be brief.

The Chair: Okay.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a supplementary question.

Within the Bangladeshi diaspora here in Canada, is that perception the same?

Do you think there's more openness among members of the Bangladeshi diaspora toward the Rohingya here on Canadian soil?

[English]

Yasmin Ullah: I believe there is a lot more openness and also sympathy towards the Rohingya by the Bangladeshi diaspora, for sure. I think they're the first people who have helped to raise the issue of the Rohingya in Parliament in 2017.

I think the locals in Bangladesh are also dealing with real issues, with the camps being in their country and disrupting a lot of their livelihoods. That is understandable, but I think we need to do more to support the work to build the social cohesion.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

That puts an end to this meeting.

On behalf of the subcommittee members, staff and interpreters, I would like to thank all the witnesses for their testimony in this meeting. As for your work with the actual children and on human rights at the international scale, to all of you, we would like to thank you.

I will suspend for two minutes.

• (1655)

(Pause)

• (1700)

[Translation]

The Chair: We'll resume the meeting.

Colleagues, you've all received the budget for the study on the human rights situation of children around the world.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the budget?

[English]

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. It's approved.

[Translation]

I also have a reminder.

The draft report on the current situation for democracy and human rights defenders around the world will be distributed on Friday, June 5, and we will examine it on Monday, June 8.

Does everyone agree?

Approved.

[*English*]

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you very much to all of you.

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