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Special Report: Child Soldiers

Note: This special report is part of an IRIN web special on the issue of child soldiers published on 12 December 2003. In addition to this report, the web special included country features, background documents and links to resources available for further reading on the Internet.

To access the web special please go to www.IRINnews.org/webspecials/childsoldiers/

Too Small to be Fighting in Anyone's War

His comrades in the transit camp run by Save the Children-UK in Bunia, a town in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), called him 'Kadogo', which means "small" in Kiswahili. The name suited him for he was tiny, much too tiny, in fact, to be involved in anyone's war.



Child soldier in Sierra Leone
Credit: IRIN

But at 12, Kadogo was already a veteran of a vicious bush war between ethnic militias in eastern DRC. So were his comrades at the transit camp, victims like him of a practice that has drawn widespread condemnation, including from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Dubbed "an illegal and morally reprehensible practice" by UNICEF, the use of children in violent conflicts continues in many war situations around the world.

The last few years have seen heightened interest in the problem at the highest level of the international community, and landmark developments to strengthen and broaden the scope of international measures to protect children from this scourge. For this reason, says Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, we are now at "a watershed moment" when international attention can be coupled with new mechanisms and instruments to end impunity for those using child soldiers.

It is time over the next three years, according to Otunnu, "to switch from talking the talk to walking the walk ... for a critical mass that could come together to change the behaviour of parties in conflict and prevent them getting away with abuse of children."

The nature of the problem

More than 500,000 children under-18 have been recruited into state and non-state armed groups in over 85 countries worldwide, according to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [www.child-soldiers.org]. At any one time, more than 300,000 of these children are actively fighting as soldiers with government armed forces or armed opposition groups worldwide, says the coalition.

Most child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18 years, but some are as young as seven. Most, but not all, soldiers under 15 years of age are believed to be part of non-state armed forces. Those children who are not fighters, are typically runners or scouts, porters, sex slaves, cooks or spies.

The recruitment and use of children for combat is outlawed by various measures of international human rights law, humanitarian law, labour law and criminal law but a chasm exists between these standards and their application.

Most observers agree that the practice continues because children make for cheap and obedient fighters, and are easier - because of their youth and inexperience - to mould into effective and expendable combatants. In some areas subject to persistent violent conflict, there is a shortage of "eligible men" so belligerents widen the recruitment base by using girls and boys, some observers say. The proliferation of light weaponry has also fed into the problem, making it possible for very young children to bear and use arms, others add.

But all agree that the most obvious reason armed forces take on children as soldiers is because they can. Despite the regulations outlawing the practice, little effective action has been taken against those who violate the conventions and international agreements.

Child soldiers are often abducted from their homes, schools or communities and forced into combat, whether by government forces, rebel groups or paramilitary militias. Sometimes they are accepted as 'volunteers', although UNICEF makes the point that few children who join armies are really 'volunteers': minors who are forced to fight are often poor, illiterate and from rural or otherwise marginalised communities. In such circumstances, signing up with fighting groups may seem more attractive than the dismal alternatives.

Zaralam, a 14-year-old military policeman near the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, told IRIN that life was tough but that he had had to join the "army" to earn some money for his family. He is one of at least 8,000 children believed to be under arms in Afghanistan, many in the pay of regional warlords.



Child soldier working as policeman, Kandahar. Credit: IRIN

Even a little education, vocational training - and therefore opportunity - can make children more independent and less susceptible to military recruitment, according to UNICEF. Propaganda and ideological 'brainwashing' can also lure children into the ranks of armed forces.

In conflict situations, orphans whose parents have been killed or have disappeared are particularly vulnerable to coercion or volunteering for service as child soldiers.

Among other things, protection involves developing strategies to make children less vulnerable to military recruitment, and identifying non-violent ways for them to contribute to their families and communities. Resources and capacity are particularly needed to extend education and vocational training, as well as to revive agriculture and provide other economic opportunities, according to the UN.

"Unless children demobilised from armies are given alternatives to soldiering, they are likely to be recruited again into armed groups," Graca Machel, an expert on children in armed conflict, noted in a September 2000 report on The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.

The effects on children

Child soldiers are subject to ill treatment and sexual exploitation. They are often forced to commit terrible atrocities, and beaten or killed if they try to escape. They are subjected to brutal initiation and punishment rituals, hard labour, cruel training regimes and torture. Many are given drugs and alcohol to agitate them and make it easier to break down their psychological barriers to fighting or committing atrocities.

