



## Use of Children as Soldiers

By Shannon McManimon, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

At the beginning of this century, wars were fought primarily on defined battlefields between men in governmental armed forces. Today, dozens of wars specifically target civilians—now 90% of all war casualties—and their communities' social institutions. Children have become increasingly involved in these wars, both as civilian victims and as combatants. Poverty, the social disruption and destruction stemming from these wars, and the proliferation of small and cheap weapons are major factors in making child soldiers a growing phenomenon.

Today, an estimated 300,000 children under age 18 are participating in armed conflicts worldwide. Thousands more face recruitment or are members of armed forces and groups not presently at war. The Swedish organization Rädde Barnen reports that during 1997-98, children under age 18 participated in the armed conflicts of 36 countries, 27 of which involved soldiers under 15. Approximately 20 more countries, including the U.S., recruit children under age 18. Most child soldiers are from 15 to 17 years old, but others

are as young as 7. Because age documentation does not exist in many areas, children are frequently passed off as older than they are.

Children have always been used in war. Present-day war, though, triggers those conditions most likely to pressure a child to become a soldier: lack of education and stability, internal displacement or refugee flight, separation of families, and poverty. Under these circumstances, distinguishing between a forced and a voluntary child soldier is difficult. Some children join armed forces for food, survival, or to avenge atrocities in their communities; others

have been physically abducted for war by such armed groups as RENAMO in Mozambique and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda.

Armed forces and paramilitary groups use both girls and boys in many roles. Children commonly start out in support positions, acting as porters, cooks, spies, or sexual slaves. Often, though, these children end up on the front lines of combat, e.g., planting or detecting landmines or participating in first-wave assaults.

Child soldiers are frequently subject to extreme abuse and manipulation during training and combat, and generally suffer higher casualty rates than adults. Often plied with drugs and given promises of food, shelter, and security, child soldiers are at times forced to commit atrocities against other armed groups and civilian populations, including sometimes their own families and communities.

This use of children in war is greatly facilitated by an estimated 500 million small arms and assault weapons worldwide. These weapons are very inexpensive—an AK-47 and two clips of ammunition can be bought for \$12 on the Mozambican border. They are also durable, small, lightweight, easy to maintain, and simple enough for a 10-year-old to handle. Illegal arms trafficking and poor monitoring of the legal trade make it easy for nearly anyone to obtain these weapons—and to put them into the hands of children.

Several initiatives are under way internationally to address the problem of child soldiers. In the policy arena, a growing movement is seeking international agreements raising the minimum age for soldiering to 18. Current international agreements [the 1977 Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, as well as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)] set 15 as the minimum age. Raising this to 18 would add protection for children ages 15-17 and for those passed off as older than they are. In 1998, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared that UN military peacekeepers must be at least 18 and should preferably be older than 21. Some governments have also changed (or are considering changing) their policies, and instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child reflect this perspective. U.S. law, however, permits 17-year-olds to join the military voluntarily, with parental permission.

Attention is also being given to the need to assist child soldiers after conflict. Many former child soldiers have a difficult time reentering civilian life, and communities frequently have trouble reaccepting them. Alternately, former child soldiers may be drawn to gangs or criminal activity or become adult leaders of future armed groups, such as in Afghanistan. Peace treaties almost without exception do not address the use of children as soldiers. Consequently, they rarely provide for demobilization of child soldiers or for adequate care or assistance—medical, psychological, spiritual, or educational—to help them reenter civilian society. Small programs in countries such as Sierra Leone are addressing these needs, but more are necessary.

### Key Points

- Approximately 300,000 children under 18 currently participate in dozens of armed conflicts. Thousands more either face recruitment or are members of armed forces not currently at war.
- Poverty, the proliferation of small and cheap weapons, and the changing nature of warfare have increased both the use and the roles of child soldiers.
- Using children as soldiers robs them of their families and their education; surviving children often have difficulty rejoining their communities.

Although critical of the use of child soldiers in certain contexts, the U.S. government—particularly the Department of Defense—has consistently opposed widely popular international efforts to raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18. For the past five years, the U.S. has led efforts to block the development of an Optional Protocol to the CRC that would raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18, consistent with other internationally recognized children's rights and norms. Even though a 1998 sense of Congress resolution attached to the Defense Appropriations Authorization Act for 1999 urged the U.S. not to block this process, the nonbinding resolution has been ignored by U.S. representatives to ongoing UN negotiations.

