



# Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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## **CHILD SOLDIER USE 2003: A Briefing for the 4th UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict**

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### **MYANMAR (BURMA)**

#### **Government armed forces**

The Burmese army, the *Tatmadaw*, continued to recruit large numbers of child soldiers, despite government statements to the contrary.<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch estimated that children may account for 35 to 45 percent of new recruits into the national army, and 70,000 or more of Myanmar's estimated 350,000 soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Children, some as young as eleven, were forcibly recruited, brutally treated during training, used in forced labour by the army and forced to participate in armed conflict. Children were also used to commit human rights abuses against civilians and other child recruits.<sup>3</sup>

In 2002 the ruling body, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) claimed that the army was comprised entirely of volunteers aged eighteen and older. In May 2002, the Permanent Mission of the Union of Myanmar to the UN stated that: "the Government prohibits the enlisting of recruits under the lawful age [of 18 years]. The under age are not allowed to apply for recruitment. Action is taken on any infringement of the Regulation under the Defence Services Act."<sup>4</sup>

In January 2003 *The Washington Post* conducted an investigation along the Thai-Burma border and interviewed several former soldiers recruited as children.<sup>5</sup> Reports emerged of children being kidnapped by soldiers while on their way home from school, at ports, bus terminals, and train stations.<sup>6</sup> In June 2003, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reported recruitment of children as young as eleven or twelve, based on eyewitness accounts by refugees in Northern Thailand.<sup>7</sup>

A 14-year-old boy interviewed in April 2003 recounted being abducted when aged 13 while on his way to school in August 2002 in Yangon (Rangoon). He said the soldiers forced him into a military vehicle and threatened to shoot him if he tried to escape. After being taken to a military camp, he said that "other trainees, if they were caught trying to run away, their hands and feet were beaten with a bamboo stick, and then put in shackles and beaten and poked again and again, and then they were taken to the lock-up".<sup>8</sup>

Similar findings were reported by Human Rights Watch in 2002.<sup>9</sup> They found that new recruits were typically sent to one of two large recruitment holding centres near Yangon and Mandalay. Reports by former soldiers sent to the centres over the past four years indicated that approximately 35 to 45 per cent of new recruits were under the age of eighteen and 15 to 20 per cent were under the age of fifteen. The youngest recruits were between eleven and thirteen. New recruits were generally not allowed to contact their families, and children reported harsh treatment during training, including frequent beatings and brutal punishments for attempted escapes. Duties performed reportedly included preparing meals to fighting in

front line areas and committing human rights abuses, including rounding up villagers for forced labour, burning homes and villages and carrying out extra-judicial executions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Non-state armed groups**

Human Rights Watch found that nearly all armed groups in Myanmar recruited and used child soldiers. According to some estimates the combined non-state armies contain between six and seven thousand soldiers under the age of eighteen.<sup>11</sup> The United Wa State Army (UWSA), which agreed a ceasefire with the authorities in 1989, was estimated to have 2,000 child soldiers, often conscripted by force. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) worked with the support of the Burma Army and SPDC authorities and regularly engaged in skirmishes with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).<sup>12</sup> It was unclear whether the DKBA had a policy on the minimum age for recruitment to the army. One former DKBA soldier interviewed by Human Rights Watch believed that 40 to 50 percent of new recruits to the DKBA were under eighteen.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), another ceasefire group, also forcibly recruited children, including girls, who were used for labouring on roads and farms. Although it claimed not to have any child soldiers, witnesses reported that some children served in support roles.<sup>13</sup> The Mon National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the New Mon State Party, which agreed a ceasefire with the authorities in 1995, was also reported to use child soldiers.<sup>14</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the Karen National Union in conflict with the authorities for more than 50 years, set eighteen as the minimum age of recruitment, but was known to accept children who actively sought to enlist, and allowed them to participate in combat. The KNLA was estimated to have up to 500 child soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

