

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Issue #03-01: Measures to eradicate child soldier recruitment.

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Guiding Questions as you Read

1. Do the **positive aspects** of recruiting child soldiers **outrank** the **negative aspects**?
2. What are the **short-term** and the **long-term** consequences of enlisting in an army as an underage?
3. Can the **maturity** of children be **determined** by a **specific age**?
4. What are the **major controversies** of child soldier recruitment?

Introduction

In a world where **armed conflict** is one of the most important symbols of a nation's power, some countries find themselves in need of obtaining the resources to recruit and prepare their soldiers. Many countries around the world choose to recruit individuals who are 18 years of age or younger, or child soldiers. A **child soldier**, as defined by the United

Key Terms

Armed conflict
Child conflict
Acts of violence
Front line
Suicide mission
Human rights

Nations' UNICEF, is "any child –boy or girl—under eighteen years of age, who is part of any kind of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity." The age limit of 18 years has been established in 2002 by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The previous age, declared in the Geneva Conventions (1949) was of 15 years as the minimum age of child recruitment.

Child soldiers are used by armies for many different purposes, which include killing and other **acts of violence**. The children may be a part of the military's **front line** as easy or distracting targets. They may also be the participants of **suicide missions**, take the role of spying their opponents, messengers, or even cooks. Some child soldiers, mainly girls, are sexually exploited by their commanders. The child soldiers who survive armed conflict, in most cases, end with severe trauma that may shape them for the rest of their lives. It is important to understand that some of these children are voluntarily participating in an army, while most of them are forcefully recruited and placed in them, a factor that contributes to the negative implications of recruiting children.



Children in the southern province of Narathiwat in Thailand on January 9, 2010 handling a rifle.

The issue of child soldiers is one of the most pressing globally, as it has been getting worse each year and it conveys colossal violation to the basic **human rights** of children and their families. The increase of child soldier armies is closely related to the presence of common global issues such as high poverty, lack of education, political and religious armed conflict, and oppressing military groups. The combination of all of these elements create an opportunity to foster a culture where becoming a child soldier appears to be the *smartest* option to take at times of vulnerability.

Comprehension Questions

1. What are child soldiers?
2. What are some of the duties of a child soldier?
3. What conditions may lead to child soldier recruitment?

Definition of Key Terms

Child soldiers: According to the United Nations, a child soldier is “any child –boy or girl—under eighteen years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity.” This means that any individual who is younger than 18 years old and participates in an armed group (participation could be being an assistant to a commander, cooking, or committing any act of violence) can be considered a child soldier.

Human Rights: Can be defined as the rights and freedoms each individual has from birth until death, laid down in the UN Charter . These rights and freedoms apply no matter one’s origin, ethnicity, religious, sexuality or appearance. Examples of Human Rights are the right to education, freedom of speech, and the right of having a fair trial. In the Annotated Bibliography of this Issue Bulletin you can find a short video that describes the concept of Human Rights.

Armed conflict: Any situation where armed force is used between two groups (governmental or non-governmental) , regardless of the reason or the intensity of the conflict. Conflicts could happen between a government armed group, between two or more countries, or between two different armed groups.

Armed group: Any group or organization with possession of guns who are under command of a superior.

Acts of violence: According to the UN’s World Health Organization (WHO), violence can be defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power (...) against oneself, another person,

or a group or community, that results (...) in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.” Acts of violence are any actions that fit the descriptions of violence. This could be murder, torture, and sexual assault.

War crimes: Refers to any crime that violates the laws defined by the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Some of these crimes include the targeting of civilian, torture, and murder.

Ranks: a single line of soldiers in formation during combat. It can also mean a position between the “pyramid” of armed conflict. For example, an individual may be ranked as a General or a Lieutenant General.

Frontline: Refers to the military line in an army formation during combat that is closer to the enemy. Usually the individuals who are in the frontline get killed first. In some cases, they might be used as a distraction.

Suicide mission: A task done by members of an armed group so dangerous that the individuals who do it are not expected to survive. An example could be suicide bombings, where the person who execute the bomb commit suicide as it explodes.

