

Child-Soldier-Seminar 06/11/2002
Remarks by Kati Marton

I want to begin by relating an anecdote. I suspect many of you will be familiar with this story, so I will be brief. The story takes place January 4 of this year; the place is a rugged, mountainous region just outside Khost, Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan. And the protagonist is Sergeant Nathan Ross Chapman of the 1st Special Forces Group. The 31-year-old Green Beret, who parachuted into Panama twelve years earlier and served in the Gulf War and in Haiti, "had a huge and soft heart," according to one buddy, as well as a fierce warrior spirit.

At about 1600, after leaving a meeting with Afghani tribal leaders, Chapman stood in the back of a pickup truck and surveyed the damage from a recent allied bombing run. Out of nowhere, small arms fire rained down on him and his companions. Chapman was shot in the legs, severing a major artery. He became the first American soldier to die from hostile fire in Operation Enduring Freedom.

Here is the part of the story that you may not be familiar with. Sergeant Chapman was killed by a 14-year-old boy.

It looks unlikely that Chapman saw his attacker before the ambush. Had he done so, this father of two who loved children would have faced the terrible realization that the only way to defend himself was to shoot a child.

It is a realization and a reality that American soldiers—and soldiers all over the world—are facing with increasing frequency. The average American serviceman was 26 years of age during World War II. While the average age dipped to just 19 during the bloodiest days of the Vietnam War—today the average U.S. soldier is, once again, 26. This is a sign of a strong military and a healthy society.

For much of the world, however, the picture is much bleaker. In America's latest conflict, both the Northern Alliance and their enemies drew heavily from the youngest Afghans. "Children are innocent," one Taliban fighter said, "so they are the best tools against dark forces." In October 1993, children as young as 14 shot at the Rangers in Mogadishu.

Already this year, Palestinian girls as young as eighteen and boys as young as sixteen have been used as suicide bombers in Israel. In Paraguay, the average recruit is just over sixteen years old. Seven percent of Angolan children have fired a gun at someone and seventy percent have seen someone murdered.

During the conflict in Sierra Leone, (a metaphor for the worst abuses committed against and by children in recent times,) Civil Defense Forces recruited soldiers as young as eight years of age. The plight of Sierra Leone's children is extreme—but not altogether atypical. Kids on every continent are being taught to use AK-47s, which are light enough and simple enough to be carried and maintained by eight-year-olds. They are forced to mutilate and murder their friends and relatives to prove their loyalty to their new "parent" figures—often young adults or older children in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

Afghani children have known nothing but war. A study by UNICEF found that nearly half of all children in Kabul had lost a parent to violence; nearly three quarters had lost a family member. Nearly two-thirds lost their homes. The child soldiers who survived the latest war—hundreds on both sides did not—now face the same challenges as the demobilized Congolese and Sierra Leoneans. "We have young boys," said one Northern Alliance commander, "that are more familiar with a gun than with school." UNICEF, UNHCR—the UN refugee agency, and others are working to reunite families and reintegrate child combatants.

So what are our options in dealing with this problem, which, like the spread of HIV or Terrorism, respects no borders:

Early engagement with states in crisis is essential. We must compel countries and armed groups to adhere to the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by withholding diplomatic, financial and military assistance from those that resist. The newly-minted International Criminal Court makes it a

War Crime to recruit children less than 15 years of age for use in hostilities. The ICC—which becomes a functioning body on July 1—and its child soldier mandate, must be backed by the indictment and prosecution of those we know are practicing this form of child abuse.

Last November, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1379, asking the Secretary-General to "name names" and provide a list of parties to conflict that are in violation of their international obligations with respect to the protection of children. This list will serve as a benchmark for member states, so that they can bring all of the political, diplomatic, legal and economic pressure they have to bear on groups that use and abuse children.

So we have the tools, now all that we need is the courage to use them.

It is in our own best interest that we not allow entire regions to implode. The way we did Afghanistan. Unilateralism has no place in the post 9/11 world beset by so many problems that respect no borders.

We must work hard to rehabilitate post-conflict societies. 13-year-old Maroof Ahmad Awan was sent to fight in Afghanistan as part of his "schooling" at a Pakistani madrasa called Jamia Islamia. Some say close the madrasa. I say if you close the madrasa, then you need to replace it with a real school. Maroof's father did not send his son to the madrasa because he wanted his son to be a soldier and kill Americans; he sent his son to Jamia Islamia because there were no other schools available.

The problem of child soldiers is such a big and costly one that the only solution is for it to be stopped cold. For Sergeant Chapman, for the thousands killed by children and the thousands of children killed, we must not fail.

Thanks, Semper Fi, etc . . .