Some speak of having been forced to witness or commit atrocities, including rape and murder. Others speak of seeing friends and family killed. Susan, sixteen years of age, captures the brutalisation

children suffer at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda in the following testimony:

"One boy tried to escape but he was caught. His hands were tied and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before; we were from the same village. I refused to do it and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it... I see him in my dreams and he is saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying."

Many child soldiers report psycho-social disturbances - from nightmares and angry aggression that is difficult to control to strongly anti-social behaviour and substance abuse - both during their involvement in war and after their return to civilian life.

For that reason, according to UNICEF, successful demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes not only involve taking the guns out of children's hands but finding ways to reunite and resettle the children with their families and communities, and provide for their psycho-social care and recovery.

The UN expressed particular concern early in 2003 about "horrendous episodes of terror and deprivation" against child soldiers in eastern DRC, northern Uganda, Liberia, Aceh province in Indonesia, Iraq and the occupied Palestine Territories.

Up to half of the world's child soldiers are in Africa, despite the entry into force - in 1999 - of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the only regional treaty in the world that prohibits the use of child soldiers. The charter forbids member states to recruit or use children (anyone under 18 years) in a participatory role in any acts of war or internal conflicts.

Asia (especially Myanmar/Burma and Sri Lanka) is another area of particular concern.

Girls suffer particular hardship

Girls - especially orphans or unaccompanied girls - are especially vulnerable because they are often sexually exploited, raped or otherwise abused, subjected to human trafficking and prostitution, and forced to be 'wives' by other combatants. This, in turn, can result in physical and psychological trauma, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS) and social stigmatisation.

In case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia, and Uganda, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has estimated that up to one-third of child soldiers in these countries were girls.

In most of the armed conflicts in Africa, girls are recruited by coercion (Angola, Uganda and Sierra Leone) and, although most girl soldiers are found in opposition groups, there are some government armed forces that recruit them. Their special needs are rarely provided for in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

The particular needs of female child soldiers were emphasised in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000¹. This resolution reaffirmed that the international community had to pay special attention to women's particular vulnerability during war, given the appalling nature of systematic sexual abuse and the use of rape as a weapon of war in some modern conflicts.

In recent years, the International Criminal tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (ICTR and ICTY) have successfully prosecuted people for sexual violence and rape, and impunity for such crimes should be further eroded over time with the inclusion of grave forms of sexual violence

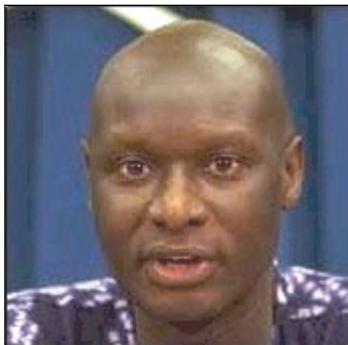
¹ See: http://www.un-instraw.org/docs/un_resolutions/S_RES_1325.pdf

(including rape, sexual slavery and enforced prostitution) as war crimes that fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Society pays a high price

Military recruitment is not only harmful to the children themselves but to societies as a whole. Children's lost years of schooling reduce societies' human and economic development potential. Many child soldiers grow up physically and psychologically scarred and prone to violence, increasing the danger of future cycles of conflict and damaging the chances of peaceful, stable democracy that are demonstrably linked to human and social well-being.

Though child soldiers have committed and continue to commit some terrible crimes in wartime, they are still entitled, as children, to special provision and protection. Somehow, the differing needs for justice and the reintegration in society of former child soldiers have to be accommodated. Children of sufficient age to be charged with criminal responsibility demand special procedures to take account of their youth and developmental state, while those under the age of criminal responsibility require appropriate measures to promote their psychological recovery and social reintegration.



The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu.
Credit UN-DPI

Another issue that arises is the need for the rights of children to be protected in peace negotiations and treaties. After concern that certain amnesty measures have provided impunity for people who abused child soldiers, there has been a strong call from the UN Security Council that peace deals and amnesties should not extend, in any circumstances, to those who commit "egregious crimes" against children.

"Today's warfare... especially the exploitation, abuse and use of children, is nothing short of a process of self-destruction," according to Olara Otunnu. "This isn't a small matter. This goes to the very heart of whether or not... there is the promise of a future for these societies".

