

INTRODUCTION

Child soldiering: a damaging and despicable practice

Overview

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has condemned child soldiering as a “damaging and despicable practice”. Five UN Security Council resolutions have denounced it.

Pope John Paul II has called the use of child soldiers a “horrible form of violence”. About half the world’s governments have formally committed themselves to end under-age recruitment or to do so in the future.

Most major armed political groups, under increasing international pressure, have pledged (although often failed) to end their use of child soldiers.

Yet despite near-universal condemnation hundreds of thousands of children have fought and died in almost every major conflict in the world. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has documented information on more than 20 countries and territories where armed hostilities occurred between April 2001 and March 2004. It has found that government forces in at least 10 continued to use children on the frontlines, including in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Myanmar.

Some governments which did not directly recruit children nevertheless backed paramilitary groups, militias and local defence groups which used children to fight and to kill, to commit human rights abuses against civilians, or to loot and destroy

property. Those using these unofficial forces included Colombia and Zimbabwe. At least six governments claiming to have ended child recruitment, continued to deploy children to gather intelligence, and to act as messengers or scouts, directly exposing them to the hazards of war or to violent reprisals if identified by opposing groups. Governments have ruthlessly targeted children suspected of membership of armed political groups. Such children have been

Between 2001 and 2004, armed hostilities involving children less than 18 years old – “under-18s” – occurred in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, India, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Indonesia, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

Governments which used child soldiers in armed conflict were Burundi, DRC, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and the United States of America. Government-backed paramilitaries and militias, were using under-18s across the world, including in Colombia, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Government forces and authorities also made informal use of children as informants, spies or collaborators in conflicts, including in Israel, Indonesia and Nepal.

detained and reportedly tortured often to extract information, such as in Israel. Some have been sentenced to death in unfair trials, including in military courts, such as in the DRC. Others have been killed during military “clean up” operations in Burundi, Indonesia and Nepal, or “disappeared”, such as in Chechnya in the Russian Federation.

Scores of armed political groups in most regions of the world continued to recruit children, force them into combat, train them to use explosives and weapons, and subject them to rape, violence, hard labour and other forms of exploitation. Children were also involved in a range of factional and clan-based groups, tribal militias or ethnic minorities fighting in opposition to central governments or to defend territory or resources from other groups, in Afghanistan, Chechnya, India, Laos and Yemen.

In all the conflicts children were forcibly recruited, sometimes in large numbers. Others enlisted voluntarily as a means of survival in war-torn regions after family, social and economic structures had collapsed. Many joined because of poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education, or to escape domestic violence,

Thomas (not his real name) was hit in the back with rifle butts in his five months of military training. His injuries were so severe that he was left without full use of his legs. “Being new, I couldn’t perform the very difficult exercises properly and so I was beaten every morning. Two of my friends in the camp died because of the beatings. The soldiers buried them in the latrines. I am still thinking of them”.

At the age of 13, Thomas was on his way to school with his eight-year-old brother, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), when an armed group forcibly recruited them.¹ An estimated 30,000 children in the DRC were child soldiers in 2003.

abuse or exploitation. Child “volunteers” often identified government abuses as their motivation to join non-state armed groups, enlisting after seeing family members tortured or killed by members of government forces.

Tens of thousands of under-18s were estimated to have been recruited by armed forces in at least 60 countries. While thousands were legally recruited, others were forcibly conscripted in military round ups to replenish numbers in unpopular armies. Still others were enlisted in countries where the lack of a functioning birth registration system made it impossible to verify the age of recruits and ensure protection of under-18s from active military service.

“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 they then were taken to the lock up.”

Boy from Myanmar, abducted at age 13 by government forces.

Much has been achieved during the last three years. Substantial progress has been made in establishing an international legal and policy framework for protecting children from involvement in armed conflict. The Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict came into force in 2002. It sets 18 as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities, for compulsory recruitment by governments and for all recruitment into armed groups. States may accept volunteers from the age of 16, but must deposit a binding declaration when ratifying the treaty, which must outline certain safeguards for such recruitment. By August 2004, 77 governments had ratified the Optional Protocol. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines all recruitment of children under 15, by governments and armed groups,

and their active participation in hostilities, as a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflict. The ICC provides for the possibility of identification, prosecution and punishment of recruiters. By July the ICC had begun preliminary investigations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 had been ratified by 150 governments by August 2004. It defines the forced or compulsory recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour.

From 1999, a series of UN Security Council resolutions have condemned the use of child soldiers and outlined progressively stronger measures to stop the practice. Demobilization programs for child soldiers have been officially established in at least 12 countries, where UN agencies work in partnership with governments and international NGOs. Some governments have created their own programs. Community, church and grassroots organizations throughout the world have supported demobilized child soldiers and assisted them to return home.

Who are the child soldiers?

While there is no precise definition, the Coalition considers a child soldier any person under the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed group, whether or not an armed conflict exists. Child soldiers perform a range of tasks including: participation in combat, laying mines and explosives, scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill or other preparations; logistics and support functions, portering, cooking and domestic labour; and sexual slavery or other recruitment for sexual purposes.

