



CHILD SOLDIERS BACKGROUND INFORMATION

<http://www.child-soldiers.org>

Child Soldiers

"I would like you to give a message. Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children. So that other children don't have to pass through this violence."

The 15-year-old girl who ended an interview to Amnesty International with this plea was forcibly abducted at night from her home by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition movement fighting the Ugandan Government. She was made to kill a boy who tried to escape. She saw another boy being hacked to death for not raising the alarm when a friend ran away. She was beaten when she dropped a water container and ran for cover under gunfire. She received 35 days of military training and was sent to fight the government army.

The use of children as soldiers has been universally condemned as abhorrent and unacceptable. Yet over the last ten years hundreds of thousands of children have fought and died in conflicts around the world.

Children involved in armed conflict are frequently killed or injured during combat or while carrying out other tasks. They are forced to engage in hazardous activities such as laying mines or explosives, as well as using weapons. Child soldiers are usually forced to live under harsh conditions with insufficient food and little or no access to healthcare. They are

almost always treated brutally, subjected to beatings and humiliating treatment. Punishments for mistakes or desertion are often very severe. Girl soldiers are particularly at risk of rape, sexual harassment and abuse as well as being involved in combat and other tasks.

Some Facts

The problem is most critical in Africa, where children as young as nine have been involved in armed conflicts. Children are also used as soldiers in various Asian countries and in parts of Latin America, Europe and the Middle East.

- The majority of the world's child soldiers are involved in a variety of armed political groups. These include government-backed paramilitary groups, militias and self-defence units operating in many conflict zones. Others include armed groups opposed to central government rule, groups composed of ethnic religious and other minorities and clan-based or factional groups fighting governments and each other to defend territory and resources.
- Most child soldiers are aged between 14 and 18, while many enlist "voluntarily" research shows that such adolescents see few alternatives to involvement in armed conflict. Some enlist as a means of survival in war-torn regions after family, social and economic structures collapse or after seeing family members tortured or killed by government forces or armed groups. Others join up because of poverty and lack of work or educational opportunities. Many girls have reported enlisting to escape domestic servitude, violence and sexual abuse.
- Forcible abductions, sometimes of large numbers of children, continue to occur in some countries. Children as young as nine have been abducted and used in combat.
- Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programs specifically aimed at child soldiers have been established in many countries, both during and after armed conflict and have assisted former child soldiers to acquire new skills and return to their communities. However, the programs lack funds and adequate resources. Sustained long-term investment is needed if they are to be effective.
- Despite growing recognition of girls' involvement in armed conflict, girls are often deliberately or inadvertently excluded from DDR programs. Girl soldiers are frequently subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence as well as being involved in combat and other roles. In some cases they are stigmatised by their home communities when they return. DDR programs should be sensitively constructed and designed to respond to the needs of girl soldiers.
- See www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org for lists of countries where child soldiers were recruited and used during the four years 2004-2007.

Why Children Join

Children are forcibly recruited into armed groups in many conflicts but the vast majority of child soldiers are adolescents between the age of 14 and 18 who "volunteer" to join up. However, research has shown that a number of factors may be involved in making the decision to actually join an armed conflict and in reality many such adolescents see few alternatives to enlisting. War itself is a major determinant. Economic, social, community and family structures are frequently ravaged by armed conflict and joining the ranks of the fighters is often the only means of survival. Many youths have reported that desire to avenge the killing of relatives or other violence arising from war is an important motive.

Poverty and lack of access to educational or work opportunities are additional factors - with joining up often holding out either the promise or the reality of an income or a means of getting one. Coupled with this may be a desire for power, status or social recognition. Family

and peer pressure to join up for ideological or political reasons or to honour family tradition may also be motivating factors. Girl soldiers have reported joining up to escape domestic servitude or enforced marriage or get away from domestic violence, exploitation and abuse.

Voices of Young Soldiers

Africa

Central Africa

"I feel so bad about the things that I did. It disturbs me so much that I inflicted death on other people. When I go home I must do some traditional rites because I have killed. I must perform these rites and cleanse myself. I still dream about the boy from my village that I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me, saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying." A 16-year-old girl after demobilization from an armed group (Source: U.S. State Dept. TIP Report 2005)

Democratic Republic of the Congo

"When they came to my village, they asked my older brother whether he was ready to join the militia. He was just 17 and he said no; they shot him in the head. Then they asked me if I was ready to sign, so what could I do - I didn't want to die." A former child soldier taken when he was 13. (BBC report.)

"They gave me a uniform and told me that now I was in the army. They even gave me a new name: 'Pisco' They said that they would come back and kill my parents if I didn't do as they said." Report of interview with a 17 year old former child soldier in 2006

"Being new, I couldn't perform the very difficult exercises properly and so I was beaten every morning. Two of my friends in the camp died because of the beatings. The soldiers buried them in the latrines. I am still thinking of them". Former child soldier interviewed in 2002.

