



COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

HIGH DROP-OUT RATE AND IMPRISONMENT OF TEENAGE SOLDIERS CALLS MOD POLICY INTO QUESTION

High drop-out rate of teenage soldiers hides unfair detention of some young recruits detained in military prisons for attempting to leave.

Failures to implement Ministry of Defence policies on discharge have resulted in teenage soldiers being imprisoned for attempting to leave the armed forces, reveals a new report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (the Coalition), published on Thursday 24 March 2011.

“Catch 16-22: recruitment and retention of minors in the British armed forces”, reveals that provisions to allow recruits under the age of 18 to be discharged if they want to leave the armed forces are not being applied consistently or effectively. As a result, young soldiers have been detained in the military prison in Colchester for going absent without leave (AWOL) while under the age of 18.

Organizations providing advice services to armed forces personnel have informed the Coalition that they regularly receive calls from young recruits who are having trouble getting a discharge or have gone AWOL. The Coalition’s new report reveals that in 2010 at least eight of the under-18s who had gone AWOL were sentenced by court martial to military imprisonment.

“The Ministry of Defence has repeatedly claimed that recruits under the age of 18 can get a discharge just by asking for it. If this was the case they wouldn’t be risking imprisonment by going AWOL”, said Martin Macpherson, Interim Director of the Coalition.

“The reality is that many young people who join the armed forces quickly realise it’s not what they want. If this is the case they should be allowed to leave as a matter of right rather than depending on the discretion of their commanding officer.”

The Coalition is recommending immediate changes to armed forces regulations to end the unfair discretionary discharge system which means some teenage recruits are allowed to leave but others are forced to stay.

The report also reveals that under-18s who succeed in getting a discharge are dropping out in large numbers, resulting in tens of millions of pounds of wasted expenditure on recruitment and training. This calls into question the financial sense of current recruitment policy. The report reveals that 27 per cent of recruits aged below 18 dropped out of training last year.

Those that completed training do not have a good retention rate either - between 2006 and 2011, almost half of the recruits who had enlisted before their eighteenth birthday had left the armed forces without completing their minimum period of service.

The report calls for a radical review of the minimum recruitment age. The UK is one of fewer than 20 countries in the world which still recruits at 16. The United Nations, the Defence Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights have all called on the Ministry of Defence to raise or review the minimum recruitment age, but it has refused to do so.

“We believe that a review of the recruitment age is long overdue. The current minimum recruitment age is inconsistent with modern standards for child protection. The Ministry of Defence should be required to provide evidence justifying the status quo, or present urgent proposals for reform” said Martin Macpherson.

Since the report went to print the Coalition has discovered that failures to implement Ministry of Defence policy barring deployment of soldiers aged below 18 have resulted in at least ten soldiers under the age of 18 being sent to Afghanistan and Iraq since 2003. International law sets 18 as the minimum age for participation in conflict.

■ ENDS

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Further information and data available at www.child-soldiers.org.

Note for editors

- There will be no pre-embargo exclusive feature on this report.
- The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers is an international human rights research and advocacy organization that works to end the recruitment and military use of children in any capacity by state armed forces and non-state armed groups worldwide.
- Figures on under-18s imprisoned at Colchester military prison for going AWOL available in Hansard, HC Deb: 1 February 2011, c728W.
- Figures on drop-out from training available in Hansard, HC Debate: 7 February 2011, c26W.
- Information on number of recruits dropping out without completing minimum service period cited in “Letter from Andrew Robathan MP to the Joint Committee on Human Rights”, 28 February 2011, available at http://www.parliament.uk/documents/joint-committees/human-rights/Letter_from_Andrew_Robathan_MP.pdf%20%20paragraphs%2015%20-%202021, correlated with annual intake figures for each year taken from www.dasa.mod.uk.
- Information on deployment of under-18s to Iraq and Afghanistan drawn from “Letter from Andrew Robathan MP to the Joint Committee on Human Rights”, as above.