

Child Soldiers: Cause and Symptom of Human Insecurity

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In a world in which the murder of civilians is commonplace, children are doubly victimized – as vulnerable targets and as cannon fodder for armies devoid of conscience. Of all the wartime violations of the rights of children, it is their exploitation as soldiers that has garnered the most attention.

Now global in scope, the recruitment of child soldiers has increased because they are cheap, malleable and expendable, and because light and deadly modern weapons more than offset their lack of strength.

In January 2004, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers released a grim report on the continuing abuse of children as soldiers. It noted massive increases in the recruitment of child soldiers in the Cote d'Ivoire, parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2003. From the DRC there were reports of children being raped and tortured, as well as forced to commit atrocities against civilians. Abductions of children in northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army were higher than at any time in the conflict's 17-year history, while in Colombia, the number of children used by armed groups may have increased to around 11,000 in recent years, with children as young as 12 trained and deployed to use explosives and weapons.¹

Sierra Leone's ten-year civil war produced one of the more extreme examples of the exploitation of children as fighters. In a conflict that left an estimated 50,000 people dead, displaced twice that number and left the country economically ruined, as many as 80 per cent of the fighters serving in the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were aged seven to 14. Many had been abducted from their homes.²

¹ <http://www.child-soldiers.org/cs/childsoldiers.nsf/37f914dcf6a462ec802569bb00677467/f2feb5995c9ac4c480256e1c004b0cd6?OpenDocument>

² Save the Children, "Children of the Gun," *Children in Crisis* project report, September, 2000. www.savethechildren.org/crisis.

The government and its militia allies also recruited children, with the total number of minors under arms estimated at 15,000 to 20,000 – a clear majority of all combatants in the civil war.

Sierra Leone is not an isolated case. Throughout much of the world child soldiers play an important role in both rebel and official military forces and in non-military, but still violent, political organizations – including terrorist groups. They serve as infantry shock troops, raiders, sentries, spies, sappers, and porters.

Near zero just a few decades ago, the numbers of child soldiers continue to rise. In 1996, UNICEF estimated that some 300,000 children were either serving in official or rebel armies, or had recently been demobilized.³ But the data are anything but reliable and the true total may well be greater.

Although many child soldiers are recruited on the borderline between adulthood and childhood, some are under-age by any cultural standard. In one survey undertaken in Asia, the average age of recruitment was 13 years, with 34 per cent of child soldiers under the age of 12.⁴ A 2003 study in Africa found that 60 per cent of child fighters were 14 or under.⁵ Some child soldiers are recruited so young that they don't even know how old they are.

- 76 per cent of ongoing or recently ended conflicts (37 of the 55) involved combatants under the age of 18 years.
- 80 per cent of these involved fighters under the age of 15.
- 40 per cent of armed organizations (157 of 366, a figure that includes both state militaries and all armed non-state groups) use child soldiers.

³ Save the Children. "Children of the Gun." *Children in Crisis* project report, September, 2000, www.savethechildren.org/crisis; United Nations. *Report of the Expert of the Secretary-General, Graça Machel, on the "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Document A/51/306 & Add 1, August 26, 1996. This figure is likely an underestimate since it was based on only 26 country case studies.

⁴ UNICEF. *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*. Geneva: UNICEF, 2003, p.19.

⁵ *Wounded Childhood: The Use of Children in Armed Conflict in Central Africa*. International Labor Office, 2003, p. 36.

- 60 per cent of the non-state armed forces (77 of 129) use child soldiers.

Relatively few of today's armed conflicts are fought with sophisticated fighter aircraft, tanks and missiles. In most wars, the weapons of choice are inexpensive and readily available small arms.⁶ Of the estimated 550 million small arms and light weapons in circulation; most are "child-portable."⁷

The cheapness and simplicity of these weapons enables large numbers of vulnerable children to be swiftly transformed into tractable, low cost – and thus, expendable – fighters, each commanding a firepower unimaginable in previous eras.

Often separated from home and family, most child soldiers are 'recruited' through offers of food, camaraderie and protection; some are abducted. Such are the privations facing children in war zones, that opting to join a rebel, or official, armed group may actually seem attractive – at least then they are fed and provided with a measure of protection. In a 2003 International Labour Office (ILO) survey undertaken in Africa, researchers found that nearly 80 per cent of child soldiers interviewed had witnessed combat, 70 per cent had their family home destroyed, and just over 59 per cent had a family member become a casualty of war.⁸ As the HIV/AIDS crisis continues to generate millions of desperately poor orphans, the pool of children susceptible to recruitment will inevitably grow.

⁶ Salopek, Paul. "The Guns of Africa: Violence-Wracked Nations are Dumping grounds for World's Arsenals." *Seattle Times*. February 27, 2002; Smith Daniel and Rachel Stohl. "Small Arms in Failed States: A Deadly Combination." Paper written for "Failed States and International Security" Conference at Purdue University, April 8-11, 1999; Stohl, Rachel. "Targeting Children: Small Arms and Children in Conflict." *Brown Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 9, no, 1, (Spring 2002), p. 281.

⁷ Singh, Jasit. *Light Weapons and International Security*. New Delhi: Inst. for Defense Studies and Analysis, 1995. Klare, Michael. "The Kalashnikov Age." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Vol. 55, No. 1, (January/February 1999).

⁸ *Wounded Childhood: The Use of Children in Armed Conflict in Central Africa*. International Labor Office, 2003, p. 25.

Once inducted, fear, brutality, and psychological manipulation are used to indoctrinate the children. Some are forced to kill friends, neighbours, or relatives – a tactic designed to deter them from returning to their home communities. The objective of the indoctrination process is to separate children from their former lives and imbue them with a sense of group loyalty – and a high level of obedience. Many also become addicted to the drugs provided to reduce their fear of combat. Their subsequent addiction provides their commanders with another lever of control.

The consequences using children to fight wars are as predictable as they are tragic. Because they are cheap they are seen expendable; because they tend to be more inexperienced, ill-trained and drug-addled than experienced fighters, they are more likely to be killed or injured. Because their inexperience puts them at disadvantage against regular soldiers, they are more likely to be used to target civilians – including other children. Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a case in point. The LRA has a core of only 200 adherents, but fields a force of up to 12,000 abducted children. This child army has sustained a decade-long civil war that has resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 civilians and the displacement of a million more.⁹

⁹ Strandberg, Peter. "End of a Long Nightmare." *Mail & Guardian*, July 26, 2002.