Furthermore, Washington has not even ratified several international treaties (the CRC and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions) that specify a broad range of special protection for children. And the U.S. has opposed the creation of a strong International Criminal Court (ICC), which has the potential to deter the recruitment of child soldiers. "The 1998 Rome Statute of the ICC includes among its list of war crimes tactics targeting civilians or civilian institutions as well as the conscription or enlistment of children under age 15 and their use as active participants in hostilities."

Specific U.S. measures to block international efforts to prevent children from becoming soldiers have also occurred outside of governmental and UN arenas. During Summer 1999 negotiations on the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, the U.S. lobbied strongly against banning all forms of soldiering by children under 18. Thus, the final text specifically condemns only forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

Successive U.S. administrations have argued that a minimum age of 18 is unacceptable and unrealistic. Recently, Pentagon officials, backed by the State Department and the administration, have contended that raising the minimum by 2 years, to 17, is acceptable and that the difference between 17 and 18 is only "peripheral." This position corresponds with U.S. law, which allows 17-year-olds to join the military. U.S. opposition to age 18 is also fueled by Pentagon concerns about possible interference with its domestic recruitment

practices, especially in the wake of current enlistment shortfalls. The Pentagon has greatly expanded its outreach and advertising activities for young people, including Junior-ROTC in high schools and various other military programs for children as young as eight.

Not only is the U.S. resisting current international endeavors, it is also actively engaged in creating the conditions leading to the use of child soldiers. Of the 42 armed conflicts that occurred in 1994-95, 39 involved armed forces that had received U.S.-supplied weaponry. As of November 1998, the U.S. was providing military support to 11 of the 22 governments engaged in armed conflict whose armed forces or supported paramilitaries were known to use children under 17. (These countries are Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Colombia, Congo-Brazzaville, Pakistan, Peru, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.) In fiscal year 1997, the U.S. authorized nearly a quarter billion dollars in foreign military sales and excess defense articles, provided more than \$3 million in training, and authorized more than \$10 million in commercial military sales to these 11 governments or their sponsored groups.

In 1997 in Colombia, for example, where documentation showed more than 15,000 children serving as soldiers in government forces, U.S. foreign military sales and giveaways of excess defense articles surpassed \$26 million, plus \$403,000 in military training through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Joint Combined Education Training (JCET) programs. Additionally, U.S. companies were authorized to sell Colombian state entities 30,000 grenades, one million rounds of ammunition, and 7,000 M-16 assault rifles. On the African continent, where the use of child soldiers is widespread, U.S. military training is taking place on an unprecedented scale and with virtually no congressional or public oversight: 34 of 53 countries had U.S.-conducted JCET training between 1995 and 1997.

## Key Problems

- The U.S. has failed to ratify major treaties protecting children's rights.
- The U.S., based in part on its domestic recruitment practices, has consistently blocked international efforts to raise the minimum age for soldiers from 15 to 18.
- The U.S. provides arms transfers, military aid, and military training to countries using children in armed conflict, exacerbating these conflicts and facilitating the use of child soldiers.

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Strong international norms can provide a critical basis to prevent and stop the use and recruitment of children as soldiers. To this end, the U.S. should ratify all treaties relating to child soldiers: the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, the CRC, the ICC, and ILO Convention No. 182. Once ratified, these conventions should be incorporated into U.S. national legislation

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## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should bring its policy and actions into line with international attempts to raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18.
  - The use of child soldiers should be examined by the State Department and Congress and reports used to monitor progress and take action.
  - Congress and the State Department should deny military aid, transfers, training, and sales to groups using child soldiers; aid should instead address root socioeconomic problems and the reintegration of child soldiers into civil society.
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and programs. The U.S. must also immediately cease any attempts to block current and future international efforts to raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18, especially in negotiations on the CRC. In keeping with international trends, the Defense Department and Congress should raise the U.S. recruitment age to 18 and ensure that presently enlisted 17-year-olds are not deployed to potential combat zones.

In addition, the U.S., with its stated commitment to human rights, should help to establish prompt, objective monitoring and effective enforcement of

agreements regarding child soldiers, particularly through the existing UN Commission on the Rights of the Child. U.S. embassy staff and other U.S.-supported personnel abroad should be educated on national and international laws regarding the use of children as soldiers.

