

# The Problem of Child Soldiers

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*Today, child soldiers fight in a lot of armed conflicts around the world. They are often recruited through force or deception, and exposed to horrific violence. They may begin as messengers or porters, but too often end up on the front lines of combat. Some are forced to commit atrocities, and many girls are sexually exploited. They are denied an education and robbed of their childhood. Many do not survive.<sup>2</sup> I will deal with the question of child soldiers in my essay, looking into what causes can lead children to become members of regular or irregular armies and what kind of international regulations, actions may help to solve this problem.*

## Introduction

*“This is a real crime against humanity. The child of war is lost of peace, lost in growth.”* (Ann Veneman – uNICEF)<sup>3</sup>

The existence of child soldiers is not a new problem, but international public opinion (media, NGOs, public figures etc.) have dealt with this problem, for the most part, only after the Cold War and mostly in Western societies. Until now, the typical child soldier profile appeared, in popular consciousness, in connection with African countries, however, according to expert notions, around three hundred thousand children are taking part in more than 30 conflicts around the world. It is also perceivable, that in developing or third world countries there is a considerable number of children used in the armed forces. I am dealing with the question of child soldiers in my essay, explaining, firstly how baffling the definition of child soldiers is. Secondly I am looking into what causes can lead children to become members of regular or irregular armies and what kind of international regulations may help to solve this problem. Thirdly with the knowledge of the statistical data I will present solutions on how the international community should reintegrate these children into society and how to handle this international problem.

## 1. The child soldier concept

At the beginning of my essay, it is important to clarify the concept of child soldiers. Defining ‘child soldier’ is not an easy task. The two terms of the compound word contradict each other. A ‘child’ is a young, physically and mentally immature person, who needs special safeguards and care. In contrast, the term ‘soldier’ refers to adult men or women who have training and military preparation.<sup>4</sup> uNICEF tried to formulate a definition of ‘child soldier’ in the Cape Town Declaration, which states:

*“A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition*

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1 Email: gabideak@yahoo.com

2 OrOMA et al. (2008) pp. 49–54.

3 Ann Veneman is the uNICEF executive director since 2007

4 COHN–GOODWIN–GILL (2003) p. 3.

*includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.”<sup>5</sup>*

However, this concept is very broad and does not specify the circumstances under which a minor entered the army, or what role he or she has there, and it does not specify the role of girls in the armed forces, only their sexual exploitation is mentioned. When it comes to a definition of a ‘child soldier’, their age, the characteristics of armed groups, as well as the question of activity should be investigated. If examining age, we should note that, in many countries the age of 18 years is not a natural one for adulthood. The upper limit of childhood is variable in some societies and individual communities. In some countries, such as African countries, being a child is not age-related, but determined by their roles played in the community, and the undertaken responsibilities. In contrast, in Western societies, the age of 18 years is generally accepted. In many cultures, the age limit is set according to various stages of adolescence and young people must demonstrate that they are fit physically and emotionally for this role<sup>6</sup>. We can understand the concept of childhood only knowing cultural, historical and social factors.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The number of child soldiers in the world

It is estimated that some 300.000 children - boys and girls under the age of 18 - are today involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. Although it is impossible to accurately calculate the number of children involved in armed forces and groups, it is clear that there are many tens of thousands of child soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Child soldiers exist in all regions of the world

and, almost inevitably, wherever there is an armed conflict. Children are used as combatants, messengers, porters and cooks and for forced sexual services. Some are abducted or forcibly recruited; others are driven to join by poverty, abuse and discrimination, or to seek revenge for violence committed against them or their families.