From 2001 to 2004 the global situation improved substantially in some countries while it remained the same or deteriorated in others. Wars ending in Afghanistan, Angola, Sierra Leone and elsewhere resulted in the demobilization of more than 40,000 children. During that same period, however, up to 30,000 more were drawn into new conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. And some countries which had pledged to stop using child soldiers continued to involve children in war. Overall, the use of child soldiers – young people under 18 years old associated with armed forces both in and outside conflict zones – appears marginally improved. However, rapidly changing circumstances on the ground and the difficulties of accessing child soldiers in conflict areas made it impossible to establish the exact numbers of children involved.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers *Global Report 2004* documents child recruitment policies and practices in 196 countries and territories, including those mentioned above. It reviews trends and developments related to the use of child soldiers since the publication of the Coalition's last global report in 2001, and highlights failures – by the international community, governments and armed groups – to protect children's fundamental human rights. A team of researchers assisted staff in collecting information from the Coalition's global network of member organizations and partners. Information was also sought from a wide range of government and independent sources, organizations and individuals. The Coalition provided training and guidelines on research, interviewing and fact-finding to grassroots groups in national coalitions in most regions. In turn, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and partners provided data obtained through local interviews and research. The research process strengthened an international network

Children and armed conflict: the key issues

- The majority of the world's child soldiers are involved in a variety of armed political groups. These include government-backed paramilitary groups, militias, and self-defence units operating with government support in many conflict zones. Others include armed groups opposed to central government rule, groups composed of ethnic, religious and other minorities; and clan-based or factional groups fighting governments and each other to defend territory and resources.
- The use of children in hostilities by official government armed forces has declined since 2001 but continues in some countries. Government forces also continue to use children informally as spies, messengers and to run errands, exposing them to injury and death, as well as reprisals by opposing forces. Some government forces target children for suspected membership of armed political groups. Such children have been arrested, detained, tortured and killed.
- Many child soldiers are between 14 and 18 years old and enlist voluntarily. However, research shows that such adolescents see few alternatives to involvement in armed conflict. War itself, lack of education or work, and a desire to escape domestic servitude, violence or sexual exploitation are among the factors involved. Many also join to avenge violence inflicted on family members during armed conflict.
- Forcible recruitment and abductions continue unabated in some countries. Children as young as nine have been abducted.
- Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programs specifically aimed at child soldiers have been established in many countries, both during and after armed conflict. Such programs have assisted former child soldiers to acquire new skills and return to their

communities. However, the programs lack funds and adequate resources. Sustained long-term investment is needed if they are to be effective.

- Despite growing recognition of girls' involvement in armed conflict, girls are often deliberately or inadvertently excluded from DDR programs. Girl soldiers are frequently subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence as well as being involved in combat and other roles. In some cases they are stigmatized by their home communities when they return. DDR programs should be sensitively constructed and designed to respond to the needs of girl soldiers.
- A series of international legal mechanisms provide for the protection of children from involvement in armed conflict. They include the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which prohibits the direct use of under-18s in hostilities, the compulsory recruitment of under-18s by governments and any recruitment of under-18s by non-government armed groups. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines the recruitment of children under 15 as a war crime and provides for the prosecution and punishment of offenders. International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 defines the forced or compulsory recruitment of any person under 18 for use in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour.
- The UN Security Council has repeatedly called for action to stop the use of child soldiers. Proposed measures include dialogue with parties to armed conflict aimed at the immediate demobilization of children; and measures to sanction those who continue to use children in hostilities.
- Despite near-universal condemnation of child soldiering and a solid legal and policy framework, lack of political will is an obstacle to achieving concrete improvements and effective child protection on the ground.

of activists working to put pressure on governments, politicians and communities in all countries where this shameful abuse of children persists.

So what needs to be done? The Coalition urges the UN Security Council to ensure that its “naming and shaming” of those using child soldiers in armed conflicts is followed by decisive action. It advocates the prosecution of child recruiters by the International Criminal Court and other justice mechanisms, for restrictions on military assistance and weapons trading, travel restrictions, asset freezing or other sanctions. Concerned governments must support dialogue between warring parties, and peace agreements should include specific provisions for reintegrating and rehabilitating former child soldiers. Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programs for child soldiers must be adequately funded and sensitively constructed, to ensure that the specific needs of boys and girls are addressed.

Children’s rights to protection from grave threats to their life and health, to family life and education, and to freedom from sexual and economic exploitation must be actively promoted. War-affected children should be closely involved in peace processes and decision-making which affect their lives. The international community and individual governments must renew their commitment to the demobilization and reintegration process. The Coalition will continue to campaign for universal ratification and enforcement of international treaties protecting children, and for governments to ban all recruitment of under-18s into any armed force. The Coalition’s members and partners remain committed to a world that does not allow children to fight wars.

