

**CHILD SOLDIERS:
PERSPECTIVES FROM HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD INVESTIGATIONS**

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Human Rights Watch investigates and documents human rights abuses in about seventy countries around the world. Since 1994, we have sent teams of researchers to conflict areas to conduct interviews with current and former child soldiers to document their experiences. In the last eight years, we have directly documented the use of child soldiers in Angola, Burma, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda.

This morning, to give you a better understanding of how these children are recruited, and their experiences, I'll focus on our findings in three countries: Burma, Colombia and the Great Lakes region of Africa.

BURMA:

It's a common misconception that child soldiers are an African phenomenon primarily linked to opposition or rebel groups. In fact, a significant number of child soldiers worldwide are part of government armies and the largest single user of child soldiers in the world is Burma (or Myanmar). The Burmese Army includes as many as 70,000 children under 18 and accounts for nearly one of every four child soldiers worldwide.

In March, I spent three weeks along the Thai-Burma border, interviewing dozens of former child soldiers from the Burmese Army. We found that forced recruitment is the norm. Only one of the kids we interviewed had volunteered. The rest were apprehended on the street, at festivals, at train stations and on their way to school. Commonly, soldiers would approach the children and ask, "Do you want to join the army?" When the child said "No," or "I'm too young," the soldiers would respond, "You can join the army or you can go to jail." If a child continued to refuse, they may be detained and beaten until they agree.

We estimate that approximately 40% of new recruits into the Burmese army are under age eighteen. 10-15% are under the age of 15. One boy we interviewed was recruited at age 11 and another was picked up at age 10.

The children are sent to recruitment centers, and then to training camps where they spend 4 months. All recruits, regardless of whether they're 12 or 20, receive the same training, including weapons training with AK-47s, M-16s, G3 and G4s. For smaller children, the training can be very difficult. One boy told us that his gun was as tall as he was, and

many said that their guns were very hard to carry. But if they dropped their gun or made a mistake, they would often be beaten. These beatings happened every day and were so numerous that many children lost count.

The children often have no contact with their families, and in many cases, their families didn't know what happened to them. Not surprisingly, children are often miserable and desperately homesick. Many try to run away, but if they're caught, they are brought back to the camp and forced to lie facedown on the ground. They are then beaten by each of the other trainees in their group – usually about 250. Many must be hospitalized afterwards, and died as a result.

After training, children are sent to join battalions and often stationed in combat areas where they must fight ethnic opposition groups. Again, age makes no difference in whether or not a child is sent into combat, and we interviewed kids that were only 12 when they first went into battle.

Initially, many described being scared in battle. Some said they were too afraid to fire their guns, or would find a hiding place and then fire their gun wildly in the air. (Interestingly, one of the opposition leaders talked about this and commented that child soldiers were a quote “waste of ammunition.”) But they acclimatized to battle very quickly. Even by their second battle, many said they were no longer afraid and would aim at the enemy. Most had no understanding of what the conflict was about, but quickly adopted an attitude of “They're shooting at me, so I'll shoot back.”

In Burma, abuses by government forces against civilians are common. One boy we interviewed described a massacre by his unit of fifteen women and children, including three babies. He was just thirteen at the time. He showed little remorse, which I think illustrates how damaging war is to the psyche of children forced to participate at such young ages.

In Burma, when we interviewed child soldiers, we ended each interview by asking them, “What age do you think someone should be before they become a soldier?” Some of the children that we were interviewing were 16 and still actively fighting. But surprisingly, each one, without exception, responded by saying 18 or even older. When we asked “why?”, they said things like, “before 18, the life of the soldier is too hard.” Or “before age 18, you don't understand what it means to become a soldier.”

COLOMBIA:

Before December 1999, child soldiers were active in every part of Colombia's armed conflict – as part of the national armed forces, the government-linked paramilitaries, and the guerrilla. Their numbers probably exceeded 25,000. 16,000 of these were part of Colombia's national armed forces. However, in part as a result of heightened international awareness about the child soldier's issue, in 1999 the government raised its recruitment age to 18 and began demobilizing children in its ranks.

