

4

CHILD SOLDIERS

"The question of children and armed conflict is an integral part of the United Nations' core responsibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security, for the advancement of human rights and for sustainable human development."

Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a speech to the Security Council, 26 July 2000

Vital Statistics

- The number of children under the age of 18 who have been coerced or induced to take up arms as child soldiers is generally thought to be in the range of 300,000.
- Most soldiers under 15 are to be found in non-governmental military organizations.
- Most child soldiers under 18 have been recruited into Governmental armed forces.
- The youngest child soldiers are about 7 years old.
- An optional protocol prohibiting the recruitment or use of children as soldiers was completed and opened for signature and ratification by all States in June 2000.
- Over 50 countries currently recruit children under age 18 into their armed forces.

Life on the front line

"I've seen people get their hands cut off, a ten-year old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive... So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn't dare cry out loud," said a 14 year-old girl, abducted in January 2000 by the Revolutionary United Front, an armed group in Sierra Leone.

Life on the front lines often brings children face to face with the horrors of war. Too many children have personally experienced or witnessed extremes of physical violence, including summary executions, death squad killings, disappearances, torture, arrest or detention, sexual abuse, bombings, forced displacement, destruction of home or property and massacres. They have been robbed of their childhood.

Some have even chosen that road: "I'm not afraid. We are prepared to fight. We don't do the cooking here, we fight with our friends," said Koshe [*nom de guerre* of a 14-year-old daughter], fighting with her dad in the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998-9.

When the fighting stopped in Rwanda, Jean-Paul was luckier than most. He can now enjoy his newfound freedom as a civilian. Having traded his military clothes for the hand-me-downs worn by most fellow refugees, he jokes, cooks meals and plays soccer with his friends. Often though, his face turns blank, desolate or anxious. Jean-Paul, 15, is one of 4,500 Rwandan children, aged 10 to 18, who was in the military during the country's brutal civil war. Now he lives in a refugee camp near Goma, Zaire, where he joined 630 demobilized child soldiers in a reintegration project sponsored by UNICEF,

and now for the first time in his life he has the chance for schooling, job-skills training, and recreational activities aimed at promoting self-esteem.

"I joined the army to get food for my mother, my brothers and sisters," says Jean-Paul, who left his family and their tiny patch of tilled land for a Rwandan Government Army unit based near Kigali. Though few engage in combat, most child soldiers suffer terrible hardship. More servants than soldiers, they carry guns and ammunition, gather firewood, cook, do laundry and run errands for their master. (Jean-Paul had 10 masters over the years). Deprived of other adult role models and kept out of school, they become profoundly dependent on the military for material and psychological support.

Child soldiers are among the saddest victims of conflict: they rarely emerge from military service with a sense of their own worth and identity. Worse, they often experience violence that leaves them physically or psychologically scarred. Facing a difficult adolescence, many turn to drugs, alcohol and anti-social behaviour.

What is a child soldier?

A child soldier has been defined as a person under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly participates in an armed conflict as part of an armed force or group. While some children wield assault rifles, machetes, or rocket propelled grenades on the front lines, others are used in "combat support" roles as messengers, spies, cooks, mine clearers, porters and sexual slaves. It is not uncommon for them to participate in killing and raping. Today in most of the armed conflicts raging in the world, an estimated 300,000 children are active participants in combat.

In addition some children are recruited into a country's armed forces, even if the country in question is in a state of peace. For example, the United States Pentagon sponsors programs for approximately 400,000 high school boys and girls where children are taught to march, shoot, act and think like soldiers. More than half of all European States accept under-18-year-olds in their armed forces. The United Kingdom routinely sends 17-year-olds into combat. According to their official statistics from January 1999, there was a total of 6,676 male and female 16- and 17-year-olds, and over 128,000 cadets from the ages of 10 to 16 in training schools around the country. Similarly, military schools are a common feature across Latin America, Asia and Africa. No area is immune to this issue.

How do children become soldiers?

In 1996, in a special report on the impact of armed conflict on children, Mrs. Graça Machel explained how children become soldiers:

Hunger and poverty may drive parents to offer children for service or attract children to volunteer as a way to guarantee regular meals, clothing or medical attention. Some children become soldiers to protect themselves or their families in the face of violence and chaos around them, while others, particularly adolescents, are lured by ideology. Children also identify with social causes, religious expression, self-determination,

national liberation or the pursuit of political freedom, as in South Africa or the occupied territories."

There are other reasons, too. Children are impressionable and can be manipulated easily into becoming ruthless and unquestioning tools of war. Child soldiers committed some of the worst atrocities in Sierra Leone. And the proliferation of lightweight weapons -- requiring no physical prowess or technical expertise to manipulate -- has made it possible for very young children to bear and use arms.

Recruiting children by force is not uncommon. Armed groups take children as they pass through villages. Some groups have specifically recruited orphans and nurtured their loyalty.