Child soldiers

2001-2004

Children at war

Children have continued to play a significant part in some of the world’s most bitter and long-running wars. As new conflicts have ignited, successive generations of children have been recruited to replenish the fighting forces.

In Africa, children were involved in armed hostilities across the continent. In West Africa, children fought children in Côte d’Ivoire as both government and armed political opposition groups forcibly recruited under-18s. Some were recruited among Liberian child refugees and veteran child soldiers from the Liberian conflict. Abductions of children in northern Uganda by the armed group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) dramatically increased in 2003. Out of an estimated 20,000 children abducted by the LRA, nearly 10,000 were taken from mid-2002. The Ugandan government and the militias it supported also used child soldiers. In Central Africa, there were as many as 30,000 child soldiers in the DRC; and armed political groups backed by Rwanda and Uganda continued to recruit child soldiers in its eastern provinces. Children fought for both government and opposition forces in Burundi – where children as young as 10 were recruited to the government’s forces.

In Latin America, the 40-year armed conflict in Colombia continued after peace talks with opposition forces collapsed in 2002. Opposition groups and army-backed paramilitaries continued to recruit and use up to 14,000 children. The armed conflict drove tens of thousands of families to flee their homes. Armed political groups made incursions across the borders into Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela and recruited from among the refugee population. Fears grew that under-18s were among those recruited.

“The army does recruit children. Because we don’t have enough soldiers, recruitment takes place twice a year and, until the necessary strength is reached, all those who come forward are enlisted, whatever their age may be.”

A soldier, Burundi, May 2002.²

In Asia and the Pacific, children continued to be used to fight in smouldering conflicts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar. In that region, only the Philippines government took measures to address child soldiering, opening a dialogue with armed groups and NGOs. In Myanmar, despite ceasefires with numerous armed opposition groups, thousands, possibly tens of thousands, were thought to remain in the army; most had been forcibly recruited. Several thousand more remained in armed political groups. In South Asia, armed political groups carried out forcible abductions of children in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In the Middle East and North Africa, child soldiers were recruited into a variety of armed groups in Iraq and Sudan.³ In Sudan, thousands of children remained in armed political opposition groups and in government and allied forces in the south of the country and Darfur. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, Palestinian children became suicide bombers and took part in operations by armed groups. Israeli armed forces treated children as combatants, shot those throwing stones or participating in demonstrations, and coerced them into becoming informants.

While not absolving those directly responsible, some share of the blame lies with the international community. Governments continued to provide military training and assistance to armed forces using child soldiers or encouraging paramilitaries to do so; and small arms and light weapons

– all too easily used by children – continued to proliferate in most regions.

Armed political groups

The majority of the child soldiers involved in armed conflict throughout the world were associated with government-backed paramilitary and militia groups, as well as armed opposition forces.

Government-backed paramilitaries and other irregular forces in countries including Colombia and Sudan recruited children. In Zimbabwe, under-18s were among young people trained in military tactics in the government’s national youth service training program, with some encouraged to harass, torture and kill political opponents. In northern Uganda, “Arrow Groups” and other militias organized by the government used children to fight the opposition LRA, primarily composed of children itself. Children were also found in a range of informal armed groups used by governments and political parties, as well as in factional and clan based groups fighting in Afghanistan, the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, Laos, Somalia and Yemen.

“They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don’t kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed. That’s why I got out. I couldn’t stand it any longer.”

Bernardo (not his real name), 17, member of army-backed paramilitary group in Colombia.⁴

Armed opposition groups continued to recruit children, despite renouncing their use in some cases. In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued to recruit children despite pledges given to the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Children and

Armed Conflict and UNICEF in 2003. The opposition Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) flouted a public pledge made several years previously to the UN not to recruit children. Instead the FARC lured and compelled children to join their forces. The Mai-Mai fighters in the DRC also recruited and used thousands of children in combat. Many children were recruited by armed groups not to fight but as forced labour, for example in the diamond mines of Sierra Leone. On a positive note, armed groups in Algeria and Turkey appeared to have ended the recruitment of under-18s.

“Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA [Lord’s Resistance Army] explained to us that all five brothers couldn’t serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until two of them died. They told us it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was nine years old.”

Martin P, a child soldier at the age of 13 with the Lord’s Resistance Army, Uganda.⁵

In other countries, children joined anti-crime vigilante groups, such as in Nigeria, where the authorities endorsed or turned a blind eye to the violence of the Bakassi Boys. Armed gangs whose members included children were used to carry out acts of political violence in Nigeria. Criminal gangs with a history of involvement in political violence were used to intimidate political opponents on behalf of political leaders in Kenya and South Africa. Although not defined as child soldiers, children in Brazil were involved in organized criminal violence related to drug trafficking in forces with similar characteristics to non-state armies: they operated chains of command, trained their forces in arms and tactics, and defended territory.