These new "parents" will often give their kids drugs or amulets that, the children are told, will make them impervious to bullets. These children are thus among the world's most fearless and brutal fighters. BUT THEY ARE FIRST OF ALL VICTIMS OF A TERRIBLE FORM OF CHILD ABUSE.

When conflicts end—as in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Cambodia—child soldiers continue to be dangerous because, unlike conventional demobilized combatants who can return to their plowshares, these children are neither educated nor trained in non-violent pursuits. Furthermore, they have a sort of reverse socialization: all they know is how to kill or be killed. Combine this with the fact that they are asked to reenter societies already imploding, and it is clear that it is not enough just "to end a war." The international community needs to make a tremendous commitment in order to turn these kids into productive people. The alternative is world made less and less stable by a generation weaned on brutality. IN A WORLD WITHOUT BORDERS, THESE FACTS HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

FOR ALL OF US....

As many as one half million children serve as combatants in the 30+ conflicts around the globe. Twice that number have been orphaned or separated from their parents. Two million children have been killed—and more than twice that many disabled—in armed conflicts in the last decade. 12 million have been left homeless and psychologically traumatized by conflicts that have been forced upon them.

Here is the status quo in some of the worst cases.

Sierra Leone, once considered an intractable symbol for "hopeless Africa," is of late something of a success story in its progress towards disarming its child soldiers. In an otherwise broken country, DDRR—Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation—appears to be working: Between May 2001 and January 2002 about 7,000 child soldiers have been disarmed. The children's weapons have been turned in and burned in ceremonies held in Lungi, Bo, Makeni, and Kenema. "Reintegration" is, of course, much more complex, costly and time consuming. But most child-excombatants have been absorbed in various short-term reintegration projects. Their own families are often afraid of these children, but the scenes where the former 11-year-old "sergeant" is hugged by his weeping father and suddenly becomes a kid again, make it worth whatever it takes.

Needless to say, there is never enough money for any of this, in contrast to the abundant flow of arms—especially small arms, which are the child soldiers' enablers. AK-47s are easy to come by—they cost as little as \$6 a piece in some parts of Africa; but acceptance of a child who has shot his friends is much more difficult to attain.

Sudan: Childhood is a commodity almost as scarce—but not as valued—as water in much of the Sudan. Over 4,000 child soldiers have been disarmed so far. But since April, in the Western Upper Nile, an estimated 400 children have been involved in an upsurge in fighting (including helicopter attacks on civilians) over the oil fields in the Nyhal area.

The attempts of UN and NGO partners to demobilize children in camps run by rebel groups has not been successful, because of continued fighting.

Under Joseph Kony's savage but mesmerizing control, the abducted children who form the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda and southern Sudan have been among the most brutalized and violent child soldiers. The terrible dilemma of how do you rescue children who are trained and programmed to shoot back has never been clearer than in southern Sudan.

DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo): At present, about 15,000 child soldiers are fighting in the government armies, local militias, and other armed groups. Former president Laurent Kabila employed Congolese child soldiers—known as "kadogos," or "little ones" —as runners, bodyguards, porters and spies. Many fought at the front with virtually no training. Kabila used 30,000 of them in his 1996-97 war against Mobutu Sese Seko. Some were among his Presidential Guard. He gave them tattoos, which he told them would make them invincible.

The government of his son and successor, Joseph Kabila, started demobilizing seven months ago, in December of 2001. The children have been in camps during this period, some of them getting psychological help while the UN and NGOs look for their families.

Elsewhere in the Congo, the situation is less rosy...

The Rwandan-backed rebel forces have not only recruited children into the fighting forces, but have also pressed kids into use as decoys. This is a very tricky and horrifying strategy: unarmed children will be made to bang on trees with sticks; government troops, thinking that they are under attack, will shoot the children, and the older, armed rebels will fire upon the government troops from a different location. Needless to say, the children are slaughtered wholesale.

BUT: LET, ME EMPHASIZE THIS, CHILD SOLDIERS ARE NOT A UNIQUELY AFRICAN PROBLEM:

Cambodia has been Asia's worst-case scenario for child soldiers. Primarily the Khmer Rouge, but also the government, recruited and killed thousands of children in the bloody, at times genocidal, 25+ year conflict.

The government took a step in the right direction two years ago, however, when it became the first Asian state to sign the Optional Protocol prohibiting the use of soldiers under 18. The Khmer Rouge has largely disintegrated (a process hastened by the death of its former leader, Pol Pot), and UNICEF and NGOs are working with the Cambodian government towards full demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers.

Afghanistan: The world rightly celebrated the defeat of the Taliban, the hunting down of Al Qaeda fighters, and, for the first time in 5 years, the return of girls to school. However, the damage caused by decades of war to Afghanistan's infrastructure and to the psyches of its children, is not so easily rectified.