

CHILD SOLDIERS:

WHY RECRUITING AND USING CHILD SOLDIERS IS A WAR CRIME



WHAT IS A CHILD SOLDIER?

A child soldier is 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 political group. Child soldiers perform a range of tasks including actual fighting, laying mines and explosives; scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; undertaking logistic support and domestic duties. Child soldiers and particularly girls are often sexual slaves or recruited for sexual purposes.

HOW ARE CHILD SOLDIERS RECRUITED?

"When they came to my village, they asked my older brother whether he was ready to join the militia. He was just 17 and he said no; they shot him in the head. Then they asked me if I was ready to sign, so what could I do - I didn't want to die."

- A former child soldier taken when he was 13. (BBC report.)

Child soldiers rarely get a choice about being a soldier with many commanders using violence or the threat of violence to recruit. Children are easy to recruit and intimidate due to their small size.

The most commonly used methods of forced recruitment are abduction, press ganging or children are forced to be handed over by family or communities to fill quotas.

Separated from parents and the supports of family and friends, child recruits enter a new world governed by strict military rules, harsh discipline, hardship, and frequent exposure to deaths.



Child soldiers have also been used in the Pacific, and the boy above operated during the Solomon Islands conflict from 1998 to the early 2000s.

WHAT IS THE LIFE OF A CHILD SOLDIER LIKE?

It is a world full of risks – attack, exploitation, disease – and death. Hardships include loss of freedom, gruelling marches, heavy labour, shortages of food and water, and health problems. A culture of violence dominates and children face constant danger. Armed groups deliberately use violence to force children to obey. In such an environment children are sometimes forced to commit grave atrocities, including rape and murder of civilians. Some are forced to injure or kill members of their own families or other child soldiers to survive. Most children will become conditioned to violence and death, experiencing as normal what most people would regard as horrific.

Although most child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years old, recruitment can start at the age of 10 and the use of even younger children has been recorded by Amnesty International.



Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) being drilled

"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".

Former child soldier interviewed in 2002



Former child soldiers in the DRC burn their uniforms.

WHERE ARE CHILD SOLDIERS OPERATING

Unfortunately some 250,000 child soldiers exist in all regions of the world and in almost every country where there is armed conflict.

The African continent has the largest number of child soldiers in Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

In Asia thousands of children are involved in fighting forces too. Myanmar (Burma) is the only country in the region where government armed forces forcibly recruit and use children between the ages of 12 and 18. Some 30,000 child soldiers are believed to be operating in this army - making it the largest single user of child soldiers.

Child soldiers also exist in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand.

In the Middle East child soldiers are reportedly used in Iran, Iraq, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in tribal groups in Yemen. Children have also been used as suicide bombers and human shields in this region.

In Latin America up to 14,000 children are estimated to be involved with armed political groups and army-backed paramilitaries in Colombia. In Europe under-18s are believed to be involved in Turkey and a range of armed groups in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation.

THE COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

The coalition to stop the use of child soldiers was formed in June 1998 to create a convention banning the military recruitment and use in hostilities of any person younger than eighteen years of age; and to lobby for global recognition and enforcement of this standard by all armed forces and armed groups, both governmental and non-governmental.

The Coalition was founded by six international non-governmental organisations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Red Cross and Red Crescent. The Coalition continues to work for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

TREATIES & LAWS BANNING THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

On February 12, 2002, a new treaty came into effect, banning the use of children under age 18 in war. This treaty is known as the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*.

Globally, February 12 has become known as Red Hand day - an international day annually to highlight the plight of child soldiers and to campaign on their behalf. While international law, such as the Geneva Conventions, has long existed to ban the recruitment and use of child soldiers it has not been enough. It is for this reason that the Rome Statute, which led to the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC), has made it a war crime since 1998 for governments and rebel or opposition groups to recruit or use children in national, regional and international conflicts. All those people currently appearing before the ICC are facing charges solely or in part related to recruitment and use of child soldiers.



The International Criminal Court, The Hague, Netherlands.

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