One boy in the DRC was abducted by the Mai-Mai when he was 14. At the front line, his commander would put a substance in his water and tell him it had a mystic power that would protect him. The Mai-Mai said he could not be released because he had lived among the Rwandese Tutsis, enemies of the Mai-Mai, who might extract important information from him if he returned. There were many children like him in the ranks of the Mai-Mai.⁶

War on children

Governments killed, tortured and arbitrarily detained children suspected of being opposition combatants or supporters. In Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israeli forces shot Palestinian children if they threw stones or joined demonstrations, and denied them protection and rights in detention that are allowed to Israeli children.

In their pursuit of armed opponents, government forces – including those that were not allowed to recruit under-18s under national law – nonetheless targeted children for recruitment as spies. Coalition-supported research found that Palestinian children detained by Israeli forces were tortured or threatened in attempts to coerce them to become informants. In Indonesia, children were used as informants in counter-

K. died young but not nearly as young as some of the others massacred alongside him....eight male villagers were executed that day, each shot in the head at close range. Besides K, one was 20 years old, two were 18, one was 17, one was 14, one 13 and one just 11. The Indonesian army claimed the dead were suspects killed during a shoot out.

Report of killings of suspected members of GAM, an armed political group in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, Indonesia.

insurgency activities. In Colombia, although it was illegal to use children as spies, contradictory regulations allowed children to be paid for supplying information.

Some governments simply blocked access to information about the recruitment and use of child soldiers by not allowing independent human rights monitors into areas of armed hostilities, including in Chechnya, India, Indonesia and Myanmar.

“I was detained on 18 March 2003... We are in a very small room with 11 people... We are allowed to use the bathroom only three times a day at specific times. Once a week we are allowed to take a 30-minute recess. The prison guards force us into shabeh position: they tie our hands up and one leg and then we have to face the wall.”

A 15-year-old boy, describing conditions at Bet El detention centre in an Israeli settlement outside Ramallah.⁷ Most Palestinian children in the Occupied Territories who are detained on suspicion of involvement in armed attacks are held in facilities for adults, treated as adults in law, and denied the protection offered to other young people under 18 years of age in Israel and in Israeli settlements.

Voluntary recruitment into government forces

As many as 60 countries outside conflict zones continued to recruit children at the ages of 16 and 17. They included Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Canada, Cuba, Germany, India, Iran, Jordan, Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea and the Netherlands. In Turkmenistan, minimum ages for both voluntary recruitment and conscription were lowered from 18 to 17, and China was also reported to have reduced the recruitment age to 17 in Beijing.

In Europe some young soldiers under 18 were exposed to malnutrition, disease

and institutionalized bullying. High levels of death and suicide were reported among recruits in Azerbaijan and Belarus, and the United Kingdom (UK) authorities responded to the deaths of two under-18-year-old recruits in disputed circumstances with flawed investigations and excessive secrecy.

Many underage recruits reached 18 before they completed training, or were not deployed to active service. After training its 17-year-old recruits, for example, Ireland requires newly-qualified Irish soldiers to wait a year before deployment overseas. The UK continued active recruitment of 16-year-olds. Young recruits could sign up for up to 22-year terms of service

In many non-western, non-European countries, the lack of a functioning birth registration system – the recording of birth dates and provision of birth certificates – increases the risk of child soldiers enlisting in the armed forces. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child requires that safeguards against underage recruitment should include production of a birth certificate as evidence of age. However, a large proportion of births were unregistered in many countries. The risk of underage recruitment remained in Guinea and Tanzania, as well as in countries outside Africa, including in India, Papua New Guinea and Yemen.

Factors leading to recruitment

Children have often voluntarily joined armies and armed groups. In most cases, they had few alternatives. Invasion and occupation, ethnic and religious discrimination, abuses against community and family – all have impelled children into soldiering. Yet in conflict zones such as Colombia or Liberia, as also in countries not at war, poverty and a lack of alternative employment are critical “push factors” in the recruitment of children. Cultural expectations and violence in the home are often also decisive.

Coalition member organizations have studied the roots of child soldiering to gain better understanding of why so many children volunteer. In 2004, the International Labour Organization (ILO) funded the publication of research by the Quaker UN Offices on the factors leading adolescents to volunteer with armed groups. The Quakers have also conducted interviews with former girl soldiers in Angola, Colombia, Philippines and Sri Lanka about their lives as part of an armed group. Many of the girls volunteered in support of ideological or political beliefs. Others became soldiers to gain an education, money or status. Some were escaping abuse and violence in the family.

Responsibility for child soldiering lies not only with forces that actively recruit children, but also with governments and the international community, who must act to reduce unemployment, offer access to education and stem falling living standards. States will only prevent child recruitment by offering alternatives for young people to joining an armed force.

“I had to run away to a forest with my friend to join the underground. I was 14 when I first held a gun in my hands. I love to go to school but for the poverty of my family I have to lift a gun. Now I am earning enough money with the help of the gun for myself and can send money for my family also. “

Boy aged 16, Northeast India

Yet in many countries, governments encouraged the militarization of society by indoctrinating children in a military culture from an early age. Young people were compelled to undergo military training or received early exposure to a soldier's life in military schools and camps in countries

and territories such as Azerbaijan, Brazil, Chile, Eritrea, Kenya, Palestine, the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe.

