

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's issue highlights the exploitation of children as soldiers in armed conflict.

Thousands of children under the age of 18, some as young as eight or nine years old, are recruited and used in armed conflicts worldwide.

Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were confirmed as recruited and used by parties for conflict, with children accounting for up to 60% of armed forces, although the actual number of cases is much higher. Eastern DRC has among the highest numbers of child soldiers in the world.

Warring parties use children not only as fighters and suicide bombers, but as scouts, cooks, porters, guards, messengers, and more. In addition, many, especially girls, are also subjected to gender-based violence. Referred to as child soldiers, these boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse.

Having child soldiers can be a form of human trafficking involving the unlawful recruitment or use of children (through force, fraud, or coercion) as combatants, for labor, or sexual exploitation by armed forces. Many child soldiers have been abducted or violently forced into armed conflict. Children are often desperate and feel they have no other choice when coerced to join a militarized faction.

Children become part of an armed force or group for various reasons.

For example, some are abducted, threatened, coerced, or manipulated by armed actors. Other factors that may drive children to join a military group include:

Poverty—when food and other necessary resources are scarce, the promise of food and a place to stay may be difficult to resist. Also, some children may feel a need to generate income for their family or community. Poverty is also a root cause of girls becoming child soldiers. Girls are used as wives and girlfriends of soldiers and are commonly pushed into those relationships. Girls are also often used as spies.

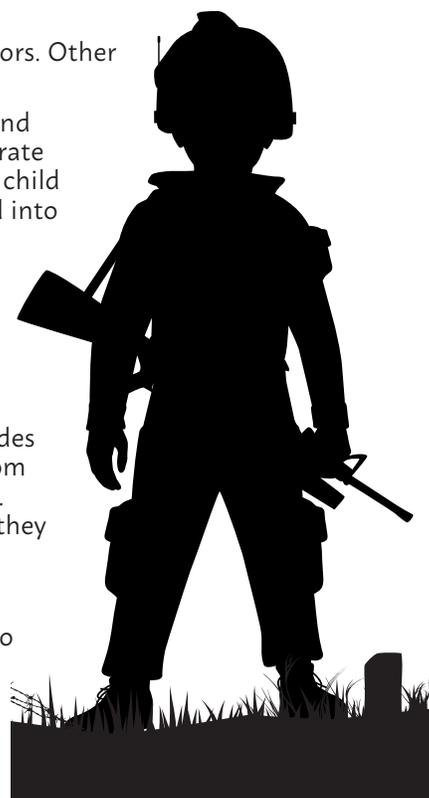
Lack of educational and employment opportunities—during armed conflicts, children may be living in refugee or internally displaced camps where education is nonexistent. Lack of education means a lack of jobs, and many children may become a means of employment.

Poor sense of belonging or lack of familial relationships—armed conflict often leads many children to be isolated from family and friends. Joining an armed group provides a sense of identity and community. It may also bring status. Children may return from fighting with shoes, money, and other status symbols influential in recruiting others. Their newfound prestige can also lead to positions of leadership and influence that they would never achieve otherwise.

Children may also join an armed group as a form of protection.

Community and family expectations—members of communities may feel pressure to do their part in an armed conflict. Children whose families have been affected by violence may choose to seek revenge by joining an opposing group

No matter their involvement, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces is a grave violation of child rights and international humanitarian law. Click [here](#) to learn more.





Awareness

Man has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated weapon, at the expense of humanity's own future: its children . . . Desperate children, boys and girls, are cheap to sustain, have no real sense of fear, and are limitless in the perverse directions they can be manipulated - through drugs and indoctrination, since they have not yet developed a concept of justice and have been ripped away from their families to fend for themselves in the new perverted family of armed force.

(General Romeo Dallaire, Canadian humanitarian and Canadian Forces lieutenant-general)

The Impact of Post-traumatic Stress on Children

Children exposed to traumatic stress during development suffer from long-term psychological effects. These include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe personality changes. In addition, the child soldier may be forced to take drugs that can change the child's temperament and negatively impact their personality. There are also long-lasting physical effects, including fistula and physical maiming.