The United Nations and other relief organizations make major efforts in order to gather reliable information on the enrolment of the child soldiers and on what impact armed conflicts have on children. According to The Global report 2008, (edited by UNICEF and the Child Soldiers Global Institution), between 2004 and 2007, there were children actively involved in armed conflict in government forces or non-state armed groups in 19 countries or territories. These were: Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), India, Iraq, Israel, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Thailand, and Uganda.<sup>9</sup>

Discussing the situation of girl soldiers needs a separate section. Girls continue to be involved in fighting forces, in combat and non-combat roles, in countries including Central African Republic, Chad, Nepal, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Armed groups in Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, the DRC, and Uganda. These locations were among those known to have subjected girl soldiers to rape and other forms of sexual violence. The country believed to have the largest number of child soldiers is

- 5 Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (Cape Town, 27-30 April 1997). [http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index\\_childsoldiers.html](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index_childsoldiers.html) (12.12.2009.)
- 6 Arab societies, and in many countries in Africa.
- 7 ROSEN (2005)
- 8 BeSeNyő János: Néhány gondolat a gyerekkatonaságról. [http://www.hm.gov.hu/hirek/kulfoldi\\_hirek/gyerekkatonasagrol](http://www.hm.gov.hu/hirek/kulfoldi_hirek/gyerekkatonasagrol) (20.10.2009.)
- 9 Child soldiers Global report. 2008. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/12/11/child-soldiers-global-report-2008> (12.12.2009.)

Myanmar (Burma), which has recruited tens of thousands of children into its national armed forces. The Global 2008 report also listed the organizations using such armed groups:

1. *Government*: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Myanmar, Sudan and Uganda
2. *Government supporters and paramilitary groups such as militias*: Colombia, Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Uganda
3. *Non-governmental armed groups* (these opposition forces, such as regional, insurgent, terrorist forces): Afghanistan, Chechnya, Colombia, Congo, India, Laos, Nepal, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uganda and Yemen<sup>10</sup>.

The map (Figure 1.) shows the countries where children are recruited.

Children as young as 8 are being forced to fight in conflicts around the world, the United Nations and human rights groups report. Human Rights Watch lists 19 places where children were being used as soldiers in 2006. Click on highlighted places to learn more.

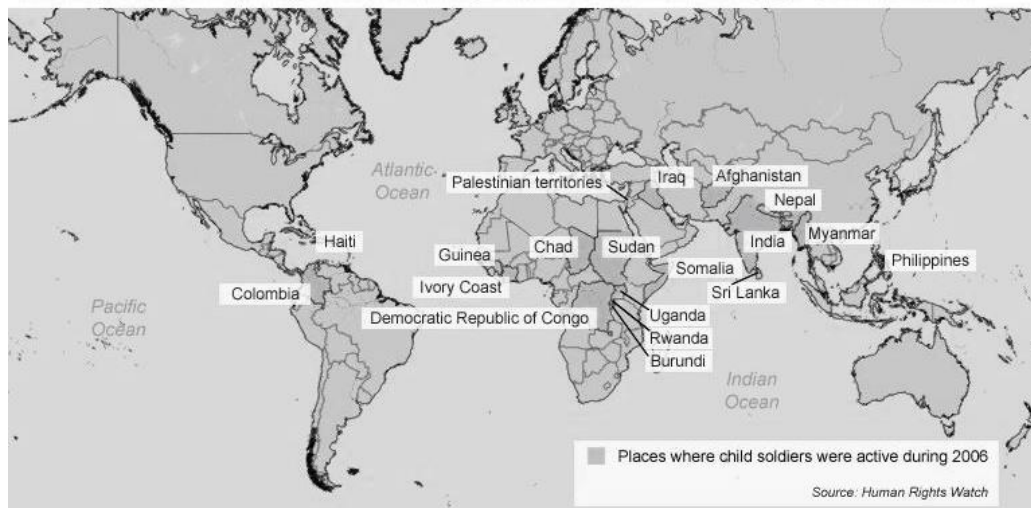


Figure 1. The map shows the countries recruiting child soldiers (2006 date)<sup>11</sup>

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### 3. The causes of child enrolment

“Child soldiers are ideal because they don't complain, they don't expect to be paid, and if you tell them to kill, they kill.”