Children still make up a significant portion of guerrilla forces and paramilitaries, however, and there are probably 6,000-10,000 children currently fighting. The guerrillas refer to child soldiers as “little bees” for the ability and power to sting. The paramilitaries call them “little bells” because they are deployed in front to draw fire, detect traps and serve as an early warning system. In the cities, child members of militaries are called “little carts” because they ferry drugs and weapons without raising suspicion.

Children around the world join armed groups for many reasons. We’ve found that many of these are at play in Colombia:

- Some are enticed by recruiters who come to school and offer stories of excitement and adventure;
- Some join because they are promised a wage or their family is offered guarantees of security;
- Some join because they want to defend their families from attack;
- Some runaways join because of family violence or losses;
- Some girls join because they fall in love with guerilla boys;
- Some are virtually born into the guerrilla because their parents are members;
- Some are forcibly recruited. Paramilitaries force families to provide children for service or risk being killed as suspected guerilla sympathizers. Last year, a group of paramilitaries seized a youth detention center and abducted ten children.

Paramilitaries use children as young as eight to patrol with units, for spying, and as backup troops. The guerrilla use children to collect intelligence make and deploy mines, serve as advance troops in ambush attacks, and to kidnap and guard hostages. These children are often fully armed. One 13-year old girl reported that she had used pistols, AK-47s, Galils, M-16s, R-15s, Uzis, Ingrams, and a 357 Magnum.

One difference between Colombia and Burma is that while in Burma, recruitment is exclusively of boys, in Colombia, girls are a significant percentage – as high as 30% - of both guerilla and paramilitary forces. Girls are frequently subjected to sexual abuse, often by middle-ranking officers. We have also received reports that the FARC fit young girls with IUDs or give them contraceptive injections.

In many conflicts involving children, we’ve seen the involvement of drugs as a way of reducing a child’s inhibitions to fight. This is also the case in Colombia, where some children have reported drinking milk mixed with gunpowder. One boy in the guerilla said, “Gunpowder gives you more energy, like with the desire to kill the troops passing in front of you. You say to yourself, “I hope they come my way, and then you load up and shoot off a round and feel more capable, with better morale.”

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO:

After Burma, the DRC is probably the country of the world with the largest number of child soldiers. A December 2000 UN report estimated that between 15 to 30 percent of all newly recruited combatants in the DRC were children under the age of 18, and that a substantial number were under age 12.

Although the government of the DRC has made a commitment to demobilization, there are still thousands of child soldiers in its ranks. On the opposition side, one of the aspects that we've looked at is the complicity of the governments of Uganda and Rwanda in recruiting and training child soldiers to fight with rebel forces in the DRC.

In northeastern Congo, thousands of children have been recruited by rebel factions with the direct assistance of the Ugandan army. Recruiters for the Congolese Rally for Democracy-Liberation Movement (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-Mouvement de Libération (RCD-ML), (later merged with the Front for the Liberation of Congo, FLC) would routinely tour villages on recruitment missions and return with a truckload of 100 to 200 children and youth, aged 13 to 18. Instructors from the Ugandan People's Defense Force would then provide three to six months of infantry and weapons training at Nyaluke camp. "We trained them rapidly," said one Human Rights Watch source. "The important thing was to learn how to use and maintain firearms." Conditions at the camp were terrible, and reportedly many children died from abuse and lack of health care. In mid-2000, Uganda also transported several hundred child soldiers to Uganda for training. UNICEF later got access to the children and arranged for their return home.

Rwanda has backed another opposition group, the RCD-Goma (Congolese Rally for Democracy-Goma). HRW investigations found that RCD and Rwandan troops have conducted recruitment drives and taken children by force from schools, roadsides, markets and their homes. In some communities, because parents fear their children will be taken for use as soldiers, families have begun sleeping outdoors away from their homes, and schools have been closed. A former RCD instructor reported that after local schools in two localities were closed, recruiters began targeting churches. 500 children on their way to church were recruited on a single Sunday.

According to this recruiter, RPA officers often oversaw the training of child recruits:

"[The children] were trained on how to use arms and how to shoot, and that was the end of it. Some of the kids were even sent to battle without arms. They were sent ahead of battle-ready troops of the RCD and RPA to create a diversion. They were ordered to make a lot of noise, using sticks on tree trunks and the like. When they succeeded in diverting the attention of government troops, that is to say when they drew government fire on their unarmed elements, these units, known as the Kadogo Commando, would be literally allowed to fall like flies under government fire. The experienced troops would then attack the governments troops when their attention was diverted to the Kadogo Commando."