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Monitoring children's rights

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by its State parties. It also monitors implementation of two optional protocols to the Convention, on involvement of children in armed conflict and on sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

All States parties are obliged to submit regular reports to the Committee on how the rights are being implemented. States must report initially two years after acceding to the Convention and then every five years. The Committee examines each report and addresses its concerns and recommendations to the State party in the form of "concluding observations".

The Committee reviews additional reports which must be submitted by States who have acceded to the two Optional Protocols to the Convention.

The Committee cannot consider individual complaints, although child rights may be raised before other committees with competence to consider individual complaints.

The Committee meets in Geneva and normally holds three sessions per year consisting of a three-week plenary and a one-week pre-session working group. In 2006, the Committee will consider reports in two parallel chambers of 9 members each, "as an exceptional and temporary measure", in order to clear the backlog of reports.

The Committee also publishes its interpretation of the content of human rights provisions, known as general comments on thematic issues and organizes days of general discussion.

Government Armed Forces

Despite near-universal condemnation, hundreds of thousands of children have fought and died in almost every major conflict in the world, many in government armed forces. According to the [Child Soldiers Global Report 2004](#), governments which used child soldiers in armed conflict between 2001 and 2004 were Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Chad, Côte D'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and the United States of America.

Some governments which do not directly recruit children nevertheless back paramilitary groups, militias and local defence groups which use children to fight and to kill, to commit human rights abuses against civilians, or to loot and destroy property. Those using these unofficial forces include Colombia and Zimbabwe. In 2005, at least six governments claiming to have ended child recruitment, continued to deploy children to gather intelligence or to act as messengers or scouts, directly exposing them to the hazards of war or to violent reprisals if identified by opposing forces. Governments have ruthlessly targeted children suspected of membership of armed political groups. Such children have been detained and reportedly tortured often to extract information, such as in Israel. Some have been sentenced to death in unfair trials, including in military courts, such as in the DRC. Others have been killed during military "clean up" operations in Burundi, Indonesia and Nepal, or "disappeared", such as in Chechnya in the Russian Federation.

As of 2005, as many as 60 countries continued to recruit children at the ages of 16 and 17 into peacetime armies. They included Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Canada, Cuba, India, Iran, Jordan, Democratic People's Republic of North Korea and the Netherlands. In Turkmenistan, minimum ages for both voluntary recruitment and conscription were lowered from 18 to 17 in 2002, and China was also reported to have reduced the recruitment age to 17 in Beijing in 2003.

The Coalition is opposed to the military recruitment or use of any girl or boy under the age of 18. A large number of states have pledged to abide by a range of international human rights treaties, but much remains to be done for their full and effective implementation.

In March 2004 the Coalition made a [submission](#) to the UN study on Violence against Children, with specific reference to children in military schools and to children in peacetime government forces

Questions & Answers

Who are child soldiers?

While there is no precise definition, the Coalition considers a child soldier any person under the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed political group, whether or not an armed conflict

exists. Child soldiers perform a range of tasks including participation in combat, laying mines and explosives; scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill or other preparations; logistics and support functions, portering, cooking and domestic labour; and sexual slavery or other recruitment for sexual purposes.

Why are girls considered child soldiers? Don't they just accompany the men and boys who do the fighting?

Girls usually fulfil multiple roles. While they are frequently recruited and used for sexual purposes, they are virtually always also involved in other military tasks, including combat, laying explosives, portering, and performing domestic tasks.

How many child soldiers are there?

It is not possible to give a global figure for the number of child soldiers at any one time.

The reasons that exact figures cannot be calculated are various. For example, military commanders frequently conceal children or deny access to observers. Armed groups frequently operate in dangerous, inaccessible zones to which observers do not have access and many children perform support roles and are therefore not visible in military operations.

The way in which children are recruited also prevents accurate documentation. Children are recruited both formally and informally. In some situations they stay in their communities and report only when required and often for short periods of time, for example when fighting escalates or to build strength while negotiating a demobilization package. Child soldiers also shift between groups or are released and then recruited by a different group. Many children are killed or die of injuries sustained or illnesses caused by the hardships of military life. Child soldiers often reach the age of 18 while in the ranks and are no longer considered children. The years spent as a child soldier then become invisible.

While thousands of children have come out of fighting forces in the last five years as wars ended in countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, thousands more have been drawn into new conflicts, for example in Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan and Chad.

In countries such as Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Myanmar (Burma) there has been little change and thousands of children continue to be used as soldiers.