Former child soldiers report participating in traumatic training or initiation ceremonies and engaging in combat, all with a significant risk of death, chronic injury, and disability. They may also witness, suffer from, or be forced to take part in torture and killings. In addition, girls can

be subjected to gender-based violence. Armed groups may also deprive food to child recruits or subject them to substance abuse, with significant negative consequences for their physical and mental well-being.

Children recruited or used by armed actors may be viewed with suspicion or outright rejected by their families and communities once they return home. Whether or not children are accepted back into society depends on several factors, including their reason for association with armed actors and the perceptions of their families and communities. Moreover, children may find it difficult to verbalize or process their experiences, especially if they fear being stigmatized by their families.



Children Recruited from West Africa

A United Nations Children's Fund report from November 2021 indicates that children of West and Central Africa are the most recruited by armed groups globally and have the highest number of victims of sexual violence. There has been an increase in conflict in the area over the past five years, with over 21,000 children reported to have been recruited by armed groups or by government forces. In addition, over 3,500 children reportedly have been abducted.

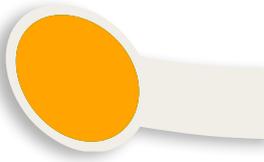
Since the United Nations established a system to monitor severe violations against children in 2005, one out of four violations globally were committed in West and Central Africa. In countries affected by conflicts such as Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, violence has had devastating humanitarian consequences for children and communities.

The conflict in countries around the Lake Chad basin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, has displaced some 3 million people. Meanwhile, in Burkina Faso, a jihadist insurgency has killed thousands.

Children recruited by military groups rose fivefold in 2021. In June 2021, at least 160 people were killed in one attack in the Sahel region. There were reports that children were seen alongside jihadists, chanting "Allahu Akbar" (*God is great* in Arabic) as they burned homes.

Please click [here](#) to view a brief video by some survivors of this massacre.

The United Nations has called on aid groups to document violations and hold perpetrators accountable.



We are “Children, Not Soldiers”

In 2014, with UNICEF, the Special Representative launched the campaign “Children, Not Soldiers” to bring about a global consensus that child soldiers should not be used in conflict. The Campaign was designed to generate momentum, political will, and international support to turn the page once and for all on the recruitment of children by national security forces in conflict situations. The Campaign received immediate support from the Member States, United Nations, NGO partners, regional organizations, and the general public. In addition, the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly welcomed “Children, Not Soldiers” and requested regular updates through the Special Representative’s reporting.

At the launch, the countries concerned by the Campaign were: Afghanistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. Representatives from each of these countries attended the launch event and expressed their full support for reaching the objectives of “Children, Not Soldiers.”

The Campaign ended at the end of 2016, but the consensus envisioned is now a reality. Thousands of child soldiers have been released and reintegrated with the assistance of UNICEF, peacekeeping and political missions, and other UN and NGO partners on the ground. All governments concerned by the Campaign are engaged in an Action Plan process with the United Nations. Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo put in place all necessary measures to end and prevent the recruitment of children in their armed forces, and they are no longer listed.

National campaigns to promote the objectives of “Children, Not Soldiers” have been launched in most countries concerned and beyond.

Child Soldiers Released in South Sudan

Shortly after the Government of South Sudan signed an Action Plan in 2020 to end and prevent all grave violations against children, 15 children associated with armed groups were released in South Sudan. The children, all boys, ranged in age from 16 to 18 and were taken as prisoners a year before. The children were first sent to an interim care center to receive psycho-social and medical support. Plans for a three-year-long reintegration program were made while their families were located. Some families were killed during the conflict, and their children were then placed with foster families. Social workers were assigned to each child to guide them through the often difficult journey back to civilian life.

Reintegration and care are sponsored by UNICEF, who, in 2020, supported the release of some 2,100 children associated with armed forces and armed groups and the continuation of the reintegration program for formerly and newly released children in South Sudan.

In the past twenty years, tens of thousands of former child soldiers globally have benefited from rehabilitation programs designed to help them rejoin society. These programs recognize that recruiting children for armed conflict is a violation of international law and that the primary violators of the law are the adult recruiters, not the children. Click [here](#) to learn more.