Even girls are not spared. In case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia and Uganda, it was found that reportedly a third of child soldiers were girls. Girls have fought in Kosovo for the Kosovo Liberation Army and in Turkey for the Kurdistan Workers Party.

A legal framework

- The 1989 **Convention on the Rights of the Child** spells out the rights of children in times of armed conflict and in peace-time. Articles of the Convention that are especially important in wartime include all those related to survival and to family support, as well as those concerned with education, health care and adequate nutrition.

Other rights that are particularly at risk include rights to: protection against exploitation and violence; protection against torture, or any other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; family reunification; a name and nationality. The Convention also asks States Parties (i.e. Governments) to apply the rules of international humanitarian law that are relevant to the child, and to take every feasible measure "to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict."

- An **Optional Protocol** to the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the General Assembly on 25 May 2000. It strengthens the Convention in a number of ways:
 1. It sets the minimum age for compulsory recruitment or direct participation in hostilities at 18;
 2. It calls upon States parties to raise the minimum age for voluntary recruitment to at least 16 and to provide special protection and safeguards for those under 18;
 3. It categorically prohibits armed groups from recruiting or using in hostilities anyone under 18; and

4. It calls upon States parties to provide technical cooperation and financial assistance to help prevent child recruitment and deployment, and to improve the rehabilitation and social reintegration of former child soldiers.

The Optional Protocol will enter into force after it is ratified by 10 States.

- The 1999 **ILO Convention on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour** prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflict.
- The 1998 **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court** defines the conscription, enlistment or use in hostilities of children under 15 by national armed forces or armed groups, intentional attacks on civilian populations, humanitarian assistance personnel and vehicles, hospitals and educational buildings as war crimes.
- The **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child**, which prohibits the recruitment or direct participation in hostilities or internal strife of anyone under the age of 18; entered into force in November 1999.
- **Regional organizations** like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, (OSCE), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the European Commission, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, the G-8 meeting in Miyazaki, the Heads of Government of Commonwealth, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and others have adopted a **child protection agenda** including the non-use of child soldiers.

Signs of progress

In 1994, the UN Secretary-General appointed Mrs. Graça Machel, former Minister of Education of Mozambique, to study the impact of armed conflict on children. In 1996, after two years of extensive research, consultations and field visits, Mrs. Machel submitted her report, entitled "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children" to the UN General Assembly at its 51st session. "The wounds inflicted by armed conflict on children are affronts to every impulse that inspired the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child," she said in the report.

In response to the Machel report, the General Assembly recommended the appointment of a Special Representative on the impact of armed conflict on children. In September 1997, well known peace activist and diplomat Olara Otunnu became the Secretary-General's first Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

Over the last two years, Mr. Otunnu, has worked with UN country teams, particularly Resident Coordinators and UNICEF representatives, to systematically elicit commitments from all leaders of parties in conflict in several countries, including Burundi, Colombia,

the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and the Sudan. They have agreed to some of the following measures:

- not to recruit or use children as soldiers;
- not to target civilian populations, nor to block access to populations in distress within their zones of control;
- not to interfere with the distribution of relief supplies;
- to observe humanitarian cease-fires for purposes of vaccination or relief supply;
- not to attack schools or hospitals;
- not to use landmines.

In August 2000, the UN Security Council in a resolution reaffirmed that it was the responsibility of Governments, rebel groups and the private sector to ensure that the fundamental rights of children are protected in times of war, as well as in peacetime.

In another important step, the Security Council has asked for the deployment of Child Protection Advisers with UN peacekeeping operations. These civilian personnel will help ensure that the rights and protection of all children are a priority throughout the peacekeeping process. Such Child Protection Advisers are already working in peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The next steps

As a result of the efforts of the United Nations, the world now knows far more about child soldiers and the plight of children in armed conflict. The UN and regional organizations have also created a legal framework aimed at protecting children in armed conflicts. However, far too many children are still serving in armies and armed groups; far too many of them continue to suffer in conflict situations.

In a report to the UN Security Council in July 2000, Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended the next steps Member States should take. They include:

- ratification of those Conventions and protocols that protect children in situations of armed conflict;
- adjusting national laws to define as national crimes those egregious violations of the rights of children in the context of armed conflict and ensuring that national courts can exercise "universal jurisdiction" in accordance with such crimes as defined by the International Criminal Court;
- excluding genocide, war crimes and other egregious crimes against children from amnesty provisions during peace negotiations;
- concrete steps to prosecute individuals and corporations involved in illegal trafficking of currency, arms and natural resources that fuel conflicts and lead to the abuse of children;
- making any political, diplomatic, financial and military assistance for countries or armed groups contingent on compliance with international child protection standards;

- addressing the root causes of children's recruitment and participation in conflict and giving support to local communities trying to provide protection for their children in times of war;
- financial support for sustained education for all children both during and after conflict, particularly for former child soldiers and others;
- including children's concerns in peace negotiations;
- systematic training all UN peacekeeping personnel in the rights and protection of children and women;
- making the concern of children central in national priority setting, resource allocation and national policy making during the reconstruction of war-ravaged societies;
- commitment of armed groups to child protection standards of the Convention on the Rights of the child and its Optional Protocol and to cooperation in monitoring their adherence to those standards.

