

# APPEL DE GENÈVE GENEVA CALL

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*“bringing humanitarian norms  
to new frontiers”*

**Engaging Armed Non-State Actors  
on the Protection of Children  
in Armed Conflict**



*“Efforts to influence the policies and behaviour of armed groups should continue wherever possible and appropriate”*

*Child Soldiers Global Report 2008  
Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*

## Children and Armed Conflict

Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of armed conflict due to their level of physical and mental development. Among other things, they may be separated from their caregivers, their education may be interrupted, and in many instances, they are less able to withstand physical and mental trauma.



Credit: Geneva Call

A specific problem is that children may be recruited into armed forces or armed non-State actors (NSAs), and, in addition to combat roles, may be used as spies, porters, or for sexual exploitation. But, contrary to stereotypes, such recruitment and use is often not necessarily “forced”. Children may join to escape daily hardships such as a lack of basic needs or abusive relationships. Some join in search of a sense of empowerment, or to revenge the loss of family members. Other children live with family members who are active in armed NSAs, or in communities where the separation of fighters and civilians is blurred.

Human security is also at stake. Breaking the cycle of violence in war-torn communities requires that children be shielded from the effects of armed conflict.

The vast majority of current armed conflicts involve NSAs. The 2008 Child Soldiers Global Report asserts that the recruitment and use of boys and girls remains widespread, even while violations by States decline. NSAs are part of the problem. Geneva Call works to ensure that they can also be part of the solution.

## International Standards and NSAs

Over the past several years, international law has developed to recognize the particular vulnerabilities of children. Both international humanitarian law and international human rights law provide special protection for children in situations of armed conflict, including a prohibition on their recruitment and use in hostilities. The conscription, enlisting, or use of children under the age of 15 is also a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

In addition, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1612 refers to six specific violations to the rights of children in armed conflict, namely killing and maiming of children, recruitment or use of children as soldiers, attacks against schools or hospitals, denial of humanitarian access for children, abduction of children, as well as rape and other grave sexual abuse.

The international legal framework provides little opportunity for NSAs to express their willingness to abide by existing norms. NSAs cannot negotiate or become parties to international treaties. This limits their incentive to respect the norms providing for the protection of children in armed conflict.

*Yet the legal and policy framework causes confusion as to the responsibilities of NSAs:*

- the age standards and scope of prohibition differ depending on the source of law and in some cases whether the armed actor is a State or an NSA*
- the relevant provisions do not comprehensively create obligations for NSAs*

# Engaging NSAs on the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict.

Credit: Roger Lemoyne



## The Geneva Call Children and NSA (CANSAs) Programme

Geneva Call is an international NGO dedicated to engaging NSAs towards compliance with humanitarian norms. The organization has developed a standard universal and recognizable tool, the *Deed of Commitment*, which allows NSAs to demonstrate their adherence to these humanitarian norms on a subject by subject basis. The original *Deed of Commitment* Banning Anti-Personnel Mines stems from the year 2000. The Republic and canton of Geneva acts as custodian to the *Deed of Commitment*, giving the act of adherence a heightened solemnity.

The *Deed of Commitment* helps to fill the gap in which NSAs are in fact parties to conflict and bound by international humanitarian law, but are unable to sign on to international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions.

*“The work of Geneva Call constitutes today one of the most innovative forms of persuading armed groups to make unilateral declarations to abide by IHL norms... It is definitely an example to emulate.”*

*Wilder Tayler, Secretary-General,  
International Commission of Jurists*

Following the encouragement of a wide range of national and international stakeholders, Geneva Call is expanding its NSA engagement efforts with a new *Deed of Commitment* for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict. It aspires to the most effective standards of protection, particularly on the use and recruitment of children. Yet engagement efforts do not end with commitments. They require monitoring, follow-up and assistance in ensuring that commitments translate into implementation, processes in which Geneva Call has built up valuable experience over the years.

Activities towards the protection of children in armed conflict are being implemented in consultation with legal and policy experts, international actors, local civil society partners, former child members of NSAs, and NSAs themselves.

Essential to the process is the trust and confidence Geneva Call has built up with NSAs over the past ten years of engagement on the anti-personnel landmine ban. It is a proven recipe for success.

There is a growing recognition within the international community of the need to involve NSAs in the promotion and respect of humanitarian norms.

*The Geneva Call approach has been endorsed by States, UN agencies, regional organizations, local and international NGOs, and NSA constituencies.*





Open-air Classroom - Credit: CIDKP

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