2021 TIP Report on Governments Employing Child Soldiers

Section 402 of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, as amended (CSPA) requires publication in the annual TIP Report of a list of foreign governments identified during the previous year as having governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces, or government-supported armed groups that recruit or use child soldiers, as defined in the CSPA. In the period from April 2020 until March 2021, the following countries were included in the list of governments using child soldiers: Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Venezuela, and Yemen.

For the purpose of the CSPA, and generally consistent with the provisions of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the term “child soldier” means:

i. any person under 18 years of age who takes a direct part in hostilities as a member of governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces; ii. any person under 18 years of age who has been compulsorily recruited into governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces; iii. any person under 15 years of age who has been voluntarily recruited into governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces; or iv. any person under 18 years of age who has been recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces distinct from the armed forces of a state. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Advocacy

I joined the militia when I was 13 and I lived in the bush fighting other groups. I was eager to get involved and fight to stop our people from being slaughtered. Many join during public demonstrations when they are angry and they want change. But many others are forced to join these armed groups, they come through your neighborhood and if they see you, they tell you to come with them. Click [here](#) to learn more.



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT



According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and international human rights law, no child under 18 may be recruited into armed forces (government military) or armed rebel groups (militias and gangs).

Definition of a child soldier

A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes.

Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict 2007

Human rights law declares 18 as the minimum legal age for the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers are prohibited under international humanitarian law — treaty, and custom — and are defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court. Parties to the conflict that recruit and use children are listed by the Secretary-General in the annexes of his annual report on children and armed conflict.

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

In 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on

the involvement of children in armed conflict to protect children from recruitment and use in hostilities.

The Optional Protocol is a commitment that:

- ◆ States will not recruit children under the age of 18 to send them to the battlefield.
- ◆ States will not conscript soldiers below the age of 18.
- ◆ States should take all possible measures to prevent such recruitment — including legislation to prohibit and criminalize the recruitment of children under 18 and involve them in hostilities.
- ◆ States will demobilize anyone under 18 conscripted or used in hostilities and will provide physical and psychological recovery services and help their social reintegration.
- ◆ Armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a country should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities anyone under 18.
- ◆ The Protocol entered into force in 2002 and has now been ratified by a majority of the world's countries.

Geneva Convention

Article 50, second paragraph of the 1949 Geneva Convention IV, provides that the occupying power may not enlist children “in formations or organizations subordinate to it”. Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Geneva, 12 August 1949.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Some Child Soldiers Get Rehabilitation, Others Get Prison

Children who have been involved with ISIS in any capacity are being treated as criminals and charged with terrorism. The situation is particularly dire in Iraq, where the government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are currently detaining an estimated 1,500 children for alleged ISIS involvement. In addition, a child may be arrested simply because someone from their village reported them as connected to ISIS.

Once a child is arrested, security forces may torture him to coerce confessions. Multi-country research by United Nations University has found that contrary to conventional wisdom, ideology is rarely the primary force motivating children's association with violent extremist groups. Children join for a variety of reasons, or they are recruited.

There's no doubt that some children have committed terrible crimes during armed conflict. If so, they can be prosecuted under international law, taking their age into account and adhering to international standards. But charging children for any affiliation with ISIS is not justice and will only marginalize these children further.

At the end of the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone, a special court was established to prosecute those most responsible for war crimes during the conflict. However, the court's prosecutor, David Crane, announced that he would not prosecute children as a matter of principle. "I want to prosecute the people who forced thousands of children to commit unspeakable crimes," he explained.

UNICEF and child-focused agencies such as Save the Children or War Child have years of experience helping children associated with armed groups get back into school and get the rehabilitation help they need. Iraqi and KRG authorities could work with such agencies to set up rehabilitation programs to help children affiliated with ISIS reintegrate back into society. The recruitment of children by armed groups is always illegal. Prosecutions should focus on the recruiters, not the children. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Security forces systematically detained and tortured hundreds of children, some as young as 10, for suspected association with armed groups.

