



***One year into a waging war that has caused thousands of civilian victims and displaced millions, it is time that guns are silenced, human suffering is terminated, and peace prevails.***

Today, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023 marks the sad anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and peace does not seem to be a priority. Over the course of this past year, a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine was established by the Human Rights Council and many factual reports have been published. All these sources confirmed that thousands of children have been taken from Ukraine and relocated to Russia in the so-called “re-education camps”. The total number of children relocated to Russia remain unknown as there are no official data. Many of these children have living relatives or legal guardians and their families have almost no way to get them back. There is evidence that war crimes, violation of human rights and international humanitarian law have been committed.

ISS Network and ISS International Reference Centre strongly condemn the ongoing appalling violations of human rights as well as the grave humanitarian situation. Furthermore, the ISS recall all parties to the numerous international law instruments, starting from the 1949 Geneva Conventions aiming at protecting children in time of armed conflicts to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, stipulating that children are entitled to special protection and assistance provided by States.

States should also ensure that children are not to be unlawfully separated from their families. For children separated from their families, they have the right to be protected and cared for with respect to their ethnic background, language, religion, and culture. Furthermore, during armed conflicts when relocation of children takes place for a multitude of reasons, tracing and reunifying children with their families should be the priority for everyone.

The ISS network stresses that the best interest principle should always be the guiding force and the primary consideration in all actions and decisions concerning children. In the current war and displacement context, this best interest principle mandates that children remain with their families or that all efforts are made to reunite them with their biological parents or extended families. Likewise, as previously reiterated, adoption should not take place during armed conflicts as it is extremely difficult to determine whether children who may appear to be orphans or permanently deprived of parental care are truly eligible for adoption, therefore, significantly increasing the risk of illicit practices.

The ISS Global network, while continuing direct social support activities to Ukrainian refugees in different countries, urges all parties involved, directly and indirectly, to seek as a matter of urgency, peaceful resolutions to the ongoing conflict for the sake of civilians and children’s safety and well-being.