Non-state and state armed groups (NSAGs and SAGs): Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are armed groups that are independent of the government of the country they operate on. An example of this could be Colombia’s FARC or Nigeria’s Boko Haram. These organizations commit war crimes, yet do not have any association with the government of their respective countries. In the other hand, state armed groups (SAGs) are armed groups that represent or ar

part of the government's defense. Examples of this could be the United States Armed Forces or The People's Army of Vietnam. These armed groups represent their countries in conflict.

Geneva Conventions: In general terms, the Geneva Conventions are a set of 4 conventions that took place in Geneva, Switzerland, where the "minimum protections, standards of humane treatment, and fundamental guarantees of respect to individuals who become victims of armed conflict" were set. In other words, the guidelines all members of the United Nations should follow when treating current and past victims of armed conflict.

Poverty: According to the United Nations, there are two types of poverty: absolute poverty and overall poverty. Absolute poverty is characterised by a lack of basic human needs such as food, safe drinking water, health and education. Overall poverty refers to when there is a lack of income (money an individual gets on a regular basis) and lack of the resources needed to live a proper life. This means that hunger and malnutrition, ill health, and homelessness are some of the things people in overall poverty experience.

Background

Thousands of children in today's world are part of armed groups in regions such as Syria, Iraq, Mali and Central Africa amongst others. The question that often arises is why or

Key Terms

State armed groups (SAGs)
Non-state armed groups (NSAGs)
Geneva Convention
Poverty
Ranks

how do children end up as part of **state** and **non-state armed groups** (SAGs and NSAGs). The matter lies within the fact that these children are not voluntarily part of these groups, but are born into conflict; a factor which alters the

way they see the world and makes them susceptible to recruitment by choice or manipulation.

Ever since the **Geneva Conventions** in 1949, there has been an ongoing debate on what is the appropriate time for the under-aged to participate in armies. This number has been very difficult to set as there are difference in culture that contribute to a child's maturity. However, nearly 80% of armies that use child soldiers during conflict use children below the age of 15. There have been numerous examples in history where children have been used in battle.

History: Hitler Jugend (Youth)

The Hitler *Jugend*, or Hitler Youth stands out as one of the first organization that instigated individuals aged below 18 to participate in armed conflict. This organization was created by Adolf Hitler in 1933, with the purpose of educating and training male youth based on Nazi principles. Almost 60% of all German boys were enrolled in Hitler *Jugend*, and it became mandatory for all Aryan boys to attend in 1936. Enrolling in the institution gave a sense of identity and pride to these boys, as the society believed that only the bravest and strongest young men were worthy of graduating from Hitler *Jugend*.



The image shows a line-up of young boys being checked by a Nazi *gestapo* officer in 1944.

Children enrolled were heavily angled to believe that the Aryan race was the superior race, and thus were taught to discriminate all other racial groups. Teachings were also very warfare and violence oriented. The objective of the institution was to prepare children from the ages of 13 to 18 to become a part of the Nazi party and serve in the state labor services and armed forces for at least three years. Just as in today's child soldier recruitment,

authorities take advantage of children vulnerability and manipulate them to adopt their beliefs. Even in the 1930s children were being trained from early age to kill and participate in combat. Nowadays, there are numerous conflict groups that target children for the same reasons they were targeted during this time.

Why children?

Children are recruited by armed groups for several reasons. When countries face long periods of armed conflict, the social and economic conditions in the country often deteriorate. This means that poverty levels increase, and things such as food, shelter, and water, appear scarce to many families. Children may opt to be part of an army in order to get in exchange for their participation these things for themselves and sometimes their families. Another variable that is negatively affected by conflict is education. Oftentimes, schools close down during conflict as children may be at risk in the streets. When schools close down, children interrupt their education and are more easily manipulated to be part of conflict itself.

