

Forum: *Human Rights Council*

Issue: *Issue of Child Soldiers*

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Introduction

The UN (United Nations) has often debated how to successfully demobilise child soldiers, and how to stop militant groups and national armies from using children as part of their fighting effort. There is currently an estimated 250,000 – 300,000 child soldiers serving in different armed groups around the world, carrying out numerous jobs and roles, such as fighters and suicide bombers, cooks, human shields, messengers or spies, and (on occasions) for sexual purposes. There has been evidence of some of these children being under the age of 10 years old. Out of these 250,000 – 300,000 children it is estimated that around 40% of these combatants are girls. Girls have often been overlooked when demobilisation efforts have been carried out in the past; they are usually harder to find – as they are less likely to be used in front line fighting – and are often seen as more of a sensitive and less talked about area than male child soldiers.

When discussing the issue of child soldiers, it is important to remember that children are not just used in rebel militant groups or militarised illegal organisations/operations, but, can occasionally be found to be fighting in State armies. There are also instances of states allowing children to join armies and train without them being sent to the front lines. Such States include the UK (United Kingdom) and the USA (United States of America) where 17 year olds are allowed to enlist into the armed forces. These 'legal' child soldiers must also be kept in mind when discussing the topic, particularly in states that have weaker legislation than the UK and the USA on the issue.

A final thing to be kept in mind in regards to demobilising child soldiers is that a large proportion of young people, particularly in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) that have been raged with civil war, actually volunteer to join the militant groups that they are fighting for and are therefore more likely to want to revert back into being a child soldier.

Definition of Key Terms

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.¹

Demobilisation:

Act of changing from a war basis to a peace basis including disbanding or discharging troops;²

Militant:

Adjective: vigorously active and aggressive, especially in support of a cause / engaged in warfare; fighting. Noun: a militant person / a person engaged in warfare or combat.³

Key Issues

Benefits of Child Soldiers to armies

Children are seen as extremely beneficial to armies, particularly rebel militant groups. They are less likely to be fired at as many western and state soldiers are reluctant to kill a child. A child's mind is also extremely receptive when it comes to learning, this means that extremist groups are able to manipulate a child's thought patterns so that they are likely to wholeheartedly believe and do things for a cause that adults would think twice about (such as suicide bombing). Children are also easily intimidated and will do as they are told; they are therefore easier for a group to control and command.

Recruitment - Voluntary

A large number of child soldiers actually volunteer to fight in rebel armies. As stated in the introduction instances of voluntary recruitment are far more likely to occur in LEDCs undergoing Civil War. Many families in these areas live in extreme poverty and children do not often have the chance to get an education to be able to get skills to get a job with a reasonable income in the future; it must also be remembered that many children are orphaned in these civil wars and have nowhere to go hence making the army an attractive alternative to living in the streets. Some militant groups offer a salary to children (although it should be kept in mind that many children do not demand a salary), as well as shelter and food. This is attractive to those who have no other option. There are also children who join

¹ (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict | To promote and protect the rights of all children affected by armed conflict, 2019)

² (TheFreeDictionary.com, 2019)

³(www.dictionary.com, 2019)

armies to fight against those who have harmed them or their families, or those who believe in the cause that they are fighting for.

Recruitment - Forced

There are other child soldiers that have been forcefully taken by armed groups to serve in their forces. These 'recruitments' can be extremely harsh and violent. There are instances where a child has been taken in the night and has been forced to shoot his or her family before they are relocated to a group's base - these are, of course, drastic examples but are not unheard of in recruiting circumstances. Other children are intimidated into joining an armed group and feel that they have no other choice but to go with their intimidator as if they do not, they, or a family member could be killed; many children go into militant groups as a plea to save their family. Finally, some children are simply taken by armed groups during raids in their villages and are unable to prevent a group from recruiting them against their will.

Use of Boy soldiers

Boys are most commonly used as soldiers in their respective groups, they are usually more open to performing acts of violence than girls and tend to be and are more easily radicalised. There is also a belief in many groups that boys would be better at operating weaponry and heavy machinery, this can be seen in the fact that in some cases boys as young as 14-15 can be as tall and strong (with training) as their fully grown counterparts they are also seen to be fast and are believed to have quicker reaction times than adults which therefore makes them an ideal addition to forces. It must be kept in mind, however, that male child soldiers often carry out other roles and functions in the armies that they are a part of. It has also been known that male child soldiers have also been raped in order to keep them in line.

Use of Girl soldiers

Girls are used as child soldiers in armed forces almost as much as boys with roughly 40% of all child soldiers being female. Girls are much more likely to become cooks and porters. However, one of the most common uses for girls that become members of a militant group is them becoming child brides for the senior officers and/or as 'sex slaves' for the adult soldiers. Due to this girls are very often abused whilst they are a part of a militia. This makes them less likely to run away or leave a group willingly as their abuse (in many cultures where child soldiers are prominent) makes the female out to be the person that has done wrong. This also creates shame on the family leading to issues where girls are less likely to be welcomed back into their own homes.

Long Lasting Effects on Child Soldiers

Children are often extremely mentally scarred after serving in an armed force and a lack of therapy once removed from a force and a child not understanding their mental issues can lead to children re-joining armed groups and/or becoming increasingly violent. An investigation by the World Health Organisation has also shown that large numbers of child soldiers suffer from malnutrition, cholera and sexually transmitted diseases; all of these need to be tackled in the demobilisation process. There are also instances where children do not know their true age or where they once came from. This makes the reunification process extremely difficult and measures for these children are often not taken into account, this can also have a mental effect as children will feel that they do not have a home.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Myanmar (Burma)

Thousands of children serve in Myanmar's Tatmadaw Kyi (army) and are still being recruited today. On top of this, children are being recruited to fight in armed political groups across the country due to the internal conflict that is still occurring. Myanmar's government has taken some steps in trying to solve the issue of child soldiers in their country but do not have an official demobilisation program in place. The country's government is currently going through peace talks with a number of different ethnic groups and the internal situation is currently getting better, large amounts of international support is currently helping the government with Myanmar's child soldier situation.