Representatives of the Karenni Army (KnA), the armed wing of the Karenni National Progressive Party, told HRW in 2002 that it had had over 3,000 names on its enlistment rolls but due to a lack of resources there were only 1,200 armed and active soldiers. Other estimates placed KnA strength at approximately 1,000 soldiers, with possibly an additional 500 militiamen.<sup>16</sup> While KnA policy specified the minimum recruitment age as eighteen, KnA officials openly admitted that the rules were often broken. In March 2002, a KnA general told HRW that an estimated 20 per cent of the soldiers in his army were under 18 years old, suggesting a total figure of about 250 child soldiers. Other sources provided similar estimates.<sup>17</sup> All the KnA soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2002 testified that they had volunteered for service, with several under-16s saying they volunteered because their houses had been burned down.<sup>18</sup>

### **International developments**

In April 2003 the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights adopted by consensus resolution 2003/12 which deplored continuing human rights violations in Myanmar, including the “systematic use of child soldiers”, and called on the government to take immediate action to end the use of forced labour, including by the armed forces.<sup>19</sup>

The International Labour Organization (ILO) opened a liaison office in Yangon in June 2002 and in September appointed a Permanent Liaison Officer. In May 2003 the ILO said that an agreement had been reached between the ILO and the SPDC to appoint an independent ILO facilitator with a mandate to receive complaints on forced labour. However, the ILO postponed signing the agreement following the deterioration of the human rights situation and the mass arrests of political activists at the end of May. Concern was widely expressed that the facilitator’s capacity to receive complaints would be seriously impaired in the prevailing climate of fear and intimidation.<sup>20</sup>

## Demobilization and child protection programs

There were no disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs available for child soldiers in Myanmar or neighbouring countries. Children suspected of desertion were subjected to beatings, long prison terms, forced re-recruitment, or in some cases, summary execution.

## Recommendations

- The UN Security Council should treat the continued recruitment and use of child soldiers in Myanmar as a matter of high priority; and should consider taking appropriate steps to ensure that such recruitment and use is halted.
- The Myanmar government should take immediate steps to end the forced and voluntary recruitment of children into the armed forces.
- The government should establish dialogue with all ceasefire groups aimed at the demobilization of child soldiers and an end to their recruitment and use.
- The government should permit either UN observers, or independent human rights monitors to visit Myanmar and observe recruitment practices within the armed forces.
- The government should begin a dialogue with UNICEF and other appropriate UN agencies to establish DDR programs for child soldiers from both government and opposition forces.
- DDR programs should take into account the specific needs of girls, former child soldiers who have attained the age of majority, and other vulnerable youth.
- The government should ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children in armed conflict and declare a commitment to a “straight-18” standard for recruitment.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers* (New York, UNICEF, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002; Democratic Voice of Burma News, 2 July 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to HRW from the Permanent Mission of the Union of Myanmar to the UN, May 8, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Nakashima, Ellen, “Burma’s Child Soldiers Tell of Army Atrocities,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Democratic Voice of Burma News, 22 January 2003. See also, Wilkinson, Ray, “Growing pains,” *Bangkok Post*, 19 June 2003; Asia Child Rights Weekly Newsletter, Vo. 2, No. 22, “Child Soldiers Flee to Freedom,” 28 May 2003.

<sup>7</sup> International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, *Trade Union World Briefing*, June 2003, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Information received confidentially by credible Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers sources in August 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Information provided by HRW, July 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Information provided by HRW, July 2002

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Pathan, D, “New Rebel recruits train to face Burmese Army”, *The Asian Age*, 3 February 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by HRW, July 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Information provided by HRW, July 2002

<sup>18</sup> Information provided by HRW, July 2002

<sup>19</sup> Resolution 2003/12 on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, 17 March-25 April 2003

<sup>20</sup> Amnesty International 2003, *Myanmar: Justice on trial* (ASA 16/019/2003)