The experience of girls

Girls as well as boys were involved in armed conflict in most regions. Girl soldiers are frequently subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence as well as being involved in combat and other roles. In Afghanistan, some girls were reportedly forced into marriages with men involved in factional and clan-based groups. Girls attached to Colombian armed groups reported the enforced use of contraceptives and abortions, often after pressure to become the “girlfriend” of an adult soldier. In the DRC, almost all girls and some boys were reported to have been raped or sexually exploited by their commanders or other soldiers.

“They would eat and drink, then they would call for you. They were so many. It was so painful... If you refused, they used sticks to whip you... They all had sex with me... A man would come, then another and another. I wasn't even the youngest. Some girls were even younger than me. Even the commanders called for you... They said they'd kill you if you ran away.”

A girl abducted at the age of 13 by an armed group in Burundi.⁸

In Liberia, girls were recruited as both fighters and helpers, but faced routine rape and sexual assault. The LRA in northern Uganda abducted girls in large numbers to become fighters but also forced them into virtual slavery as “wives” to commanders, for whom they worked long hours as domestic servants. In Zimbabwe, former girl trainees reported rapes at the National Youth Service training centres, including by officials,

while one estimate in 2002 indicated that some 1,000 women were held in militia camps for sexual purposes.⁹

In some cases girls are stigmatized by their home communities when they return. Despite growing recognition of girls' involvement in armed conflict, girls are often excluded from disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, which need to be sensitively constructed and designed to respond to their needs. Women and girls taken as "wives" by the Angolan armed opposition feared exclusion from government aid and rejection when they returned to their communities. Initially, demobilization programs were restricted to male adult soldiers. It was unclear whether later programs to address the needs of women and girls had been adequately implemented.

Girls in South and Southeast Asia reportedly joined up to escape domestic servitude, forced marriages and other forms of gender-based discrimination. "I left home and joined the NPA because I wanted to run away from my family's noise and I hated getting hurt."

Sonia, Philippines.

Not all armed groups committed sexual violence against girl recruits. In the Philippines and Sri Lanka, sexually intimate relationships between men and women were forbidden without the consent of the woman and the approval of a commander. The Sri Lankan government estimated that one third of all LTTE recruits were females.

The challenge of demobilization

Long-running armed conflicts came to an end, releasing tens of thousands of children from armies and armed groups. Former child soldiers searched for their place in post-conflict societies in Afghanistan, Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone following peace agreements in those countries.

In Angola, where peace came in 2002 after three decades of war, thousands of former child soldiers from the government forces and those of *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, searched for their own way back to normalcy in peacetime. The ending of a decade of war in Sierra Leone in 2002 left an estimated 21,000 former child soldiers struggling to be reintegrated in a shattered society. About 7,000 children were demobilized in 2001 and 2002. In Liberia, where tens of thousands of children had been involved in conflict since 1990, the first demobilization programs were set up to assist 5,000 child fighters.

Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programs for former child soldiers operated in about a dozen countries, including Burundi, DRC, Sri Lanka and southern Sudan. However, such a program was not established for 8,000 children in Afghanistan until three decades of fighting had been officially over for two years.

Efforts to rehabilitate children were made as fighting continued in Colombia and the DRC. The programs were aimed at reintegrating child soldiers into their communities while avoiding their re-recruitment or further fuelling of the conflict. Since 2001 individuals and organizations working with former child soldiers have conducted studies and discussions to strengthen understanding of best practices in the reintegration of child soldiers. Child protection advisors were created within UN peacekeeping missions



The Bangladesh Coalition for Child Rights sponsored rallies in front of the National Parliament House and the National Press Club on 12 February 2002 to mark the coming into force of the Optional Protocol.

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in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC and Sierra Leone to ensure that the rights, protection and wellbeing of children were an integral part of peace processes.

However, demobilization efforts were not always given top priority or adequate resources; and many young fighters rejoined armed groups in Burundi, the DRC, Liberia and Sudan. Some demobilization programs excluded girls, children with disabilities or the children of child soldiers, as well as those who turned 18 during their time with the armed group. In Sierra Leone, demobilization programs initially failed to address the needs of thousands of girls associated with armed groups. In Guinea-Bissau, only 119 children were officially demobilized out of the thousands involved in the armed conflict of 1998-99. After war ended in Papua New Guinea in 1997, thousands of children who fought with government forces and the

opposition Bougainville Revolutionary Army were not demobilized.

Child soldiers became bargaining chips for their commanders during peace negotiations, when the international community pledged money to help demobilize child combatants. In Sudan, for example, the SPLA "stockpiled" children in 2004 to obtain UNICEF demobilization funds. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE retained most of its experienced child fighters during a fragile ceasefire, despite commitments to demobilize children from its ranks. Only small groups of children were handed over to the international community for demobilization while forcible abductions and aggressive re-recruitment increased in mid-2004. In Colombia only ten per cent of the estimated total number of child soldiers have been demobilized since 1999.

