



Use of Children as Soldiers

Shannon McManimon, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Rachel Stohl, Center for Defense Information (CDI)

At the beginning of the 20th century, wars were fought primarily on defined battlefields between men in governmental armed forces. Today, dozens of wars specifically target civilians and their social institutions. Most are within, not between, states. Children have become increasingly involved in these wars, both as civilian victims and as combatants. Poverty, social disruption and destruction stemming from these wars, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are major factors in expanding the use of child soldiers.

Today, more than an estimated 500,000 children have been recruited in 87 countries (including the United States). At least 300,000 children are actively participating in conflicts, and are directly involved in combat in 41 countries. Although most child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years old, others are as young as seven.

Children have been used in support services and even as soldiers throughout history. However, the rise in intrastate conflict has exacerbated the conditions—such as internal displacement or refugee flight, and separation of families—most likely to pressure a child to become a soldier. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to make a distinction between a forced and a voluntary child soldier. Some children join armed groups for food, survival, or to avenge atrocities in their communities; others have been physical-

ly abducted for war by such armed groups as 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, planting or detecting landmines or participating in first-wave assaults. 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 light weapons worldwide. These weapons are very inexpensive: an AK-47 can sometimes be bought for a bag of maize or for \$20-30. They are 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.

International agreements have been created to protect children from war. The 1949 Geneva Convention IV (and its 1977 Additional Protocols I and II) and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) delineate guidelines for protecting children in conflict and set 15 as the minimum age for soldiers. The 1998 International Criminal Court (ICC) statute makes it a war crime to conscript or enlist children under age 15 or to use them in hostilities. A 1998 UN policy directs governments not to send military observers and civilian police younger than 25 to participate in UN operations, and it specifies that other types of peacekeeping troops should preferably be at least 21 but definitely not younger than 18. The International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 182 (1999) bans the worst forms of child labor and prohibits forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

Not yet in force is an upgrade of the CRC agreement—the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, adopted by the UN in May 2000. The Protocol requires state parties to “take all feasible measures” to ensure that children under age 18 do not participate in hostilities, prohibits the conscription of anyone under 18, obliges states to raise the age of voluntary recruitment to at least 16, forbids any use of children under age 18 by nongovernmental armed groups, and directs states to criminalize such practices.

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. Almost without exception, peace treaties 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 efforts in countries such as Sierra Leone are addressing these needs, but more programs are necessary.

Key Points

- Approximately 300,000 children under 18 currently participate in armed conflicts. Thousands more 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, despite increasingly stronger international agreements designed to minimize this practice.
- Using children as soldiers robs them of their families and their education; surviving children often have difficulty rejoining their communities.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Although critical of the use of child soldiers in many contexts, the U.S. government—particularly the Defense Department—has consistently opposed widely popular international efforts to raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18. The U.S. strenuously opposed the creation of a strong ICC, which has the potential to deter the recruitment of child soldiers. Opposition from the U.S. led to weaker language in ILO Convention 182 (ratified by the U.S. in 1999). Furthermore, the U.S. has not ratified several international treaties (e.g., the CRC and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions) that specify a broad range of special protection for children.

Perhaps even more significantly, for five years, the U.S. led efforts to block the development of the Optional Protocol on Child Soldiers. Many countries were dissatisfied with the 15-year standard and wanted to create an instrument to protect all children under the age of 18 from participation, conscription, and recruitment. However, consensus on prohibiting all forms of soldiering could not be reached, and a lower standard was adopted. The final agreement bowed to U.S. interests in several respects, including failing to establish 18 as the minimum age for all soldiering, and allowing states to become parties to the Protocol without ratifying the CRC (only the U.S. and Somalia have not ratified it).

Successive U.S. administrations have argued that a minimum age of 18 is unacceptable and unrealistic. U.S. law currently allows 17-year-olds to join the military voluntarily (with parental permission). It is likely that the U.S. will officially declare 17 as its minimum age for recruitment if it ratifies the Optional Protocol (signed by former President Clinton in July 2000). U.S. opposition to age 18 is fueled by Pentagon concerns about possible interference with its domestic recruitment practices, especially in the wake of current enlistment shortfalls (even though the Joint Chiefs of Staff signed off on U.S. approval of the Optional Protocol during January 2000 negotiations). The Pentagon has greatly expanded its outreach and advertising activities geared for young people, including high school Junior-ROTC and various other military programs for children as young as eight. Such programs actively sell militarism to children of all ages.

Individual countries and regions have taken steps to eliminate the use of child soldiers; an estimated 73 countries uphold the principle that children under 18 should not be used in armed forces. The refusal of the U.S. to participate in expanding international standards is just one further example of the U.S. unilateralism that plagues current U.S. foreign policy.

