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Children in Conflict Zones: Nothing but Victims

Every child deserves a safe and caring environment to grow up in, no matter where in the world they are. War and conflict deny millions of children their fundamental rights: the right to shelter, education, protection, health, and a future free from fear.

According to *Save the Children*, an international organisation that has been defending children's rights worldwide for over 100 years, and the *International Paediatric Association (IPA)*, more than 460 million children live in areas affected by armed conflict.

In 2023, over 30,000 verified cases of grave violations against children's rights in conflict zones were reported — but the actual figures are likely much higher, as many cases go unreported.

As the Belgian Academy of Paediatrics (BAoP), we wish to express our deep concern and frustration at the growing number of children worldwide who are growing up in and falling victim to armed conflict.

Or, in the words of Catherine Russell, Executive Director of UNICEF International:

“Children don't start wars and they have no power to end wars, but they are the ones who suffer the most.”

As paediatricians, but also as human beings and citizens, we want to rise above political debate and viewpoints. That is why we do not speak about specific conflicts. Instead, we speak out broadly for every child and against any form of violence that disrupts their innocence and developmental path. Every conflict and every child who is wronged places a burden on our society, our planet, and the future of humanity — the future we aspire to build together.

The consequences for children are profound, lifelong, and their impact continues to ripple through societies for decades:

- Death and injury: thousands of children are killed or maimed each year.
- Forced recruitment: children are forced into armed groups as soldiers and human shields.
- Sexual violence: heightened risk of rape, exploitation and abuse.
- Displacement: loss of home and family as children are torn from their communities.

- Psychological trauma: PTSD, depression, anxiety and lifelong emotional scars.
- Disruption of education: schools destroyed, education halted, compromising children's future.
- Severe malnutrition and disease outbreaks: due to food shortages, poor sanitation, lack of clean water, and attacks on hospitals and health workers.
- Cycle of hatred and revenge: children who lose parents, siblings, relatives or classmates may grow into adults filled with hatred towards perceived perpetrators, further delaying hopes for world peace.

As an association, we advocate for the protection of all children across the world. They should never have to pay the price for wars completely beyond their control. It is our shared responsibility to strive for peace, disarmament, humanitarian aid, healthcare, education, and an environment where they can safely be children again.

That is why the Belgian Academy of Paediatrics has structurally established the *Disaster Medicine* working group led by Dr. Els Duval and Dr. Gerlant van Berlaer, in order to unite both expertise and humanity for the benefit of children worldwide.

Let us stand together for the rights and wellbeing of all children, regardless of background, circumstance or location. It is our shared humanity that will shape their future.

Or, in the words of Nelson Mandela:

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.”