In addition, when armed conflict lasts longer than expected or is prolonged, armies prefer to use children to fill up their **ranks**. They choose young children (aged 14 or younger) because they are cheaper: their clothing is smaller, the guns handed to them do not need to be as extravagant, heavy or expensive, they are easily persuaded by their commanders, and they serve as long-term investments to the army as they can serve until adulthood.

The most common reason why children are recruited is the fact that in most cases, their performance is effective. Children are vulnerable, often intimidated, and easily create trust bonds with their superiors. They are the perfect subject to manipulate. In addition, children have the ability to rapidly learn how guns operate. Not only that, but when motivated by their politics or religion, they are tenacious fighters during combat. Another element that makes children more effective, is that their systems are more responsive to minimal amounts

of drugs. Superiors in an army often drug children to increase their performance during battle. Because they have less body mass than adult soldiers, minimum amounts of these substances are enough to maximize their performance.

Why is child recruitment harmful?

Mental Health and Alcohol Misuse

It is imperative to understand that child recruitment has a grave negative impact on the development and lives of children. The most obvious of them being that they are consistently exposed to violent situations in which they could lose their lives or be injured. This exposure also makes them prone to psychological and emotional trauma that could last as long as their whole life. There are countries that offer coping mechanisms for their armies to overcome and deal with trauma, however, these are a minority.

The American Public Health Association has found through multiple studies that show military service is associated with poor health for those in their teenage years. The same studies reveal that military soldiers are more likely to have anxiety-related health issues, have a tendency to become alcoholic, and tend to act violently in their day-to-day lives. It has also been found that depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are twice as common among the underaged who have been recruited in an army. In addition, a linkage between age, recruitment, and incidents of suicide attempts has also been found. In fact, in the UK's army (where recruitment minimum age is 17), the underaged had a 45% higher suicide rate compared to their adult peers.

Education, Violence and Aggression

Another factor that is of great harm to these children is that many discontinue their education during recruitment. This means, that if they ever finalize their service in the army,

reintegration into society becomes an issue as they could be twenty-year-olds who finished their education only until third or fourth grade. This lack of education contributes to the country's **poverty**, and leaves these individuals to grow without a career plan. In the long-term, the lack of education of these generations causes the whole country to take a step back in their progress. Education is very important for a country to develop and grow, and if the future generations lack it, this development and growth do not happen.

There are some armed groups, for examples those in the state of Jharkhand, India, that provide basic education to their children recruits. However, in most cases, the content taught to the children is manipulated so that they live by the beliefs and guidelines of said armed group.

Participation in an army reinforces several risk factors for violent behavior, especially for children coming from poor backgrounds. It is believed that the training methods used on children to prepare them for conflict stimulates aggression and pays respect to dominant behavior. In addition to this, studies have shown that during the period of early childhood, the brain is more likely to develop fascination for certain behaviors, such as violence.

General Health

Children in SAGs and NSAGs, especially girls, are sexually abused. Being sexually abused at such a young age may damage their reproductive systems and leave them infertile for the rest of their lives. Not only that, but could cause physical damage to the insides of



Teenager in the Central African Republic in training. Children oftentimes receive fake rifles for training.

their bodies, or increase their exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. Another scenario that could arise from the episodes of abuse is the possibility of girls getting pregnant. Early pregnancies are a threat to a

girl's life and physical wellness; leaving aside all of the social and financial repercussions early pregnancies embody.

Furthermore, children may have permanent deformities in their bodies due to injuries and consistent work during wars. Carrying heavy loads may affect the growth and development of their bones and muscles. In more serious cases, permanent injuries in the child's spinal chords may cost them their ability to walk, or even move at all.

Current Situation

In the present day, there is an estimate of 300,000 child soldiers on active duty dispersed in conflict around the world. This is a shocking number, considering that many countries have implemented initiatives that condemn child recruitment. One of the main obstacles faced by the prevention of child soldiers, is the fact that not all conflict groups are state related. This means that they work as independent armed groups that, despite of the laws in their locations, act as they please regarding their recruitment.

In the past few years, an organization called Child Soldiers International has developed an online database that contains information regarding child soldier scales around the world. This database covers information from 197 UN-member states about their child recruitment policies and laws.