Senior officer in the Chadian National Army (ANT)<sup>12</sup>

Some studies set apart three aspects of enrolment: with violence, mandatory and voluntary enrolment.<sup>13</sup>

1. **Enrolment with violence** is possible and beneficial for conscripted armed groups, because

10 Armed groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda are well known for having recruited and used children over many years. Others receive less international attention. In southern Thailand the separatist group National Revolution Front-Coordinate (BRN-C) recruits under-18's (Child Soldiers Global report. 2008).

- 11 <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/12/11/child-soldiers-global-report-2008> (20.12.2009.)  
 12 Voices of Child Soldiers. <http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/voices-child-soldiers> (10.03.2010.)  
 13 DCAF Backgrounder. Copii soldati. [http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:BVVJDTDIBAJ:se2.dcaf.ch/serviceengine/FileContent%3FserviceID%3D21%26fileid%3D0C13B08D-AA8B-490A-227e-15676D7B2e64%261ng%3Dro+Copii+soldati&cd=6&hl=hu&ct=clnk&gl=hu&lr=lang\\_ro](http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:BVVJDTDIBAJ:se2.dcaf.ch/serviceengine/FileContent%3FserviceID%3D21%26fileid%3D0C13B08D-AA8B-490A-227e-15676D7B2e64%261ng%3Dro+Copii+soldati&cd=6&hl=hu&ct=clnk&gl=hu&lr=lang_ro) (2009.10.10.)

these children :

- work for less money than adult soldiers;
  - comply better with the instructions;
  - are easy to deploy in combat and can easily be manipulated;
  - survive easier in jungle fighting; have a small size, for mobility of deployable reconnaissance, espionage;
  - generally do not represent a threat to the leaders, and are subservient;
  - can cause problems of conscience for the enemy;
  - can be easily persuaded to do illegal activities such as various types of contraband; or are easily converted into sex slaves;
  - increase the number of armed groups, if the number of adult fighters is reduced (especially in protracted conflict).
2. **Military duty, the legal obligation to join the armed groups.** This can be included in the state laws related to the armed forces.
3. **Voluntary enrolment or freely joining the armed forces.** The children may have reasons to volunteer in the army:
- *Political and security reasons:* caused by violence in conflict situations, invasions, occupation of territories by governmental and non-governmental troops.
  - *Economic and social reasons:* collapsed economy, poverty, lack of education, family, domestic violence, need for protection of the family, home loss, torture, discrimination against an individual or family etc. (Table 1.).
  - *Cultural reasons:* the existence of values which exaggerate the importance of military life, or the influence of environment, the traditional military lifestyle of previous generations.
  - *Ideological reasons,* an ideology of violence, to fight for a “true cause”.
  - *Personal reasons:* access to benefits only from the military, education, money, rank occupied in society.<sup>14</sup>

Children are also affected by positive and negative experiences before and during wars. The environment and the experience of the child (social milieu) also affect the subjective decision. The environment, the parents, family, school, religion, and other community institutions, put pressure on or send messages to the children encouraging them to get involved in the fight. The child's attitude also influences the development of an objective relation to war.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. The problem of international control of child soldiers

The provisions of international law apply to children. These are the specific and comprehensive charters, such as human rights and international humanitarian rights, and international criminal law (Table 2.). Other sources can be the customary international and state law. Despite the fact that some states have not ratified international treaties, they can still be accountable for violation of customary international law. Children should be protected by national and international laws. The development of international legal standards between 1949–2007 are summarized in the table below. These international agreements, standards and regulations call for the protection of children. Violations of these can be charged to any member of the international community.

