STATEMENT OF THE OSCE GROUP OF FRIENDS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT AT THE SIDE EVENT, "HUMAN SECURITY IN ARMED CONFLICTS: PROTECTION AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE"

Vienna, 7 February 2024

Mr Chair,

I am making this statement on behalf of the OSCE Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict co-chaired by Albania, Belgium, Norway, Poland and Italy.

On Monday we will mark the anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which entered into force on 12 February 2002.

The International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers aims to raise awareness on the fact that children continue to be disproportionately affected by armed conflicts.

In Ukraine, for example, children have endured almost two years of escalating violence, trauma, destruction and displacement. As documented by the Moscow Mechanism reports and through ODIHR monitoring initiatives, they continue to be killed, wounded and subject to deportation and/or forcible transfer. Families have been separated and lives torn apart. Schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure on which they depend continue to be damaged or destroyed.

In this context, we warmly welcome the decision of the Cypriot Chairpersonship to hold today's event on "human security in armed conflicts", with a particular focus on protection against gender-based violence.

Sexual violence against children during conflict is one of the six grave violations identified and condemned by the UN Security Council. Girls remain disproportionately affected by rape and other forms of conflict-related sexual violence, with 99 per cent of the violations recorded in 2022 perpetrated against them. And yet, "sexual violence [against children in conflict] continue[s] to be vastly underreported, owing to stigmatization, fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence or lack of access to services, impunity and safety concerns."

The effective protection of children in armed conflict, through respect of international humanitarian law and human rights, should therefore continue to be our priority.

We strongly believe that the OSCE, with its comprehensive concept of security and wide toolbox, can play an effective role in this regard. For example, ODIHR's factsheet on sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict offers a useful overview of applicable international law and important policy recommendations to hold perpetrators accountable.

The OSCE Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict has also presented an indicative list of issues on Children and Armed Conflict, to be included on a voluntary basis in the annual Questionnaire on the OSCE Code of Conduct on Political-Military Aspects of Security (FSC.DEL/421/23 and FSC.GAL/80/23). The additional voluntary questionnaire aims to foster the exchange of information and sharing of best practices and lessons learnt on this matter, as well as to support participating States in their commitment to strengthen the knowledge and respect of international humanitarian law by their armed forces personnel. We do encourage all to make use of it, starting from the 2024 reporting cycle.

Thank you, Mr Chair.