Information on child soldiers should be included in State Department country reports, where present coverage is spotty. Congressional hearings involving the Departments of State and Defense should examine the problem, monitor progress, and lead to vocal and active measures against countries or groups using child soldiers, including withholding military transfers, aid, and training. Congress should authorize the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to report on establishing and implementing this guideline as a condition for receiving military aid, transfers, and training. Congress should also examine war practices that increase the likelihood of children becoming soldiers.

Several pieces of legislation can be used toward this effort. One is the 1997 Leahy Law, which stipulates withholding funds from governments whose security forces have been implicated in human rights abuses. Another proposed bill is the McKinney-Rohrabacher Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers Act of 1999 (HR 2269). To be eligible for arms transfers, military aid, or training under this code, countries would need to adhere to internationally recognized human rights standards and not be engaged in armed aggression. The enforcement of such a code, which should recognize using child soldiers as violating these terms, would

restrict the availability of weapons to groups that use children as soldiers.

The U.S. must take responsibility for the ways in which its own laws and practices foster the use of child soldiers and warfare against children. Congress should explore how U.S. weapons aid and training facilitate the use of child soldiers. Accordingly, it should monitor the entire process and investigate the end use of U.S. weapons shipments, including both weapons given as aid and arms that various government bodies have authorized for legal sale by U.S. manufacturers. This oversight is particularly important in curbing the vast illegal weapons trafficking (especially of small arms), upon which armed opposition groups rely. Additionally, U.S. aid should focus on universal access to basic education, food security, and primary health care, which are important factors in keeping children out of conflict.

Rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers into their communities is crucial in ensuring both lasting peace and stable communities. Just as the decommissioning of arms is now seen as a crucial—though often missing—component in cease-fires and peace accords, the resettlement and reintegration of child soldiers and other combatants should be critical elements. Children's basic needs must be addressed, along with education and family reunification. For instance, Christian Children's Fund (CCF) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with help from the U.S. Agency for International Development, have developed locale-specific programs to demobilize and return Angolan children home. To continue and expand this work, Congress should increase funding for the rehabilitation and reintegration of disarmed and demobilized child soldiers. The U.S. should also be willing to grant asylum to former child soldiers unable to return home and to youngsters fleeing wars or conscription.

Washington refuses to admit that the U.S. has its own child soldiering problem. But 17-year-olds in the U.S. armed forces are only one aspect of a greater problem: a tolerance and even glorification of violence in U.S. culture that leads many youth to engage in different types of warfare in U.S. streets and schools. What must be recognized is that this tolerance of violence is ultimately connected to Washington's failure to condemn unequivocally all use of children as soldiers. Thus, this culture of violence has ramifications not only in countless U.S. communities but also for hundreds of thousands of children—especially child soldiers—around the world. As public concern grows over youth violence, we must be sure that the efforts to end violence perpetrated by and against children extend to all the world's children.

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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

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## Publications

Amnesty International, *Child Soldiers: One of the Worst Abuses of Child Labour* (London: Amnesty International, 1999).

Laura A. Barnitz, *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict* (Washington: Youth Advocate Program International, 1997).

Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Stockholm, Sweden: Rädda Barnen, 1998).

Center for Defense Information, *U.S. Campaign to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers Advocacy Video*, July 1999.

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Stop Using Child Soldiers!* (Stockholm, Sweden: Rädda Barnen, 1998).

Mike Wessells, "Child Soldiers," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November/December 1997.

## World Wide Web

**Amnesty International\***  
<http://www.amnesty-usa.org>

**Center for Defense Information's Children and Armed Conflict Project\***  
<http://www.cdi.org/atp/childsoldiers>

**Children and Their Rights: The Convention on the Rights of the Child**  
<http://www.unicef.org/crc>

**Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (international)**  
<http://www.child-soldiers.org>

**Human Rights Watch: Stop the Use of Child Soldiers!\***  
<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp>

**Impact of Armed Conflict on Children**  
(UN report by Graça Machel)  
<http://www.unicef.org/graca>

**International Committee of the Red Cross**  
<http://www.icrc.org>

**Rädda Barnen**  
(Swedish Save the Children)  
<http://www.rb.se>

**U.S. Campaign to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers**  
<http://www.us-childsoldiers.org>

**Youth Advocate Program International\***  
<http://www.yapi.org>

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