Recent progress despite the odds

Not all is lost, however, in the battle to protect children from involvement in combat. Recent years of campaigning have both strengthened the framework for protection of children from armed conflict, and altered general perceptions around the practice, according to Otunnu. Not so long ago, he has noted, governments and rebel forces were proudly displaying young fighters; now they are at pains to deny the presence of child soldiers in their ranks and sometimes agree to demobilise them.

The entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in February 2002 is regarded as a particular landmark in that it specifically prohibits the use of child soldiers.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child contained specific provisions for the protection of children under 15 years from recruitment into armies. The Optional Protocol - now signed by 115 countries and ratified by 63 - has strengthened the Convention in several ways and raised the ceiling from 15 to 18 years.

The Protocol :

- Outlaws compulsory recruitment of children under 18 years of age by armed forces (government and non-government)
- Obliges ratifying states to ensure that members of their armed forces under age 18 do not take direct part in combat
- Raises the minimum age for voluntary enlistment into armed forces to 16 years and includes specific measures requiring proof of a wish to enlist by the volunteer and his/her parents
- Outlaws the recruitment or participation of anyone under 18 years in insurgency groups and rebel forces "under any circumstances"

Those states that ratify the protocol are expected to enact national legislation to comply with its standards and, importantly, to submit regular reports on implementation to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Protocol also urges states to work for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of former child soldiers, and calls on donors to provide increased resources for demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of those children still being forced to fight in war.



Perched on a looted truck: child fighters drive around Monrovia, Liberia
Credit: IRIN

With the Optional Protocol, according to Otunnu, there is now "a universal standard" to aim for and a rallying point for the international community to really tackle those parties that continue to use children as weapons of war.

Another landmark development was the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which classifies conscription, enlistment or use in hostilities of children below 15 years of age as a war crime in both international and internal armed conflicts.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has reported that the ICC is likely to investigate war crimes, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers, in the DRC, where tens of thousands of child soldiers have been used - and that the court's first prosecution may soon be expected.

Higher political profile

More generally, the political profile of the problem has grown. The UN Security Council has recognised it as a particular threat to international security and addressed it in four resolutions, while child protection has been incorporated in UN peacekeeping mandates.

In January 2003, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified to the UN Security Council 23 parties to five conflicts on the Council's agenda (in Burundi, the DRC, Liberia, Somalia and Afghanistan) where the recruitment and use of children in combat was practised, by governments (Burundi, the DRC and Liberia) as well as armed groups.

The report also contained information about many other conflicts (including Colombia, Myanmar/Burma, Sudan, northern Uganda and Sri Lanka) where children continued to be used as combatants, but which were not on the Security Council's agenda, as well as recently-ended conflicts (Angola, Kosovo, Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau) where demobilisation and/or reintegration programmes were under way.

This was the first time a report presented to the Security Council specified groups that recruit or use child soldiers in armed conflict, but many conflicts beyond its scope also feature the routine use of child soldiers (the recent civil war in Cote d'Ivoire, for instance) and many other combatants groups that are guilty of such practices.

Shaming the bad eggs

There have been calls for the UN to "name and shame" offending belligerents in all conflicts on a yearly basis, in order to keep the spotlight on the international agenda and spur punitive action against those who continue to abuse children in this way. Such measures might include diplomatic isolation, curtailment of arms supplies or sources of financing, and criminal prosecution.

The UN's list has "put on notice parties to conflict that exploited and brutalised children that the international community was watching and would hold them accountable", according to Otunnu. The challenge now is to ensure the protection of children from combat, through prevention, demobilisation, disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

At the heart of the proposed "era of application" is the need for as many states as possible to sign, ratify and implement the terms of the Optional Protocol on child soldiers.

New efforts to monitor and report on situations where children are used in armed forces will prioritise the killing and maiming of children; the recruitment or abduction of child soldiers; the deliberate use of sexual violence as a strategy of warfare; and the denial of humanitarian access to children in distress, Otunnu told the UN General Assembly in October.

The "era of application" will then require international action (from the Security Council, the ICC and UN Commission on Human Rights), including consideration of targeted measures against those who continue to flout their international obligations.

"Children are not expendable," notes UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy. "They belong in schools and in their families. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are protected from the horrors of warfare."

[ends]

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