Which country or region has the worst record for using child soldiers?

Unfortunately child soldiers exist in all regions of the world and in almost every country where there is armed conflict.

Africa has the largest number of child soldiers. Child soldiers are being used in armed conflict in Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

In Asia thousands of children are involved in fighting forces in active conflict and ceasefire situations, although government refusal of access to conflict zones has made it impossible to document the numbers involved. Myanmar is unique in the region, as the only country where government armed forces forcibly recruit and use children between the ages of 12 and 18. Child soldiers also exist in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand, where they are mainly associated with armed opposition groups, factional or clan-based groups or groups composed of ethnic or religious minorities. In Sri Lanka,

hundreds, perhaps thousands of children are believed to remain in the ranks of the main opposition force and forcible recruitment continues.

In the Middle East child soldiers are reportedly used in Iran, Iraq, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in tribal groups in Yemen.

In Latin America up to 14,000 children are estimated to be involved with armed political groups and army-backed paramilitaries in Colombia.

In Europe under-18s are believed to be involved in Turkey and a range of armed groups in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, although the numbers are impossible to establish given the lack of information available.

Why is the minimum recruitment age for child soldiers set at 18? Surely in many "non-western" societies children assume "adult" responsibilities far below this age?

The Coalition bases its work on international legal standards for child protection. The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets the age of majority at 18 years. It states that children and youth below 18 require special protection because of their physical and mental immaturity. Virtually all nation states have pledged to implement the provisions of the Convention.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict came into force in February 2002. It deals specifically with the use of child soldiers. It bans the direct use of all children under the age of 18 in hostilities and prohibits all military use of under-18s by non-governmental armed groups. While government armed forces are permitted to recruit volunteers from the age of 16, they must take steps to ensure that the recruitment is genuinely voluntary. Many "non-western" states were involved in drafting and negotiating the Optional Protocol and many have pledged to abide by its terms and to end the use of child soldiers.

There is continuing debate about the age of adulthood in "western" and non-western" countries. For example, the governments of Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the USA continue to recruit under 18 year olds into their armed forces, although they are not allowed to vote. In some Middle Eastern countries on the other hand, the age of majority is higher than 18 years. In many countries where children are recruited - either legally or illegally - families, communities, activists, academics, doctors, lawyers and former child soldiers themselves have spoken out against the practice. They have argued for laws and other measures to protect children from the dangers and trauma of involvement in hostilities or other military activity.

Does the Coalition support the recruitment of under 18 year olds into government armed forces?

No. The Coalition campaigns for a complete prohibition of all recruitment and use of under-18s for military purposes by any armed force. Even if they are not sent to fight, young recruits in government armed forces are frequently exposed to bullying and other forms of physical or sexual abuse, hazardous training activities, and to harsh discipline and difficult living conditions.

Some child soldiers are known to have committed human rights atrocities. Shouldn't they be punished for such crimes?

Child soldiers, even those who have committed human rights abuses, should be treated first and foremost as victims of adult crimes – that is the prosecution should be prioritized of those who unlawfully recruited and used them.

However, there will be cases where a child soldier was clearly in control of his or her actions, was not coerced, drugged, or forced into committing atrocities. In such cases, not holding children accountable may deny justice to the victims. Acknowledgement or atonement, including in some instances prosecution, may be an important part of personal recovery and may contribute to successful reintegration of former child soldiers into their families, communities and society at large. However, in any criminal justice process involving a former child soldier, international standards on juvenile justice must be adhered.

Most child soldiers are used by non-governmental armed political groups. How can they be stopped from using child soldiers?

Non-governmental armed groups are not bound by international law in the same way as governments. However, child soldier recruiters may face prosecution by the International Criminal Court, established in 1998. The statute of the court defines the use of children under 15 in hostilities as a war crime. The court announced its first investigations in 2003, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, where child soldiers are extensively used by armed groups. In 2006 it successfully prosecuted a Congolese warlord for recruitment of child soldiers.

The Special Court for Sierra Leone issued its first indictments in 2003, including against former Liberian president Charles Taylor. The indictments included charges of recruiting or using children under the age of 15 in hostilities. The court was established in 2002 to prosecute those suspected of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the 1991-2002 war.

Prosecutions of child recruiters may serve as a deterrent to armed groups in future. Some armed groups are seeking international legitimacy and support for their political objectives. Negative publicity arising from child soldier use might undermine such support and lead to pledges and action to stop the practice. Armed groups may also respond to pressure from governments tacitly supporting their activities or providing military or other assistance. In some cases armed groups may be open to negotiations with governments or the UN aimed at demobilizing child soldiers. If children continue to be used, the Coalition considers that the international community should act decisively with targeted sanctions and prosecutions to stop the operations of such groups.