

## Child Soldiers: Innocence Lost

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More than 300,000 children play a significant role in some of the world's most violent and long-running conflicts. Paramilitary groups and government armies involved in more than 30 conflicts arm children with AK-47s and M-16s to fight on the front lines, participate in suicide missions or act as spies, reported the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in their Global Report of 2004.

The Coalition, an advocacy group formed in 1998 by leading human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Save the Children Alliance amongst others, defines a child soldier as "any child—boy or girl—under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to, cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members."

Between 2001-2004, children as young as 9 years-old in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Colombia, Sri Lanka and Uganda, along with dozens of other countries, were abducted or forcibly recruited to take part in intra or international conflicts.

Other children, especially between the ages of 14-18, voluntarily enlisted to fight, "but research shows that such adolescents see few alternatives to armed conflict," the Global Report said. In many cases, they are living in areas of conflict and have been separated from their families or displaced from their homes.

According to UNICEF, "children may join armed groups as the only way to guarantee daily food and survival."

Jimmie Briggs, a former journalist for Life magazine, spent five years interviewing and researching child soldiers in Africa, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Colombia and found that commanders believed that "kids don't have the same inhibitions that adults do. You tell a child to blow up a church or spray a school....they'll do it much more easily than an adult will.

"Adults who exploit kids in this way recognize that kids are the best fighting-machines out there," Briggs said in a discussion at Columbia University on his new book, *Innocents Lost: When Child Soldiers Go to War*.

In countries like Liberia, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, UN agencies have worked with governments and international NGOs to demobilize and reintegrate former child soldiers, also referred to as under-18s, into society. Most programs, like UNICEF's Support to War-Affected Youth (SWAY) program implemented in Liberia in the late 1990s, provide counseling along with vocational and literacy training to former child soldiers.

A recent UNICEF program started in Afghanistan in February 2005 had trained more than 3,300 ex-child soldiers in animal husbandry, motor mechanics, masonry and carpentry by July of this year. In addition to acquiring vocational skills, participants were required to sign a pledge of good conduct, “which commits the youngster to turn his or her back on the fighting forces and make a contribution to the construction of the nation.”

Economic and educational reintegration into society is crucial, especially in areas of on-going conflict where children are easily re-recruited to fight or exploited in other ways.

In Liberia, “demobilized child soldiers who lacked productive skills or found their skills unmarketable in a shattered economy were quickly re-absorbed into fighting forces in the region and elsewhere or employed in the illicit exploitation and trafficking of minerals and resources,” said a UN Report issued by the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, whose term ended in August, 2005.

Furthermore, demobilization programs often fail to address the specific needs of girl soldiers, who suffer what Briggs calls a “double wound.”

The first trauma a girl soldier experiences comes from “killing people as a child...surviving war, seeing people killed around you,” Briggs said, and “the second trauma is sexual violence.”

Most girl soldiers are subjected to rape or other forms of sexual violence. Often, they are forced to become “wives” of commanders and may even remain with their “masters” post-conflict when they are rejected by their home communities.

“Very few programs that deal with former child soldiers deal with the girl soldier’s experience...they are gender-neutral and see all child soldiers as the same, even when they know girls have been victimized in this way,” Briggs said.

Armed groups have also taken advantage of demobilization efforts, using child soldiers as “bargaining chips” for their commanders during peace negotiations, reported The Coalition Global Report.

In Sudan, for example, “the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) ‘stockpiled’ children in 2004 to obtain UNICEF demobilization funds.”

Some international legal mechanisms exist to protect children from involvement in armed conflict. In 2002, the Optional Protocol to the 1990 Convention of the Rights of the Child entered into force. The Protocol prohibits the recruitment or use of under-18s in armed conflicts and has been signed by 117 countries and ratified by 88.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), established in 1998, made the conscription, enlistment or use of children under 15 in hostilities a war crime. On October 15,

2005, the ICC issued its first warrants of arrest for senior commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, one of the world's most notorious offenders of the forced recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Prosecutions, however, may prove difficult as leaders of armed groups hide and act with impunity in lawless regions over which they have absolute control.

"We've got all the standards, initiatives, condemnation, resolutions, and conventions; but the reality on the ground remains grave and unbelievably ugly for children," Otunnu said in an interview with UNICEF in March, 2005.

Although hundreds of thousands of children still kill and are killed in battle, the overall number of child soldiers has decreased in the last five years. Advocacy groups have greatly increased global awareness of the use of under-18s in war. The international community has established a comprehensive body of international protection instruments and norms, and the UN has firmly placed the protection of war-affected children on the international peace-and-security agenda.

A structure of recognizing, monitoring and prosecuting this abuse of children has been put into place. Now, as Otunnu said, "We are at a turning point for transforming words into deeds, standards into enforcement, and condemnation into accountability."