14 LOUYOT (2000) pp. 5–9.

15 COHN-GOODWIN-GILL (2003) p. 25.

Demand side	Supply side
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the rapid proliferation of cheap weapons</li> <li>• the armed organizations' objectives and activities (in conjunction with children and adults substitutability)</li> <li>• the armed organizations' capability (ideological belief, social base, organizational structure)</li> <li>• the armed organizations leaders' characteristics</li> <li>• the armed organizations' material base (the estimated amount of resources)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poverty</li> <li>• the education system's insufficiency</li> <li>• war environment, interaction between government and rebel groups</li> <li>• the refugee camps' openness;</li> <li>• religion, ethnicity</li> <li>• family (or orphanage)</li> <li>• impact of friendly community;</li> <li>• boredom</li> <li>• ideological grounds, belief</li> <li>• rural and isolated communities</li> <li>• the opportunity for access to land (through marriage or inheritance)</li> </ul>

Table 1. Economic and social reason for child enrolment<sup>16</sup>

2007	The Paris Principles
10 May 2002	A World Fit For Children
6 Sept. 2000	United Nations Millennium Declaration
25 May 2000	CRC-Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict
25 May 2000	CRC-Optional Protocol on Exploitation
17 Jun. 1999	ILO Convention 182
12 Jul. 1998	Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court
25 Jun. 1993	Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action
11 July 1990	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
20.Nov. 1989	The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
8 Jun. 1977	Geneva Convention-Additional Protocol I
8 Jun. 1977	Geneva Convention-Additional Protocol II
12 Aug. 1949	The Fourth Geneva Convention
10 Dec. 1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Table 2. International Conventions<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.1. The prosecution of child recruiters by the International Criminal Court (ICC)

“This first ICC trial makes it clear that the use of children in armed combat is a war crime that can and will be prosecuted at international level.” Para-Pree Singh<sup>18</sup>

The International Criminal Court Statute adopted in 1998 treats as a serious crime the infringements of the rules of non-international conflicts and the International Criminal Court has the authority and obligation to condemn those suspected, and declare those guilty of war crimes, who

16 Source: PARAGI (2008) p. 67.

17 Source: International law. <http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/internationallaw.html> (10.03.2010.)

18 Counsel in Human Rights Watch's International Justice Program

enlist children into armies and send into battle those under 15 years of age. At the moment there are seven individuals wanted for such crimes with warrants already having been issued.

It is important to mention the Lubanga trial of the International Criminal Court because it is significant in many ways.<sup>19</sup> This was the first ICC proceedings on the issue of child soldiers. This will help to create precedence in the ICC.

The ICC has situations under active investigation in four countries, Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, and the Darfur region of Sudan.

At the national level, there have been very few prosecutions of military commanders for the recruitment and use of child soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Handling the problem of child soldiery and finding solutions

Today there are 300 thousand child soldiers, and in spite of the existing international conventions their numbers are not declining. How could the problem of child soldiery be addressed? Some studies offer four methods of treatment: prevention, development of standards and their application, and the implementation of DDR programs (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration).<sup>21</sup> The DDR program for child soldiers should be implemented completely independently of adult program of DDR and more specific factors must be taken into account.

**1. Disarmament:** The collection of weapons in the conflict area. It is not always necessary to include this option in the program, because many children do not bear arms, especially girls, who do not always participate with weapons in battles, but serve a support function: provide food, nursing, etc.

**2. Demobilization** (Disarmament) is the official and controlled release of soldiers from the army.

However, for children it is more specific. It has to be investigated whether the child was involved in the conflict, but it is also necessary to establish the identity of the child, to find his or her family, the needs assessment must be conducted and prioritization has to be determined, and last but not least, sufficient information has to be obtained for reintegration.

**3. Reintegration** is a long process, which is designed to give children an alternative, saving them from the harm of armed conflict, and also helping them find their place in the community and in society again. Reintegration includes family reunification, or finding a new home for children, providing education and professional development, economic, financial aid, as well as creating a strategy that will help children to see themselves in the future, and to conduct an independent life. Reintegration could also involve providing mental assistance even with the help of a psychologist. The DDR program in

practice shows that its implementation should not be delayed until the end of the conflict, to be really successful. It should be started as soon as possible, before the conflict is over, as it was done with certain success in Colombia, Congo, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

However, besides the negative consequences mentioned above there could also be positive aspects of the involvement of children in conflicts. Perhaps the only way to stay alive is to join the armed forces.

