

CHILD SOLDIERS

WHAT DOES THE TERM CHILD SOLDIER MEAN?

The term “child soldiers” refers to young people under the age of 18 who are recruited or forcibly abducted to serve as soldiers for government troops and rebel armies. Child soldiers are usually between the ages of 14 and 18 though children as young as 8 or 10 have been recruited

Boy and girl soldiers perform many functions. Younger children work as porters, spies, cooks and messengers. If a child is strong enough to hold a gun and old enough to know how to use it, he or she will participate in raids and fighting. Sometimes they are used as human shields or decoys. Looting villages for food and collecting water is typically the responsibility of child soldiers. Girls are often expected to provide sexual services, particularly for the commanders. In some cases children are ordered to commit atrocities against civilian populations.

UNICEF estimates that there are 300,000 child soldiers currently serving in the world’s conflicts. The majority of these are from Africa and Asia, though the use of children in armed conflicts has been documented in the Americas, the Middle East and Europe.

Government and rebel armies recruit children for many reasons. The production of lightweight weapons has meant that even small children can be effective fighters. They are often a good source of information in civil wars that are fought inside villages or along back roads. As many commanders have noted, children can be trained as fearless combatants, especially if they are brainwashed or fed with drugs. Teenage boys have high levels of strength and energy, allowing them to march long distances or fight for many hours.

There are numerous reasons why young people become child soldiers. Many children are forcibly recruited or abducted, especially by rebel armies. Northern Uganda, the Congo and Sierra Leone are some of the most notorious examples of this. Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda, has made a policy of abducting children for his rebel force, saying that children are easier to capture and also that it gives his cause international attention. While it is less common, government troops will also “actively persuade” young people to join their armies. In some areas of Colombia the only choice is which side they will join.

Children also choose to join armed groups. Those who have had parents or siblings killed do this to exact revenge or vent their hatred for those who have so badly hurt them. For children who have been subjected to constant abuse from rebel or government armies, the decision to take up arms is one way of fighting for their rights. Parents can encourage their children in this, saying that they are honouring their families by taking on this role. In societies where young people marry at age 15 or earlier, the appropriateness of the term “child soldier” is questioned.

Children living in poverty are understandably attracted to the chance of having regular meals and good clothes. Still others are lured by the romance of fighting with a rebel army. Recruiters will make promises of beautiful girlfriends and exciting missions.

Of course, the reality is much different – as the lowest level recruits, child soldier are also the most disposable. There are few exits from this world. If caught, deserters are severely punished or killed. Those who do manage to escape have very difficult re-entries both because of their emotional adjustments to civilian life and their community’s response to them.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has created a strong lobbying force with members from most of the major international human rights and development agencies. Largely through their efforts there is a growing movement to ban the use of children as soldiers, regardless of the situation.

WORLD WIDE MOVEMENT TO BAN THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

International law prohibits government forces or armed groups from recruiting children under the age of 15. Such recruitment has been recognized as a war crime under the statute for the International Criminal Court. In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted an Optional Protocol to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

- * prohibits governments and armed groups from using children under the age of 18 in conflict;
- * bans all compulsory recruitment of under 18s;
- * bans voluntary recruitment of under 18s by armed groups;
- * raises the minimum age and requires strict safeguards for voluntary recruitment

OTHER IMPORTANT MEASURES:

- * The Security Council of the United Nations is studying ways to implement Resolution 1379, a measure to ensure that governments comply with the prohibition against the use of child soldiers.
- * The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined the forced recruitment of children under the age of 18 for use in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour. (passed in 1999)
- * The UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Organisation for African Unity, the Organisation of American States and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe have all condemned this abuse.
- * More and more governments around the world are raising the age of recruitment to their armed forces to the 18 standard. The UN Secretary General has set 18 as a minimum age for UN peacekeepers. Even some armed groups, seeking recognition and legitimacy within the international community, have acknowledged the principle.

**“The use of children as weapons of war is like
the use of landmines or chemical and biological weapons
– simply unacceptable in any circumstances.”**

Source: www.child-soldiers.org

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COMMENTS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

“When I returned home my mother was there all right. My family accepted me. But people around were always calling me names, that I was a rebel and a bad girl, that I had been with boys in the bush. But I told them that I didn’t choose this, that I didn’t want to be abducted. So, thank you.”

Uganda

“If the war ends, there will be no more child soldiers. But now many people in our culture have a different view, especially about the definition of a child. Sometimes a person who is 14 or 15 can be married and have a child already, or someone who is 16 is teaching school. So if the culture allows them to teach or be married why can’t they fight for their culture?”

Burma-Thailand

“Sometimes a boy wants a new experience so he joins the guerrilla. He thinks that he will be more powerful and be able to dominate people. Some boys join the guerrilla for protection or because members of their family are with them. And they think that they will have good food and be able to do what they want. But after they realize that it’s not true or easy.”

Colombia

“The words willingly or unwillingly don’t really have any meaning in this kind of situation. You will end up joining because that is the world you are inside. It is a choice many boys make – to get respect, to get protection and to ensure that there is food for their family.”

Angola