**Children at both ends of the gun**



*Child soldiers are "more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers."*

The exploitation of children in the ranks of the world's armies must end, says a new United Nations report. "One of the most alarming trends in armed conflict is the participation of children as soldiers," declares the report, by Graça Machel, the Secretary-General's Expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.

The report says the use of child soldiers is a problem created by adults, to be eradicated by adults. It calls for a global campaign to demobilize all child soldiers and to "eradicate the use of children under the age of 18 years in the armed forces." The report further calls upon governments to renounce the practice of forced recruitment, which has put increasing numbers of children under arms against their will.

"Children are dropping out of childhood," commented Devaki Jain of India, one of Ms. Machel's Eminent Persons' Group of advisers. "We must envision a society free of conflict where children can grow up as children, not weapons of war."

*Photo: War games in the divided city of Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The psychosocial effects of armed conflict on children can be devastating and may haunt them through life, says the Machel report, particularly when children are attacked by those they have considered neighbours and friends, as happened in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. ©*

The use of child soldiers is hardly new. "Children serve armies in supporting roles as cooks, porters, messengers and spies," the report notes. "Increasingly, however, adults are conscripting children as soldiers deliberately." Children under 15 years of age are known to be serving in government or opposition forces in at least 25 conflict zones and it is estimated that some 200,000 child soldiers under 16 years of age saw armed combat in 1988. Generally, however, child soldiers are statistically invisible as governments and armed opposition groups deny or downplay their role.

The 1989 [Convention on the Rights of the Child](http://www.unicef.org/crc) defines childhood as below the age of 18 years, although it currently recognizes 15 as the minimum age for voluntary or compulsory recruitment into the armed forces. However, momentum is building for an Optional Protocol to the Convention that would raise the minimum age to 18.

With new weapons that are lightweight and easy to fire, children are more easily armed, with less training than ever before. Moreover, as was stated in one background paper prepared for the Machel report, child soldiers are "more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers." And they usually don't demand pay.

A series of 24 case-studies on child soldiers, covering conflicts over the past 30 years, makes it clear that tens of thousands of children — many under the age of 10 — have been recruited into armies around the world. In Liberia, children as young as seven have been found in combat, while in Cambodia, a survey of wounded soldiers found that 20 per cent of them were between the ages of 10 and 14 when recruited. In Sri Lanka, of 180 Tamil Tiger guerrillas killed in one government attack, more than half were still in their teens, and 128 were girls. Solid statistics are hard to come by, however, as most armies and militia do not want to admit to their use of child soldiers.

According to the report, children are often press-ganged from their own neighbourhoods where local militia or village leaders may be obliged to meet recruitment quotas. In the Sudan, children as young as 12 have been rounded up from buses and cars. In Guatemala, youngsters have been grabbed from streets, homes, parties, and even violently removed from churches. In the 1980s, the Ethiopian military practised a 'vacuum cleaner' approach, recruiting boys, sometimes at gunpoint, from football fields, markets, religious festivals or on the way to school.

The report deplores the fact that children are often deliberately brutalized in order to harden them into more ruthless soldiers. In some conflicts, children have been forced to commit atrocities against their own families. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Revolutionary United Front forced captured children to take part in the torture and execution of their own relatives, after which they were led to neighbouring villages to repeat the slaughter. Elsewhere, before battle young soldiers have been given amphetamines, tranquillizers and other drugs to "increase their courage" and to dull their sensitivity to pain.

Some children become soldiers simply to survive. In war-ravaged lands where schools have been closed, fields destroyed, and relatives arrested or killed, a gun is a meal ticket and a more attractive alternative to sitting home alone and afraid. Sometimes a minor soldier's pay is given directly to the family.

For girls, recruitment may lead to sex slavery. The report notes that in Uganda, for instance, young girls abducted by rebel forces were commonly divided up and allocated to soldiers to serve as their 'wives'. A case-study from Honduras, prepared for the Machel report, illustrates one child's experience of joining armed groups:

"At the age of 13, I joined the student movement. I had a dream to contribute to make things change, so that children would not be hungry ... later I joined the armed struggle. I had all the inexperience and fears of a little girl. I found out that girls were obliged to have sexual relations 'to alleviate the sadness of the combatants. And who alleviated our sadness after going with someone we hardly knew? At my young age I experienced abortion ... In spite of my commitment, they abused me, they trampled my human dignity. And above all, they did not understand that I was a child and that I had rights."

It is difficult to reintegrate demobilized children after a peace settlement is reached. Many have been physically or sexually abused by the very forces for which they have been fighting, and have seen their parents killed, sometimes in the most brutal manner, in front of their eyes. Most have also been led into participating in murder, rape and other atrocities. These children have no skills for life in peacetime and they are accustomed to getting their way through violence.

The report urges that all future peace agreements include specific measures pertaining to the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers, ranging from job creation and the rebuilding of schools, to the training of teachers who are sensitive to the special needs of child victims of war.

The report calls on governments to regularize recruitment procedures for their armed forces and to prosecute violators to ensure that under-age recruitment does not occur. The Machel report also illustrates how the recruitment of children can at least be minimized when parents and communities are better informed about existing national and international law.

While much remains to be done, there have been some successes. In Peru, for example, forced recruitment drives reportedly declined in areas where they were denounced by parish churches. And in Myanmar, protests from aid agencies led to the release of boys forcibly recruited from a refugee camp. In the Sudan, humanitarian organizations have negotiated agreements with opposition groups to prevent the recruitment of children.

Source: <http://www.unicef.org/graca/kidsoldi.htm>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K4yhPSQEzo>

1. What can you and I do to try to end this practice of Child Soldiers around our world?
2. What can governments in democratic countries like Canada do to end the practice of Child Soldiering around the world?
3. What do you think are the short-term and long-term effects of being a Child Soldier for the child, families and countries that these children are forced into such horrible conditions?