The international response

Growing consensus

The landmark development in ending child soldier use during the past three years was growing international support for the Optional Protocol, which came into force on 12 February 2002. In 2001, only four states had ratified it and another 79 states had signed it. By August 2004, 77 states had ratified it and 115 states had signed it. Of those which ratified, 58 also maintained a “straight-18” position to exclude any recruitment of children under 18. Ratifications have since gathered momentum, with 14 in Latin America and 27 in Europe. Africa and Asia had a poor record of ratification, although many countries in conflict did ratify. They included the DRC, Liberia, Rwanda and Uganda in Africa; and Afghanistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka in Asia. Both the DRC, Uganda and Liberia subsequently violated their legal obligations. Morocco, Qatar, Syria and Tunisia were the only four states to ratify in the Middle East and North Africa.

New Zealand became the first country to report on implementation of the Optional Protocol to the UN monitoring body, the Committee on the Rights of Child. Other countries scheduled to report included Finland and Austria.

Governments, including Burundi, Guatemala, Indonesia and Philippines introduced legal reforms or military regulations to protect children from involvement in armed conflict. Before military conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, the USA pledged not to deploy under-18s in combat. Although it later failed to effectively enforce that pledge, this shift in deployment practice by a major military power demonstrated a new international consensus on the issue. Afghanistan’s new government adopted an official age

threshold of 22 for entry into the state armed forces, in response to a history of child soldiering in which boys as young as 14 were used as spies, messengers and porters, as well as combatants.

The European Parliament adopted several resolutions pressing for action to end the use of child soldiers and in 2003 and 2004 called for a special envoy to lead European Union (EU) policy. In December 2003 the EU adopted Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, which asked its diplomatic representatives in conflict areas to report on the use of child soldiers and spell out possible actions ranging from press statements to sanctions. The Human Security Network, a grouping of states including Austria, Canada, Chile, Greece, Ireland, Jordan, Mali, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland and Thailand, in 2003 adopted the “Bridging the Gap Support Strategy” for children in armed conflict, with a strong focus on monitoring and reporting on child soldier use. A small but growing number of other like-minded governments demonstrated their commitment to ending child soldiering by mobilizing political support and resources to protect children in armed conflict and meet their needs for care and recovery from trauma.

Naming and shaming

The UN Security Council played an increasingly important role in condemning child soldiering and calling for the international accountability of those who recruit and use them. Since 1999, when it first identified children and armed conflict as an issue affecting international peace and security and condemned child soldiering (Resolution 1261), the Security Council has held a series of annual debates and adopted progressively stronger resolutions. In 2000, it requested peace negotiations to include protective measures for children (Resolution 1314).

In November 2001, resolution 1379 asked the UN Secretary-General to produce a list of parties to armed conflict on the Security Council's agenda which recruited or used children in violation of their international obligations. Following resolution 1460 (January 2003), in October 2003 the Secretary-General's list was expanded beyond the Security Council's formal agenda to include 54 forces in 15 countries, including those with some of the worst records for child recruitment, such as Colombia, Myanmar and Uganda.

Resolution 1539 in April 2004 demanded that forces named in Afghanistan, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Liberia and Somalia develop concrete action plans to end child recruitment or face sanctions such as weapons bans or suspension of military assistance. The resolution created follow-up mechanisms such as the designation of UN "focal points" or representatives to establish dialogue with child recruiters and assist in creating plans for an end to recruitment and the demobilization of all children. The resolution extended the list to include forces responsible for war-related abuses against children, such as killing, maiming, abduction, sexual violence and denial of humanitarian access. In 2003 and 2004 Security Council representatives visited West and Central Africa, and discussed child soldier recruitment, among other human rights concerns, with governments and armed groups.

Prosecution for using child soldiers

For the first time, those who recruited children into armed forces or armed groups faced prosecution. In July 1998, the international community adopted the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to establish a permanent court to investigate and prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes when national

courts were unable or unwilling to do so. The Statute provides that "conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years into the national armed forces or armed groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities" is a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflicts. In its preparatory discussions, the states negotiating the Statute accepted that the definition covered direct participation in combat, as well as active participation in military activities linked to combat such as scouting, spying, sabotage, and the use of children as decoys, couriers or at military checkpoints.

In 2003, the Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (an international court established by the UN and the government in 2002) issued the first indictments against those bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during the country's decade-long conflict. The Special Court defines a war crime in the same way as the Rome Statute. The indictments, including against former Liberian President Charles Taylor, included charges of conscripting, enlisting and or using boys and girls under the age of 15 to participate in active hostilities. The trials began in June 2004. On a preliminary motion, the court ruled that child recruitment was a crime under customary international law even before the Rome Statute was adopted in 1998.