Central African Republic

The UN has released that they believe that there could be up to 6000 child soldiers serving in the Central African Republic. The recruitment of child soldiers has been growing since the conflict in the Central African Republic began from all sides of the fighting. The UN states that it believes the main reason for child soldiers in this state could be due to poverty in the region, despair, a desire for revenge from some children, and a lack of options for children in the country.

Chad

Even though the fighting within Chad between rebel groups and Chad's army has almost come to an end there is still an estimated 7,000-10,000 child soldiers serving in various armed groups in the country. The Government has taken steps to remove child soldiers from armed groups but the lack of education facilities and centres where children can be placed in the country and intense poverty has made this process extremely difficult.

Colombia

There is much debate between NGO's and International organisations as to how many children have been recruited into the groups fighting in Colombia's conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Some sources say that in the past century 5000 child soldiers have gone through demobilisation processes and that 7,500 child soldiers have been recruited between 1985-2014. Colombia's national army demobilised 15 child soldiers in 2015.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo has the worst child soldier problem in the world with an estimated 1 in 10 child soldiers coming from the State. This amounts to 30,000 children serving in armed forces. Both the countries' national army and the rebel groups that operate against the government use child soldiers as they see them as a tactical advantage. The DRC has signed a large number of international treaties including Security Council resolution 1341 which called for an end to all children being recruited as child soldiers, many NGO's have said that these signings have been nothing more than publicity stunts and haven't been carried through.

Iraq

There are big issues with terrorist organisations such as IS using child soldiers in Iraq. One of the biggest problems with child soldiers being used in these extremist militant groups is that they are often brainwashed and are more reluctant to take part in demobilisation programs. It is not just the rebel forces in Iraq that use child soldiers but also the national army. This makes it extremely difficult to combat the use of child soldiers in this region.

Somalia

The number of child soldiers serving in Somalia has decreased since 2013 but is still high with 1,870 cases of children being used in armed conflicts being documented by the UN. Along with numerous rebel armed groups Somalia's national army contains an estimated 198 child combatants.

South Sudan

There have been 81 reported incidents of child soldiers being used in South Sudan, which leads to a total of 617 children being used in armed forces and groups in the region. A majority of these have been found to be recruited into the Sudan People's Liberation Army along with a number of other rebel groups.

World Health Organisation (WHO)

WHO works with child soldiers and former child soldiers in areas that have a large number of health risks such as cholera and malnutrition. They also work with children who have been mutilated in conflicts and with children that have suffered from sexual abuse, this also includes the treatment of any sexually transmitted diseases.

United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is extremely concerned about child soldiers that are still involved in conflicts, as child soldiers may have had no support once they have left armed groups. UNICEF’s study showed that nearly all of the 69 former child soldiers that they interviewed had been given weapons and had served as combatants. It also showed that child soldiers can be serving in armed groups from the extremely young age of 7 years old. The UNICEF study on child soldiers calls for a systematic demobilisation of child soldiers, which focuses on education and vocational programs that help child soldiers to get back into a regular routine and gives them the life skills that they need to make their way in the world after serving in a conflict. This organisation also works with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

The IRC aims to immediately help child soldiers that have been present in conflicts. They wish to provide immediate protection, healthcare and psychological and emotional support. These services are provided to children that have been demobilised or have escaped from armed forces around the world. There is a focus on cultural support. The IRC is currently working on programs for former child soldiers in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Uganda.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event
20th November, 1985	UN Convention on the Rights of a Child is Founded

2nd September, 1990	UN Convention on the Rights of a Child is put into force
1996	The Issue of Child Soldiers comes to the UN's attention after the publication of The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children by Graca Machel
2005	A new Policy mandate is created for all DDR programs – this includes demobilisation programs
2006	The number of estimated child soldiers serving across the world is researched and then proposed by Rachel Brett and Margret McCallin

Possible Solutions

DDR programmes

Over the years there have been many strategies tried and tested as to the best ways to successfully demobilise child soldiers. The first, and most important thing that has been concluded upon when it comes to child soldier demobilisation is that there needs to be a cohesive support network, and cooperation network setup between the military, civilian officials, families, communities, former child soldiers, and international workers when attempting to demobilise children from military groups. Only when there is complete cohesion can a child feel comfortable enough to allow the demobilisation (and then reintegration) process to work properly. For example former child soldiers in Uganda are given security clearance and a document that makes children feel safe enough to return back to their former communities. Former child soldiers in the Democratic People's Republic of the Congo have asked for these documents and for security clearance these requests have not yet been fulfilled, therefore, success rates in the Congo are lower than in Uganda.

A second strategy and model put in place for child soldiers are interim homes, that protect children against from being marginalised or radicalised and that children are put into before they enter the reintegration process where they can stay before the most successful next step of family reunification. Some of the most successful interim homes have been located in Sierra Leone where homes were modelled on family care; this makes children feel more secure and safe. It has also been found that the shorter amount of time a former child soldier spends in an interim home, the more likely

the success of their demobilisation will be. Typically, if these steps are followed the demobilisation process can be successful.

Making sure states comply with the UNDRC

Making sure that all states, not just those who actively use child soldiers but also recruit child soldiers, comply with the terms of the UNDRC is extremely important. This sets a precedent and ensures that states are held to account for their actions.

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Appendices

- I. Any appendices required