According to the database, a worrisome number of 18 countries have used children in conflict since 2016, despite the policies and laws being nationally and internationally implemented. An example of these



Child Soldiers International's global status on the signing of the OPAC treaty. This treaty declares that children under 18 years of age cannot be in armed groups.

regulations, is the OPAC treaty (Child recruitment treaty) in 2000. This treaty resulted in the banning of child recruitment in 167 nations, and at least 85 of these criminalize this act.

However, 20% of the UN member states still enroll underage individuals in their armies.

Below there is a description of some of the world's most predominant child soldier armies over the past decade:

Child Soldiers in Colombia's FARC (1948-present)

Ever since the beginning of the ongoing conflict between Colombia's government and the terrorist drug organization FARC (late 1940s), child recruitment has been common in the country. The Colombian youth has been exposed to a life where fear of this armed group is



Young under-aged girls recruited by Colombia's FARC terrorist group posing with rifles.

common, and recruitment to become part of its operations has become common as well. The organization finds in children effective soldiers, and use them for crimes such as kidnaps, guerrilla attacks, and human

and drug trafficking. Children would join the group in the looks of a better lifestyle and then were forced to stay and serve for a lifetime. They would manipulate them into staying in the group through violent threats to their lives and that of their loved ones.

When the peace treaty between the Colombian government and FARC was ratified in 2016, crime activity has decreased gradually and so has child recruitment. In fact, the group has been setting free some of the children enrolled in their army, and stipulated that they were no longer interested in child recruitment. The new challenge is now to reintegrate these children into society after spending most of their childhoods with the terrorist group.

Joseph Kony's Child Soldiers 2012 Movement (1987-present)

Joseph Kony is an Ugandan rebel who served as the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and non-state armed group originated in northern Uganda that terrorized the area and neighboring countries in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Joseph Kony's mission is to overthrow Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and establish a government that based on his own interpretation of the Christian Ten Commandments. He wants to accomplish this through fear and violence. Joseph Kony claimed that he was chosen by God and he sent him messages through his dreams, most of which were orders to mutilate whole villages and rape women.



Child soldiers from Joseph Kony's Lord Resistance Army in Uganda, 2010.

Joseph Kony's group would target children of the area and forced them into combat to replenish his ranks. In fact, the majority of Kony's army is composed of children. Once abducted from their homelands, children are trained using mind-controlling methods based on fear. They are forced to kill from an early age those who disobey a commander's order or try to escape the armed group. Girls abducted serve as sexual slaves to commanders, as well as lifelong wives.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States of America

The United States has been one of the world's biggest advocates for the rights of children and the prevention of child recruitment in armies. Being of the most powerful countries in a military basis, the USA has a significant influence on other armies in the world.

The country created a document called “The Child Soldier Prevention Act.” This act criminalizes any military force of any country in the world for recruiting child soldiers. Countries that are criminalized are supposed to no longer receive any military assistance from the US and are written on an annual list. However, the US has made numerous exceptions to this rule, and has been criticized for it by the international community.

Colombia

Even though Colombia’s national army does not recruit children, the FARC terrorist group has done so for over 20 years. The Colombian government has done its efforts to negotiate with the terrorist group regarding the matter, and in 2016, they agreed to gradually release their child recruits. Nevertheless, recent reports have revealed that it has not been as efficient as promised.

Yemen, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Syria, and Somalia

According to the Child Soldier Prevention Act, these are the countries that have the largest percentages of child soldiers in their respective armies. Even though in some of these countries it is in the law that the official recruitment age is 18, many violate it with no consequences.