In 2004, the new International Criminal Court announced its first investigations into crimes under international law committed in Northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In both situations the use of child soldiers is widespread.

International labour law found its teeth as the International Labour Organization (ILO) began reviewing states' observance of ILO Convention 182, which defines the forced or compulsory recruitment of persons under the age of 18 for use in armed conflict as

one of the worst forms of child labour. The Convention entered into force in 2000, and in 2003 the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards reviewed the first 31 state reports. The Committee found evidence of the “forced or compulsory recruitment for use in armed conflict” of under-18s in Burundi, DRC, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Syria and Uganda. In Myanmar, an agreement was reached between the government and the ILO in May 2003 to allow an independent facilitator to receive complaints on forced labour. However, the plan had not been implemented by June 2004. An ILO interim liaison officer in Myanmar had received a significant number of complaints by June, including at least seven complaints of forcible recruitment of children between the ages of 13 and 16 years.

A failure of will

Although the UN Secretary-General reported the presence of child soldiers in more than 30 country situations, Security Council action was limited to six armed conflicts, five of them in Africa. Permanent members of the Security Council were often reluctant to infringe upon state sovereignty or to incur the financial cost of enforcing sanctions against those using child soldiers. Geo-politics also played a role. Colombia appeared unlikely to be listed on the Security Council’s agenda because of falling within the US government’s “sphere of influence”. Likewise, the Russian government was likely to hinder efforts by the Security Council to take action on behalf of children involved in armed conflict in Chechnya. When specific country situations were discussed, the Security Council frequently reverted to previous practice and failed to mention the child rights issues involved.

Governments who ratified the Optional Protocol did not always immediately withdraw children from hostilities. The UN

Secretary-General named the governments of Burundi, DRC and Uganda as using child soldiers. All had ratified the Optional Protocol. Sixty-two US soldiers aged 17 were assigned to units in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 and 2004, despite US ratification of the Optional Protocol in 2002. In Tajikistan, which ratified the Optional Protocol in 2002, abduction and forcible recruitment of young people by recruitment officers raised the strong possibility of under-18s in its armed forces.

Other governments ratified the Optional Protocol but made special provision for the voluntary recruitment of 16 and 17-year-olds. In Europe, there was concern in the military that, without this provision, too few young people would join the armed forces. Otherwise strong proponents of child rights, including Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, continued to recruit under-18s to their armed forces. Worldwide, only 10 parties to the Optional Protocol – Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, El Salvador, Ireland, Mexico, Paraguay, Serbia and Montenegro and the UK – retained the age of 16 for the recruitment of volunteers, the lowest age allowed under the Optional Protocol.

The treatment of former child soldiers seeking asylum also highlighted the discrepancy between condemnation by Security Council members and national policy and practice. In Norway, a strong champion of child rights at the UN, immigration authorities refused asylum to two Eritrean youths who said they had been forcibly recruited. If returned they faced torture, arbitrary detention and forced labour for fleeing military service. In Germany, the recruitment of children was not deemed a form of child-specific persecution and former child soldiers had little chance of being granted asylum.

Maintaining the pressure

Turning consensus into action

The question remains: how can governments and armed groups be held accountable for actively recruiting or allowing the recruitment of children?

A key step is to ensure that the Security Council takes action to enforce its demands to end child soldier use. If governments and armed groups perceive its resolutions as empty rhetoric, then the progress made in international accountability will be lost. The Security Council must keep the spotlight on the governments and armed groups which have been given a deadline to submit action plans on ending the use of child soldiers in conflict in Afghanistan, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Liberia and Somalia. Concerned governments can help that process forward by pledging resources to implement those plans, such as support for DDR programs for child soldiers. They should also promote dialogue between the warring parties, and impose penalties on those who flout Security Council directives. That small list of six conflict zones in which UN action has been authorized must be expanded to include more than 20 other situations of concern.

Defence and security agenda

In some cases, governments implement the Optional Protocol in their own countries – even promote it in international forums – but in practice overlook the use of child soldiers by governments they support with military assistance. The power to influence should be used to promote the standards of the Optional Protocol in foreign policy, especially through the provision of assistance in bilateral relations with other states and through intergovernmental

groupings such as the EU or the Human Security Network.

Concerns about children and armed conflict should be raised as a matter of routine in bilateral discussions with governments which use or allow the use of child soldiers, especially in defence and security talks. Military assistance and training must be contingent on practices that respect children's rights. In 2003, for example, the Belgian Parliament adopted legislation specifically banning arms transfers by the Belgian government to foreign government forces using child soldiers.

By contrast, other Western countries have broken their commitment to end child soldiering – in spirit if not in a legal sense – by not firmly requiring the governments which receive military training and assistance, such as Colombia, Rwanda and Uganda, to end their use of children in armed conflict.

Promoting child rights

Governments need to encourage a change of attitude towards children in society to be effective in preventing their future recruitment. Protecting children from soldiering requires recognition of the full range of child rights, including to family life, education, healthcare and freedom of expression. Comprehensive policies need to be developed and implemented to ensure children's rights to education, training and employment, to protection from domestic violence and from sexual and economic exploitation.