In one battle, the soldier said he had witnessed at least one hundred children killed, the vast majority unarmed. He later deserted RCD-Goma, because he objected to the recruitment of children.

In early April 2001, RCD-Goma authorities pledged to end the recruitment of child soldiers and demobilize those in their ranks. But just a few days later at a ceremony marking the end of a military training program at Mushaki, nearly 1800 of the 3000 graduates were children aged twelve to seventeen.

WHY CHILDREN ARE RECRUITED:

Our work has provided some insight on *why* children are recruited as soldiers. Following are five factors:

- 1) Children are vulnerable and easy targets. In the DRC, one recruiter told us that children from the Lendu ethnicity were often targeted because earlier rounds of fighting had left thousands of children orphaned or unaccompanied. He said, “These were an easy target. There was no political design beyond this practical consideration.” In Burma, we found that soldiers are often given incentives to bring in new recruits, in the form of money, promotions or early discharge. They prey on children because they are vulnerable, and easy to intimidate and manipulate.
- 2) Children are often thought to more easily follow orders and don’t have the same inhibitions of adults. In Colombia, a guerilla commander told us “Children are more intrepid, they have more bravery for war. And although children are usually given no command responsibilities, they carry out their duties much better than an adult would.”
- 3) Children are considered dispensable. In the DRC, children are clearly recruited as cannon fodder, and sacrificed in large numbers to provide military advantage to older, more experienced troops. In other parts of the world, we also have seen children assigned to the most hazardous missions.
- 4) Modern weapons technology has made it as easy for them to handle weapons as their adult counterparts.
- 5) Their particular assets. As indicated by the names given to child soldiers in Colombia– “little bees” and “little bells” – children are also thought to have a comparative advantage over adults in launching surprise attacks and acting as early warning systems.

Some of the same qualities that make children desirable soldiers pose particular threats to opposing soldiers in the field. With their immature judgment and often lack of experience, the behavior of child soldiers may not conform to what is normally expected of soldiers. They may be on drugs. They almost certainly don’t know the rules of international humanitarian law. Older soldiers may be less likely to detect an impending attack when children are involved. They may be more reluctant to use deadly force against children. When they do shoot back at children, they may feel particular guilt or remorse afterwards.

A big challenge for militaries is what to do when they face child soldiers on the battlefield. A bigger challenge for all of us is to ensure that children are not recruited in the first place.

THE OPTIONAL PROTOCOL AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES:

In May 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a new treaty, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts. The protocol prohibits the forced recruitment of children under age eighteen or their participation in armed conflict. Since its adoption, it's been signed by over 100 governments and ratified by about 30. It went into force in February of this year.

The Protocol is currently being considered by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It has the support of the Bush administration, of the Defense Department, the State Department, and of both Democrats and Republicans in Congress.

This protocol will not require changes in US military recruitment practices, but it will require changes in deployment. Past practice has been that the US armed forces have assigned soldiers to units, including combat units, as soon as they complete training. In the past, 17-year old US soldiers have served in conflict in Bosnia, the Gulf War and in Somalia. Under the protocol, this will have to change, and the armed forces will need "to take all feasible measures" to ensure that 17-year olds do not take a direct part in hostilities.

Despite the changes required, it is very important for the United States to support and implement this protocol.

- 1) The need for US leadership: As the world's leading military power, it is critical for the United States to lead by example.
- 2) Protection for US soldiers: As we've discussed, supporting international efforts to end the use of child soldiers can help protect US soldiers in the field.
- 3) The protocol has the support of the public: 93% of Americans say that combatants should be at least 18 years old.
- 4) The changes needed are minimal: The Defense Department says that by the time US soldiers finish their basic and technical training and are ready to be assigned to units, 99.76% have reached the age of eighteen. Ensuring that the remaining 0.24% are not sent into combat is not too much to ask.

Clearly, ending the use of child soldiers is important for human rights reasons, for humanitarian reasons and for security reasons. I'm encouraged that members of the US armed forces are willing to devote attention to this issue and hope that we can work together to address it. Thank you.