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 elsewhere. Of the 42 armed conflicts ongoing in 1999, 39 involved armed forces that had received U.S.-supplied arms, military technology, or military training.

Currently, child soldiers under age 18 operate within 36 countries, either in state militaries, government-supported paramilitaries, or opposition groups, which access U.S. weapons through theft and diversion. In FY 1999, the U.S. authorized the sale of weapons or the delivery of military training to 23 of these countries, 17 of which were actively engaged in conflict in 2001. The 23 countries are Algeria, Angola, Cambodia, Chad, Colombia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uganda, and Uzbekistan.

In Colombia's case, where some child soldiers are as young as eight, in FY 1999, the U.S. authorized over \$4.5 million in foreign military sales (FMS), \$66 million in direct commercial sales (DCS), and nearly \$1 million in training. Authorizations to the Philippines in the same year, reported to have soldiers as young as 10, totaled nearly \$10 million in FMS, \$91 million in DCS, and over \$1 million in training. In Indonesia, where children as young as seven likely serve in both government-allied militias and opposition forces, the U.S. authorized over \$2 million in FMS and training.

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, consistently opposes international efforts to raise the minimum age for all soldiering 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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Mail: PO Box 4506
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Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor
Voice: (505) 388-0208
Fax: (505) 388-0619
Email: tom@irc-online.org

IPS Editor
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

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 the Optional Protocol to the CRC (with 18 specified as the minimum age for voluntary recruits). Once ratified, these conventions should be incorporated into U.S. national legislation and programs. 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 and should report on violations of international law.

Key Recommendations

- In policy and action, the U.S. should follow international attempts to raise the minimum age for soldiering to 18.
 - The State Department and Congress should examine the problem of child soldiers and should use State Department reports 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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Information on child soldiers should be included in State Department country reports, where present coverage is spotty (the House recently adopted such language in the State Department Authorization bill). Congressional hearings involving the State and Defense departments should examine the problem, monitor progress, and lead to vocal and active measures against countries or groups using child soldiers. 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 anyone receiving military aid, transfers, and training.

Congress should also examine war practices that increase the likelihood of children becoming soldiers. Children at risk should be identified and provided with peace education programs and cautions about child soldiering and its consequences. Efforts should be undertaken to mitigate the conflict-specific factors that put children at risk of becoming child soldiers.

Additionally, U.S. aid should focus on universal access to basic education, food security, and primary health care, important factors in keeping children out of conflict. Countries should not be enticed to spend precious resources on weapons. Rather, they should be encouraged to invest in sustainable development programs that will protect the lives of children.

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. training and weapons aid facilitate the use of child soldiers. Accordingly, Congress should monitor the entire process and investigate the end use of U.S. weapons ship-

ments, including both weapons given as aid and arms that various government bodies have authorized for legal sale by U.S. manufacturers. (In FY 1999, the State Department's end-use monitoring program conducted end-use checks on less than 1% of its weapons export licenses.) This oversight is particularly important in curbing the vast illegal weapons trafficking (especially of small arms), upon which many groups rely.

Several pieces of legislation can be used to facilitate these efforts. One is the 1997 Leahy Law, which stipulates withholding funds from governments whose security forces have been implicated in human rights abuses. Legislation can also ensure that military aid is conditioned on each country's or group's commitment not to use children in combat or recruit them into its armed forces. In addition, U.S. military training programs (for individuals, countries, or groups) should include guidelines for preventing the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, including tips on checking the validity of identification documents and safeguards for recruiting volunteers.

The rehabilitation of child soldiers and their reintegration into local communities are crucial steps in ensuring both lasting peace and stable communities. 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 deserve similar status. Children's basic needs must be addressed, along with education and family reunification. In one useful model, the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with help from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have developed locale-specific programs to demobilize Angolan child soldiers and return them to their homes.

To continue and expand this work, Congress should increase support (through the creation of a special fund) for the rehabilitation and reintegration of disarmed and demobilized child soldiers around the world. The U.S. should also be willing to grant asylum both 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 America'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.

Shannon McManimon <smcmanimon@afsc.org> works with the AFSC National Youth and Militarism Program. Rachel Stohl <rstohl@cdi.org> is a Senior Analyst at CDI.

Sources for More Information

Organizations

American Friends Service Committee
National Youth and Militarism Program
1501 Cherry St.
Philadelphia, PA 19102
Voice: (215) 241-7176
Fax: (215) 241-7177
Email: youthmil@afsc.org
Website: <http://www.afsc.org/>

Center for Defense Information
1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20036
Voice: (202) 332-0600
Fax: (202) 462-4559
Email: info@cdi.org
Website: <http://www.cdi.org/>

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World Wide Web

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<http://www.amnesty-usa.org/>

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/>

(* steering committee members of the U.S. Campaign to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers)

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