While armed political groups are often the main recruiters of children, governments must address the social and economic conditions that provoke children to voluntarily enlist to defend their communities, or to earn more money than they can earn in regular employment. Preventing child recruitment must involve

understanding the reasons for recruitment, and action by governments to create alternatives to joining armed forces. Long-term commitment and engagement by the international community should serve to assist those states which lack the resources to ensure that children's rights are fully protected.

Promoting the rights of war-affected children – including child soldiers – means more than defining them as “collateral damage” or as passive victims of war. Such children must be guaranteed a larger role in society and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Most states fail to fully implement the requirement in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that children have the right to express their views and be heard in judicial or administrative proceedings that affect them (Article 12), which is especially relevant to former child soldiers in the juvenile justice system. Adults should be listening to child soldiers and young people as key stakeholders in negotiations to end conflicts.

Children's involvement is crucial not only to build a lasting peace but in all aspects of the dialogue between civil society and governments. Successful youth participation in policy-making has resulted in youth-driven peace processes, projects in which children teach adults about children's rights and needs during conflict, and programs in which street children train to be human rights monitors and peer mediators.

One model for youth involvement is an initiative by former child soldier Napoleon Adok, who has initiated discussions on peace in Sudan between former child soldiers and religious leaders, elders of ethnic communities and armed group commanders. In West Africa, the newly established Veteran Child Soldiers Association of Liberia took part in celebrations of World Refugee Day organized by the Liberian Welfare Council in Ghana in 2004.

“Straight-18”

Ensuring full implementation of existing standards should be a high priority for action. However, these legal standards should be strengthened further. This includes attaining a “straight-18” standard – the abandonment of provisions that allow children to be legally recruited as soldiers at the age of 16 or 17. Universal ratification of the Optional Protocol by governments that at the same time ensure a “straight-18” position remains a major objective. The more states that exclude the use of under-18s on ratification, the more the age of 18 will be recognized as a uniform, clear and workable standard.

Strengthening the grassroots

Finally, the good news in the movement against the use of child soldiers is found in the tremendous growth in the number of individuals and organizations working directly with war-affected children in conflict zones around the world. Whether they are international humanitarian aid workers or grassroots civil society groups, many thousands of people are courageously working to protect children from the atrocities of war or to assist them in regaining their childhood.

In the most remote conflict situations, activists can be found gathering information about the use of child soldiers by government armies and non-state armed groups. Such work is often difficult and dangerous. Activists face intimidation and harassment as they speak out on behalf of children, challenge the recruiters of children and remind governments of their international obligations to protect children from involvement in armed conflict. There are defenders of children's rights around the globe who provide education, health care and safety for war-affected children and help former child soldiers recover from

The Coalition has been building a grassroots membership and creating links from local groups to international organizations under its broad umbrella. It campaigns for ratification of the Optional Protocol at the national level, to raise awareness and to prevent children from becoming child soldiers. The Coalition also promotes grassroots monitoring. National member organizations across all regions have taken on the responsibility for monitoring how far governments and armed groups are honouring their international obligations and commitments.

Local groups have also campaigned for improved policies on reintegrating former child soldiers back into their communities. In Paraguay, for example, the Coalition successfully campaigned for ratification of the Optional Protocol in September 2002, and for an end to compulsory military training for secondary school students. The training was abandoned in 2003. The Belgium Coalition succeeded in its campaign for the government to adopt the “straight-18” position when ratifying the Optional Protocol in March 2002. In 2003 it presented recommendations from the Coalition’s round table in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa to the Belgian prime minister. The US network’s campaign led to the US Senate unanimously agreeing to ratify the Optional Protocol in December 2002.

their physical and psychological wounds. The increasing involvement of ex-child soldiers themselves heralds a major achievement in creating a global movement which is accountable to the children and communities affected by armed conflict. All of these people deserve not only praise and respect but solid, consistent support to facilitate their work aimed at ending the use of child soldiers.

- 1 Amnesty International (AI), *Democratic Republic of the Congo: Children at war*, September 2003.
- 2 International Labour Organization, *Wounded childhood – The use of children in armed conflict in Central Africa*, April 2003.
- 3 Sudan has been placed in the Middle East and North Africa section of this report.
- 4 Human Rights Watch (HRW), *You’ll learn not to cry – child combatants in Colombia*, September 2003.
- 5 HRW, *Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda*, March 2003.
- 6 Information from Child Soldiers Coalition members in Goma, DRC, September 2003.
- 7 Defence for Children International – Palestine Section, “Gross violation of children’s rights: Children kept in temporary detention centre in inhumane conditions for over one month”, 22 April 2003.
- 8 AI, *Burundi: Poverty, isolation and ill-treatment – Juvenile justice in Burundi*, 24 September 2002.
- 9 AI, “Zimbabwe: Assault and sexual violence by militia”, 5 April 2002.