

# Europe and Eurasia

## Regional overview

Under-18s were involved in the continuing conflict in Chechnya. In the rest of the region most states made commitments not to deploy child soldiers in combat, and a majority had ratified the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. However, children were still recruited to government armed forces at the age of 16 in several countries, some of which reserved the right to deploy children in combat. In others, homeless children were admitted to military schools from a young age or “adopted” by military units, often in the absence of state welfare provision. Former child soldiers had little chance of being granted asylum in some countries and some were returned to countries where they faced possible human rights violations.

### At war in Chechnya

Child soldiers continued to be involved in conflict in the Chechen Republic of the **Russian Federation**. Children from the age of 14 reportedly enlisted in armed groups opposing Russian rule and fought in factional groups to protect territory from rival armed groups and the Russian forces. A few under-18s, including boys and girls, were reportedly involved in suicide bombings and other incidents in which explosives were strapped to their bodies. These included an incident in October 2002 in which about 50 people, allegedly linked to Chechen rebel groups, took more than 800 people hostage at a Moscow theatre. The numbers of under-18s involved in the conflict were impossible to calculate, given

severe restrictions on media reporting and access to the territory.

Russian troops targeted young people in “cleansing” operations to round up suspected opposition supporters. Scores were reported to have been tortured by Russian forces and to have “disappeared” in custody in 2001 and 2002. Corruption in the enforcement of the draft increased fears that under-18s were being conscripted into the Russian armed forces and the possibility of some being deployed to conflict in Chechnya could not be ruled out. Russia had signed but not ratified the Optional Protocol.

### Underage recruitment

In **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova** and **Russia**, students attending military schools from the age of 16 or 17 were reportedly considered to be on active military service. Orphans and other homeless children were said to be enrolled in military schools from the age of ten or eleven in **Kazakhstan**, Russia and **Ukraine**. In the absence of functioning social services, tens of thousands of such children aged 14 to 16 were “adopted” or sponsored by military units in Russia. They attended school, received military training and in some cases lived in army barracks. The practice raised concerns about their exposure to harsh conditions, bullying and other forms of abuse, as well as to hazardous activities such as weapons training. There were no reports of such children being deployed in combat.

Public concern over the treatment of young recruits in the **United Kingdom** (UK)

was heightened following the shooting deaths of two 17-year-old soldiers in 2001 and 2002 at a military barracks. While an open verdict was recorded on the first death and an inquest was yet to be held on the second, a police investigation expressed concern over bullying and intimidation of young recruits and called for better supervision. Police and the army were criticized by the dead soldiers' families for flawed initial investigations and excessive secrecy throughout the inquiries as well as failure to establish the cause of death. Alone among European governments which had ratified the Optional Protocol, the UK and **Serbia and Montenegro** permitted recruits to enlist at 16, although in **Ireland** 16-year-old volunteers could sign up for apprenticeships to the armed forces. Up to 7,000 under-18s were serving in the UK armed forces in any given year. Underage recruits could sign up for 22-year contracts, with an option to leave after four years from the age of 18. The youngest recruits could therefore find themselves contractually bound to serve until they were at least 22. The UK reserved the right to deploy under-18s in hostilities in urgent situations. One 17-year-old girl was on board a British ship sent to the theatre of conflict during the Afghanistan war, but there were no other known deployments of under-18s to Afghanistan or Iraq during the US-led interventions in 2001 and 2003.

A few countries which had ratified the Optional Protocol allowed voluntary recruitment at 17. They included **Austria, France and Italy**. In practice most young recruits remained in training until they had reached 18. Other states, such as **Germany, Hungary** and the **Netherlands**, had yet to ratify the Optional Protocol but did not allow under-18s to be deployed in combat.

Throughout the region a trend continued to professionalize armies and abolish conscription. However, compulsory military service continued in 13 countries:

**Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Poland, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine** and **Uzbekistan**. There were reports of forcible recruitment in **Armenia**, of ethnic Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan, and in Tajikistan, although it was unclear to what extent under-18s were involved. Bucking regional trends, Turkmenistan lowered both the voluntary recruitment and conscription ages to 17 in 2001 and 2003 respectively, with no option for conscientious objection or alternative service. Some conscripts were apparently employed in public sector activities. Provision continued for the wartime conscription of 16 year olds in **Estonia** and of 17 year olds in Greece.

### **Child soldiers denied asylum**

Former child soldiers were believed to be living in numerous western European countries. Among them were an estimated three to five hundred in **Germany**. The immigration authorities stated that child recruitment would not be considered as a form of "child specific persecution" and former child soldiers had little chance of being granted asylum. In **Norway** the immigration authorities refused asylum to two youths in early 2004. The two said they had been child soldiers in Eritrea where children are reported to serve in the armed forces illegally and are subjected to torture, arbitrary detention and forced labour for fleeing forcible recruitment and military service.

### **Human rights law and standards**

International laws to protect children from involvement in armed conflict continued to be adopted by governments across the region. By June 2004, 32 out of 53 states had ratified the Optional Protocol and only **Albania, Belarus, Cyprus, Georgia, Turkmenistan** and **Uzbekistan** had yet to sign it.

The Vatican urged governments to end the use of child soldiers on several occasions. Pope John Paul II devoted his 2004 Lent message to children and referred to “children forced to work or enlisted for combat”. In October 2001 the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN encouraged other states to further the legal protection of children by ratifying the Optional Protocol.

At the regional level, in December 2003 the European Union (EU) adopted “Guidelines on children and armed conflict”. The guidelines set out the EU’s objectives of influencing countries and non-state bodies to implement international and regional human rights and humanitarian standards, and “to protect children from the effects of armed conflict, to end the use of children in armies and armed groups, and to end impunity”. The guidelines propose that EU representatives in conflict zones should increase their monitoring and reporting of human rights abuses against children. They also say that the EU will strengthen its actions on behalf of war-affected children, including by engaging in political dialogue and funding child demobilization and reintegration programs.

In February 2004 the Child Soldiers Coalition and other international non-

governmental organizations proposed the appointment of an EU Special Representative with a mandate and resources to implement the guidelines. They pressed for any EU programs to specifically address the needs of girls, for responsibility for child soldier issues to be at ministerial level and for effective coordination between the UN and the EU.

### **Optional Protocol: ratifications and signatures**

**Acceded/ratified:** Andorra, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Holy See, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of), Malta, Monaco, Portugal, Moldova (Republic of), Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, United Kingdom. **Signed:** Armenia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine. **Not signed:** Albania, Belarus, Cyprus, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.