Why so little progress?

Though the United Nations has created a legal framework to protect children from armed conflicts, its actual implementation is painfully slow. This is partly because international human rights treaties typically bind States, not non-state actors such as armed rebel groups, limiting the reach of human rights law.

Committing to international treaties is one thing, honoring them is another. Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflicts, thinks it is up to the international community to mobilize a movement of political pressure -- naming, shaming and refusing support for armed groups that continue to abuse children. "We must also reinforce the other pillar of protection -- local standards that say that the abuse of children as a routine part of war is simply unacceptable."

Activities for Students

1. The Special Representative of the Secretary General has a website to follow the work of his office: <http://www.un.org/children/conflict>. The site offers updated information on this topic and overviews of country visits to Burundi, Colombia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and Sudan; an excellent range of selected documents relevant to this topic; press releases; et. al. You are invited to send your comments to the Special Representative.

2. The United Nations General Assembly will hold a Special Session on Children in September 2001. In anticipation of that event, efforts are being made to have countries sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict by that time. Students are encouraged to visit the website of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/> or links to agencies and organizations working on this topic available at <http://www.cdi.org/atp/childsoldiers/links.html> and decide on what actions they wish to take in support of these efforts.

3. Track war crime proceedings. Follow the case of the war crimes tribunals on Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia to see what is happening. Consult your favorite news source for this information. Following research on this, hold a class debate on adjusting the laws in your country to define as a national crime those egregious violations of the rights of children in the context of armed conflict.

4. Find out more about the International Criminal Court. Has your country signed the Rome Statute? The Internet site (<http://untreaty.un.org>) will be helpful for this. Do you think it should? Write the officials of your country with your views on this issue.

5. From <http://www.un.org/children/conflict>. Read copies of the documents that have been prepared recently incorporating provisions on child soldiers. What are your opinions on what they say? The Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict has said that "words on paper could not save children and women in peril" and advocated a three-pronged approach to preventing the massive use of child soldiers: (a) raising the age limit for recruitment and participation to 18; (b) exerting international pressure on armed groups currently abusing children; and (c) addressing those factors which cause children to become soldiers. What are the recruitment policies in your country? Do you agree with them? Do you think your country's policies should support the use of child soldiers in other countries? What armed groups are currently abusing children? How could pressure be exerted on these groups? What groups are assisting in the rehabilitation of child soldiers? Contact those organizations to find out more information about these programs. (The links on the <http://www.cdi.org/atp/childsoldiers/links.html> website will help you find these.)

6. Explore the Children and War portion of the UNICEF Voices of Youth website: <http://www.unicef.org/voy>. Add your views to those of other children worldwide. Read choices of actions to take and pick the one that suits you. Share the results of the actions you take with the class.

7. Using resources from the UNICEF site, look for the map from the State of the World's Children (<http://www.unicef.org>). Look for the Publications section, then Maps, then Children and Adolescents at Special Risk. Make an enlarged copy for your class. Some may wish to explore other aspects of child victims by focusing on landmines. Research into developments in specific regions can be made by groups or individuals. The Coalition website, <http://www.child-soldiers.org> provides handy sources for you to use.

8. Survey members of your school to find out attitudes regarding the use of child soldiers. Questions can include domestic policies as well as use of soldiers in wars in other countries. How well informed are people about this issue? As a result of the survey, your class might be interested in preparing a special program for the school to help others learn more about positive developments. The website www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/mkm/pathways/survey/scoop1.htm has ideas on how to design a survey. Share the results with the local media, your elected officials or with the Secretary-General.

9. Create a simulation in your class of discussions surrounding the Optional Protocol or any one of the recent agreements signed involving the issue of child soldiers, and explore various country responses and actions regarding your chosen international instrument. See <http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/> for help in setting up a Model UN format. The website of the UN: <http://www.un.org/> has a link to each of the Member States from which more information can be obtained. Don't forget to check out the Regional Reports found on the website of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/>. Their Executive Summaries have particularly useful information.

Selected Resources

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

<http://www.unicef.org>

<http://www.cdi.org/atp/childsoldiers/links.html>

<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/>

<http://www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/mkm/pathways/survey/scoop1.htm>

<http://www.hrw.org>

<http://untreaty.un.org>

Publications

The State of the World's Children, UNICEF, 1996

Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, United Nations, 1996

Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations, July 2000

Child soldiers: the role of children in armed conflict, by Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, Oxford Press, 1994

Chart/graph

Children in armed conflicts (1990s)

2 million killed;

4 -5 million disabled;

12 million left homeless;

1 million orphaned or separated from their parents;

10 million psychologically traumatized

Source: UNICEF