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- 19 The International Criminal Court Trial of Thomas Lubanga. [http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/01/22/international-criminal-court-trial-thomas-lubanga#\\_Where\\_else\\_are](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/01/22/international-criminal-court-trial-thomas-lubanga#_Where_else_are) (20.12.2009.)
- 20 Are there other cases where military commanders have been prosecuted or charged with recruiting or using child soldiers? [http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/01/22/international-criminal-court-trial-thomas-lubanga#\\_Where\\_else\\_are](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/01/22/international-criminal-court-trial-thomas-lubanga#_Where_else_are) (12.12.2009.)
- 21 DCAF Backgrounder. Copii soldati. [http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:BVVJDTDIBA8J:se2.dcaf.ch/serviceengine/FileContent%3FserviceID%3D21%26fileid%3D0C13B08D-AA8B-490A-227e-15676D7B2e64%26lng%3Dro+Copii+soldati&cd=6&hl=hu&ct=clnk&gl=hu&lr=lang\\_ro](http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:BVVJDTDIBA8J:se2.dcaf.ch/serviceengine/FileContent%3FserviceID%3D21%26fileid%3D0C13B08D-AA8B-490A-227e-15676D7B2e64%26lng%3Dro+Copii+soldati&cd=6&hl=hu&ct=clnk&gl=hu&lr=lang_ro) (2009.10.10.)

Girls do not feel inferior to boys in the army, they are freer and stronger with weapons in their hands, and they feel they are on an equal footing with men. The army could provide orphans and street kids with a family of sorts, stability and a home. They learn discipline, loyalty, respect, a certain pride, at the same time they feel important, their self-confidence will increase, and they will think that their lives are in order, and enter into friendships.

This is not to say that it is a good thing to use child soldiers in armed conflicts, but every issue has a black and white side, too.

## 6. Conclusion

All conventions, standards, support programs, plans, laws, regulations and penalties are useless if the basic causes of the problem are not addressed and solved. Compliance to international law cannot at all times be expected from all states. Common law is not always observed, either. Economic inequality, overpopulation could always cause conflict. Poverty reduction and birth control could reduce conflicts. extensive assistance could make people passive; they would not, on their own, want to solve their problems, but would expect this from aid agencies. Mimicking, forcing, and offering the Western model on societies of developing countries might not lead to conflict prevention or a solution. Those societies that do not develop their own institutions can not emerge from underdevelopment and will remain conflict ridden. In community and tribe-based societies the exported Western democratic model can never be functional.

DDR programs has led to success in some countries, but I consider prevention more important than post-treatment of this problem. The international regulations and the DDR program have to attend the special needs of girls and would have to respond with particular rules. The further development of international legislation is very important, but such legislation should observe the sovereignty of states while aiming at the regulation of these specific internal conflicts.

Furthermore, another important issue still awaiting a solution is the question of under-aged mothers. Those girls who in childhood were abducted and raped in the camps during the conflicts later will have to take care of their children. Often their families do not accept them back, the soldiers' children are treated as enemies and therefore these young mothers and their children are very vulnerable.

From what we mentioned above we can draw the conclusion that the integration of children into communities is highly problematic. The said program could be considered a success if these people would be able to maintain a self supporting lifestyle, perhaps even learn a trade or a profession.

Another probable consequence of child soldiery might occur if a large enough portion of the society spent their childhood in war, then that society will necessarily reproduce all the conditions and circumstances that will keep human communities in a state of permanent disintegration and will result in a highly unsuccessful state. These societies can only imagine the possibility of changing the prevailing adverse conditions through the use of violence.

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