End the Taliban's Use of Child Soldiers

The conflict in Afghanistan has been one of the world's deadliest for children — estimates are that approximately 33,000 children have been killed or maimed over the past 20 years. Moreover, the death toll among child soldiers can be exceptionally high. Children have fought, planted, and detonated explosive devices and have been used as suicide bombers.

Children as young as six years old have been recruited through deception or captured, brainwashed, and forced to fight by age 13. Since 2014, suicide attacks by Taliban forces have caused approximately 6,000 civilian casualties. Armed groups often use children to carry out such attacks because they are easier to manipulate and may be less likely to arouse suspicion than adults.

The U.S.-backed former Afghan government and pro-government forces also bear responsibility for recruiting and using children to fight. Moreover, the former government's harsh treatment of children suspected of Taliban involvement fueled anti-government resentment. International law requires providing children with rehabilitation assistance. Instead, security forces systematically detained and tortured hundreds of children, some as young as 10, for suspected association with armed groups. Investigators from the United Nations report that close to 44 percent of children detained for conflict-related charges reported torture, higher than adult detainees.

As the Taliban works to establish a government in Afghanistan, the international community must speak out to end the recruitment of children and release the children currently part of the Taliban forces. Ending their recruitment and removing children from their ranks could be a confidence-building measure demonstrating the Taliban's willingness to comply with international norms.

In addition, the United Nations Security Council need to support robust United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) monitoring of violations against children, including recruiting and using children by the Taliban. Moreover, individual commanders should be held accountable. The prosecutor's office of the International Criminal Court has signaled its intention to investigate the recruitment and use of children in Afghanistan. Prosecutions of individual commanders can signal, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, that child recruitment is unacceptable and carries significant consequences. Click [here](#) to learn more.



Advocacy

Yemen Rebel Group Agrees to Stop Recruiting Children

In April 2022, the United Nations reported that Yemen’s Houthi rebels had agreed to stop recruiting child soldiers. The United Nations states that approximately 3,500 of Yemen’s children have been recruited during seven years of civil war. Former child soldiers report that boys as young as ten years old were recruited, which the Houthi military denies.

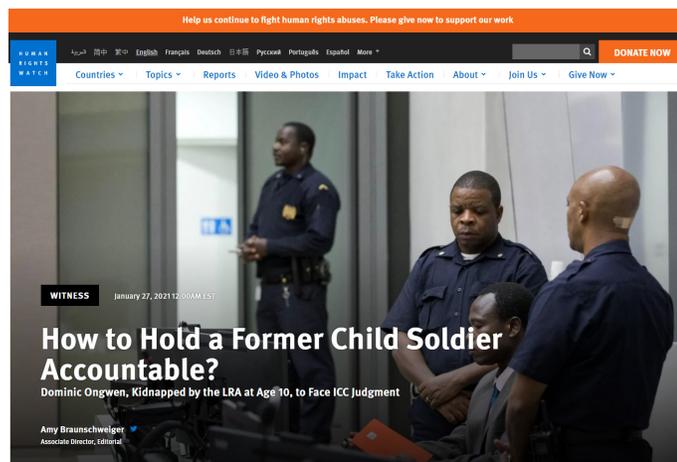
The Houthis, in what they call a plan to protect children, signed what the United Nations described as an “action plan” to end and prevent recruiting or using children in armed conflict, killing or maiming children, and attacking schools and hospitals. The rebels have also committed to releasing children serving with their groups within six months.

The United Nations reported that more than 10,200 children have been killed or maimed in the war. The number of those killed who were combatants is not known. The fighting also created one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



Action



Are Child Soldiers Guilty?

Dominic Ongwen, a senior commander in the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, was only ten years old when he was kidnapped by the LRA while walking to school. Ongwen was so small that other children had to carry him to the LRA’s military bases. Over time, using violence and manipulation, he became a child soldier. After approximately 30 years with the LRA, he has been found guilty of 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against

humanity, including torture, murder, rape, and sexual slavery. He is considered a senior commander of the LRA.

When adults refused to join the LRA, group members decided to kidnap children. The LRA forced them to become fierce, loyal fighters through brutal induction methods and death threats.

The LRA abducted at least 25,000 Ugandan children, primarily for use as child soldiers or to be forced into child marriages with LRA commanders. Some experts believe that 90 percent of LRA members were abducted as children.

