

Child Soldiers Global Report 2008: A Timely Reminder

Child soldiers—two simple words that describe a world of atrocities committed against children. These children remain hidden from the public attention about their rights and rehabilitation in the mainstream society. Governments have failed to prevent the use of children by proxy forces. On the contrary, some governments continue to recruit under-18 year olds in to national armies exposing them to military discipline, hazardous activity, bullying, abuse and possible deployment to war zones(1).

WHAT IS THE GLOBAL REPORT?

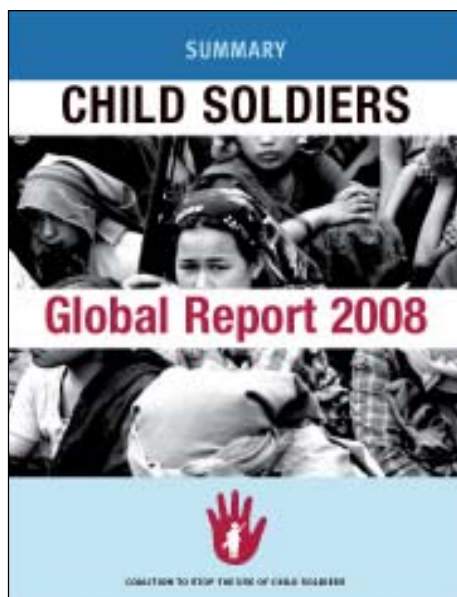
It is the third of the series of reports published by the ‘Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers’, which was formed in May 1998 by leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to secure their demobilization, and to promote their reintegration into the communities. It documents military recruitment legislation and practice, and child soldier use in hostilities by governments and armed groups across the globe. It also provides information on the treatment of child soldiers captured by government forces and any existing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs for child soldiers. The report contains an analytical overview of developments over the last four years and discusses core themes and policy directions(1).

KEY OBSERVATIONS

The Coalition's research reveals a number of disturbing findings that make it clear that the efforts to date have been insufficient, despite substantial attention and resources having been devoted to child soldiers. Child soldiers continue to be used in armed

conflicts by both government and armed groups. Governments are using captured children for intelligence gathering, or detain them rather than supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration. A wide array of armed groups continue to use children as soldiers and they have proved to be resistant to pressure and persuasion to stop the practice.

The report examines and explores issues of justice and accountability in relation to child recruiters. It highlights the problems associated with DDR in most countries. Girls in particular continue to be excluded from official programs despite well documented information of their involvement in armed conflict and their need for suitable DDR programs.



SCENARIO IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Many neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan are the worst affected nations in this region. The situation is particularly serious in Myanmar and Nepal, with Myanmar as the worst offender as far as recruiting children in armed conflict by government forces is concerned(1). In India, no information is available on how many under-18s were serving in the armed forces. The voluntary recruitment age in armed forces is still below 18 years (17 years and 6 months to be exact). Armed groups involved in conflicts and internal insurgency are active in at least 10 states which include Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, several north-eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir; several of these reported to be using children. Besides these, there are allegations that children were recruited by government-supported anti-Maoist village defence forces such as ‘Salva Judum’ in Chhattisgarh(2). There is no official government program specifically targeted at the

Key Findings

Disturbing findings

- Armed groups in at least 24 countries have recruited under-18s and many have used them in hostilities.
- The Central African Republic, Chad, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan are the worst affected countries where children are deployed to areas of conflict.
- In at least 8 countries children were used as spies and for other intelligence-gathering purposes.
- At least 63 countries permitted the voluntary recruitment of children by their armed forces; 26 were known to have under-18s in the ranks.

Positive trends

- The large-scale recruitment of children by government forces in countries such as Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Liberia ceased with the end of conflicts.
- Of 21 countries where children were deployed to areas of conflict, conflicts have ended in two (Indonesia and Nepal) by 2007.
- The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict has now been ratified by 120 states, up from 77 in mid-2004.
- More than half of countries worldwide have set the minimum age at which an individual can enter the military, including for training, at 18.
- Groups in Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka and Myanmar are working with the UN to develop and implement time-bound action plans to release children and prevent their recruitment.

rehabilitation of former child soldiers. Human rights organizations working in areas of armed conflict confirmed that there were few effective policies or facilities in place to reintegrate former militants, particularly children, into the mainstream. A draft Integrated Child Protection Scheme is, however, under consideration by the government(3).

WHAT IS NEEDED?

The global report is indeed an eye opener for which the Coalition must be complemented. However, to prevent this report becoming a futile exercise, a coordinated effort involving multiple partners like political establishment, NGOs, child welfare associations, international health agencies, and philanthropic groups is needed. An urgent attempt should be made to end all ongoing armed conflicts preferably by addressing the root causes like poor governance, inequality, discrimination and human right abuses. While such conditions persist, children will remain vulnerable to involvement in armed forces and groups. Ultimately, if the international community is to make true its promise to protect children from military exploitation; the level of political will, the amount of human and financial resources, the adherence to established best practice

and the quantity as well as the quality of collaborative effort and imaginative endeavor must all be multiplied.

Funding: None.

Competing interests: None stated.

Vipin M Vashishtha,
Consulting Pediatrician,
Mangla Hospital, Shakti Chowk,
Bijnor 246 701,
India.
E-mail: vmv@manglahospital.org

REFERENCES

1. Child Soldiers Global Report 2008. Available at: <http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org>. Accessed July 2, 2008.
2. Asian Centre for Human Rights. The adivasis of Chattisgarh: victims of the naxalite movement and Salwa Judum Campaign, March 2006.
3. Department of Women and Child Development. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS): Civil Society Partnership, 27th Draft, 27 December 2006. Available at: <http://wcd.nic.in/drafticps.pdf>. Accessed July 2, 2008.