

Mr. Iain Levine Comments

Uncontrolled flow of arms into countries exacerbates social disparities and fuels discontent.

Although most conflicts involving children are internal, oftentimes they involve outside intervention as well as recruitment and training of child soldiers across borders.

Often, children are forced to commit atrocities. Once they kill people in their own villages, they become brutalized and cannot return home.

Agreements and Treaties. Governments sign treaties, rebel groups do not. Even when governments sign treaties, because of command and control problems, it is difficult to communicate their contents throughout the country. It is even more difficult to implement them. Oftentimes, agreements even with very senior people are extremely weak and it is extremely difficult to get them carried out at all. In order to obtain government and rebel group cooperation on the issue of child soldiers, it may be worthwhile to speak with them about traditional values and the basic code of who fights and who does not fight. In most traditional societies, only men are sent to be warriors. The international community should try to appeal to the leaders' sense of honor to open the door to dialog. When agreements are made, it may help to take them directly to the people on the front lines.

Recruitment of Child Soldiers. Recruitment of child soldiers is not something governments and warring parties want to advertise. Western countries have voluntary recruitment in their militaries. But the term "voluntary recruitment" does not mean the same thing in all countries. Oftentimes children are abducted and in other ways forced to become soldiers. Girls also are child soldiers. In addition to fighting, they serve as messengers, coolies, spies, and sex slaves.

Demobilization Process. When children are returned to their villages, healing ceremonies play very important roles. On one hand, these ceremonies allay fears within the communities by demonstrating that the children have been rehabilitated and are neither violent nor are they soldiers any more. On the other hand, healing ceremonies tell the children that the community forgives them for what they have done and is accepting them back. Traditionally demobilization occurs at the end of a conflict. Because making children fight as soldiers is a violation of their human rights, international law requires that they be demobilized immediately regardless of the status of the conflict.

AIDS. Many of the countries that are facing the problem of child soldiers, especially in West and Central Africa, also are facing the AIDS epidemic. Conflicts promote family separation and sexual violence, which increases the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Those affected by AIDS also may have a nothing-to-lose attitude that encourages them to commit violent acts.