By 2003, rural families in northern Uganda were so terrified of the LRA taking their children that parents sent their kids to spend the night in nearby towns and cities, hoping they would be safer. As a result, some 40,000 children, called “night commuters,” traveled each night, taking shelter in shops, bus stations, churches, and wherever they could.

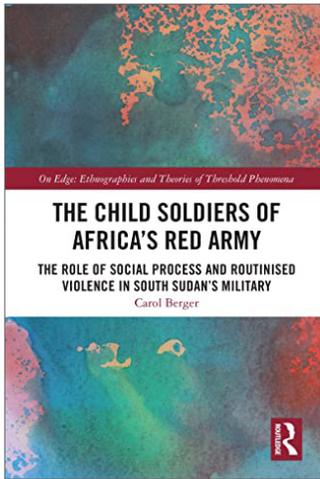
Child soldiers who escaped from or were released by the LRA report that they were killed if they tried to escape. If they disobeyed, they were killed. If they accidentally lost a gun or ammunition or dropped someone’s pack, they could be killed. The children endured harsh training and were told this was necessary to make them fighters. The LRA forced children to commit terrible crimes, including

beating children or adult soldiers to death with logs or branches. Afterward, they would tell the children that they could never return home again and that their families and communities would shun or even hurt them because of what they did.

Human Rights Watch makes the case that Ongwen is also a victim. As a child, he witnessed or was forced to participate in horrific violence. They make the point that it is virtually impossible for a child to live through this without being traumatized, leading to developmental dysfunction. In desperate situations, children choose what they see as the lesser of two evils – a choice that can lead to following orders, even committing unspeakable crimes, to survive. Finally, Human Rights Watch raises the question about decisions by the International Criminal Court, a court designed to hold war criminals to account. Should they consider a suspect's history as a child who was abducted, brainwashed, and forced to fight?

World Vision's Rebound project has supported former child soldiers and victims of sexual abuse in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo since 2012. The program provides youth targeted for violence with alternatives, including vocational work and life skills training.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



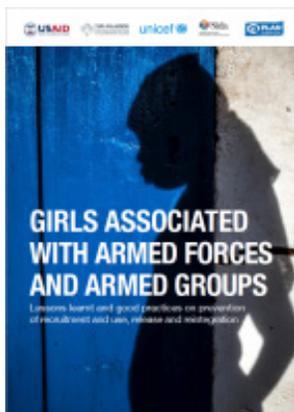
The Child Soldiers of Africa's Red Army

The Role of Social Process and Routinised Violence in South Sudan's Military
By Carol Berger

Published in 2022, this book examines the role of social process and routinized violence in the use of underaged soldiers in the country now known as South Sudan during the twenty-one-year civil war between Sudan's northern and southern regions.

Drawing on accounts of South Sudanese who as children and teenagers were part of the Red Army, the youth wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the book sheds light on the organized nature of the exploitation of children and youth by senior adult figures within the movement. The book also includes interviews with several of the original Red Army commanders, all of whom went on to hold senior positions within the military and government of South Sudan.

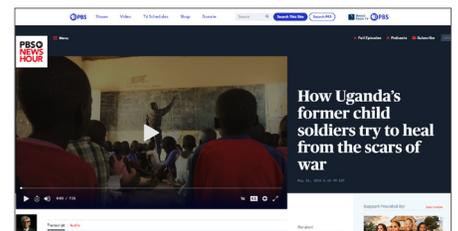
The author chronicles the cultural transformation experienced by members of the Red Army and considers whether an analysis of the processes involved in what was then Africa's longest civil war can aid our understanding of South Sudan's more recent descent into ethnicised conflict.



Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups

This 2020 report by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action provides information on the challenges that girls associated with armed forces and armed groups (GAAFAG) face during their recruitment, their period of association, and their reintegration, as well as lessons learned and promising

practices to implement gender-sensitive and gender-informed prevention, release, and reintegration programs.



How Uganda's former child soldiers try to heal from the scars of war

Please click [here](#) to view a 7-minute PBS video from former child soldiers.



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