Child Soldiers International

Child Soldiers International is a United Kingdom-based non-governmental organisation that advocates for the prevention child recruitment, exploitation, and physical assault during conflict. This organization has been advocating for these principles since 1998. The organization has had major successes in this issue, such as the implementation of some guidelines in the OPAC convention (which is described in the section International Action of this Issue Bulletin). In addition, it has developed different reports about childrne

involved in armed conflict in different countries around the world, as well as developed the Child Soldier Index. This index shows the extent that some countries use children in their armies.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
1933-1945	Creation and operation of Hitler <i>Jugend</i>
1967	Beginning of the Indian Maoist movement. This movement resulted in NSAGs recruiting thousands of children throughout 10 Indian states
1977	Additional protocols added to the 1949 Geneva Conventions regarding child soldier usage under the age of 15
1989	Conventions on the Rights of the Child which determined the official age of soldier recruitment to be 18
1999	Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182 and Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
2000	Optional Protocol to the Conventions on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC) became the first international treaty completely focused on combating child soldier armies
2002	The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court recognized the employment of underage soldiers as a war crime.

2003	The UN passes resolution 1460. This resolution required countries that failed eradicating child soldiers recruitment to provide evidence that they have worked on decreasing the amount of recruitment.
2008	Creation of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) by the United States of America
2011	Afghanistan signs a Joint Action Plan for the Prevention of Underage Recruitment with the United Nations after being qualified one of the countries with the large child soldier armies.

Past International Action

There are several regional and international treaties and regulations that relate to child recruitment:

- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** : Held in 1989, this convention recognizes the dignity of children and that their education and personal development must be protected (amongst other rights). The definition of children was also created, and the minimum age of recruitment was stated to be 15.
- **Optional Protocol to the CRC (OPAC)**: In 2002, OPAC became the world's first international treaty focused on ending child soldier recruitment. It allowed SAGs to recruit children over 16 years old only for training purposes. Non-state armed groups were prohibited of using children for military purposes. 167 out of the 197 UN Member States have ratified OPAC.

- **Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 182:** prohibits compulsory enlistment under the age of 18 since 1999.
- **Charter on the Rights of the Child:** Created by the African Union in 1999, it prohibits recruitment under the age of 18.

The following is a list of the several resolutions treated by the UN. Through these, new guidelines on the minimum age for recruitment, the child's reintegration into society, and their mental and physical health have been discussed:

- Additional Protocols for the 1949 Geneva Conventions (1977)
- Resolution 1460 (2003): Focuses on measures to decrease the use of child soldiers in conflict.
- Resolution 1612 (2005): Focuses on measures to monitor and report the use of child soldiers in the international community.
- Resolution 2225 (2015): Categorizes armies that use child soldiers as grave human right violators.

Possible Solutions

Solving an issue such as the recruitment of child soldiers is a very difficult task as in many cases, recruitment occurs illegally and it is very hard to monitor. Another thing to consider is that not all solutions are fit to all countries, as circumstances change from area to area. This means that a treaty's steps to take to diminish child soldier recruitment will not be held the same way in the Democratic Republic of Congo than in Thailand due to differences in culture and the country's economic status due to the war, for example. Even though these

factors affect the effectiveness of solutions, it is true that internationally there are standards that should be met.

The reinforcement of the points stated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child of 1989 is one action that could help set the basic international standards that should be met. In addition to this, countries should be able to monitor and send reports to organizations such as Child Soldiers International or the UN on their actions regarding the issue. Governments could also consider the sanction of officials in their armies that participate on child recruitment, and see it as a criminal act that can be punished through years in jail, for example.

Regarding the child recruitment that occurs in NSAGs, the main problem is the NSAG itself. Since these groups do not play by the rules of any government, eradicating the group or negotiating a peaceful treaty with them that touches base on child soldiers appear to be the most obvious solutions. Many countries have tried this before, yet the results have proven to be minimal. There is still hope that other solutions in order to protect the children in these armies could arise by implementing measures that protect the areas where they are recruited. As mentioned before, areas where education is poor are more likely to be targeted by NSAGs, so governments could focus on enforcing education and protection to these areas in order to prevent recruitment.

Finally, countries should also think about the lives of the children once they finalize their service to an army. Reintegration into society can be difficult due to lack of education, discriminations against them for their past, and the psychological and physical injuries they might have developed through the years. Governments could implement reintegration programs that provide children with education and basic life skills, amongst other things, to ease in their transitions towards a healthier life in their societies.

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