

CHILDREN at war

by Olga Yoldi

The modern Western idea of childhood is a relatively recent creation. It is generally perceived as a period of innocence and visionary imagination, however this romantic idea of childhood does not apply to the overwhelming majority of children. Few children in developing countries are actually safe to grow to the fullest potential.

For countless numbers of these children there is no peace in their lives, only terror. Caught in violent conflict, they are enduring almost unimaginable suffering. Children are losing life, wholeness, home, family, opportunity and hope. Their innocence and openness, which calls us to cherish and protect them leave children especially vulnerable. Learned hatred, fears and enmities are planting in children the seeds of future conflict.

In an unspeakable perversion of innocence, more and more children are being drawn as soldiers into violence, they are too young to resist the consequences of which they cannot imagine. Every year thousands of children are recruited around the world. Their experiences are brutalising. They are exposed to severe hardship, harrowing experiences, serious injury and sometimes death.

In November last year *Swedish Save the Children* held a press conference to launch a new report called *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*. The report is based on extensive research in 26 countries and shows that the use of child soldiers is far more widespread than generally realised.

The report found that an estimated 250,000 children under 18, some as young as 7, are presently serving around the world in government armed forces or armed opposition groups.

Children took part actively in 33 armed conflicts in 1995-96; most

child soldiers join armed opposition groups and paramilitary groups.

Moreover several governments' armed forces have sent children under 18 into combat, child soldiers often carry out extremely dangerous tasks such as mine detecting and spying.

The report actually documents numerous cases of how children are exploited and abused, such as the story of this Burmese boy: "Sometimes when I fell asleep when I was on sentry duty, I was beaten by my corporal. He beat me like a dog, like I was an animal, not a human being. There were 2 or 3 suicides during that time, of boys who had been hospitalised and finally shot themselves".



In countries in West and Central Africa, children as young as 8 to 10 years of age are forcibly recruited, coerced or induced to become combatants. Although exact figures are unavailable, the estimated number of 20,000 to 50,000 child combatants often cited is considered an underestimate.

Approximately 90% of all child soldiers are boys. Survival, self esteem, revenge of death of family members, peer groups pressure and coercion by adults and family members are some of the factors compelling children to participate in the wars in West and Central Africa.

The demobilisation of child soldiers has been constrained for a variety of reasons, including the lack of political will on the part of military leaders, the absence of sanctions against recruitment, weak national demobilisation structures and the social disintegration of families and communities.

The report makes recommendations on how to reduce the volume of child recruitment, for example, international and national legislation on recruitment, improved documentation of children, including the routine provision of birth certificates and monitoring of recruitment practices by relief agencies operating in conflict areas. However, it would be rather difficult to monitor and enforce these measures on governments generally because the mechanisms are not in place to do so.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1993 unanimously called on the Secretary General to appoint an expert to conduct a study on the impact of armed conflict on children. Fifteen representatives from a wide variety of African countries participated in the regional consultations and formulated a number of recommendations. They highlighted the fact that the prevention of war requires addressing and eliminating the root causes of conflict, until this happens children will always be at risk.

The recommendations addressed issues such as the reduction of arms and more accountability on the part of governments, using mechanisms for conflict prevention and education.

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They also declared the targeting of children and their recruitment as soldiers of war as crimes against humanity.

So far the recommendations have remained just a written document.

Unfortunately very little has been achieved to protect children in war. The violations on their childhood are intolerable but failure to respond is a betrayal and silence complicity. ■



Rwanda is called the nation of traumatised children. Children have been exposed to atrocities to a degree never been seen before. Three hundred thousand children have been killed, often in brutal ways.

In some of the largest mass graves up to 45 % of the victims were children.

Over 95000 children, 40000 in Rwanda lost their parents or were separated from them.

- 42% lost both parents.
- 56% witnessed a family member being killed.
- 75% witnessed other people being killed.
- 47% saw children killing other children.
- 64% witnessed massacres.
- 20% witnessed rape and sexual assault.

Many children are able to name more than 20 persons close to them who are dead.

In August 1994 UNICEF's child psychologists visited the sites of massacres and talked to the children in the area, producing the first assessments of the traumatic effects of war on children.

The Trauma Recovery Program (TRP) within the *Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances Section* was established to address the immediate and long term psychosocial needs of war affected children and their families.

As part of the program UNICEF trained 12 trauma advisers in trauma alleviation methods. These advisers passed

on their knowledge to teachers, social workers, health care providers and religious leaders. So far TRP trained a total of 1843 social workers in basic issues of trauma identification, and broadcast over 1500 trauma first aid messages to various social agents throughout Rwanda.

The TRP has conducted and analysed data from a pilot survey completed in December 1994 on levels of trauma among children in centres and family settings.

Among the findings was the fact that 62% of those interviewed felt they had no future and did not expect to live long. A set of *Guidelines for Psychological Trauma Healing* was produced by the Minister of Social Rehabilitation in collaboration with UNICEF and seven non government organisations. The Government of Rwanda acknowledged the importance of psychosocial intervention with traumatised children as one of its priorities.

Consequently a national Child Recovery Centre was opened in April 1995 in Kigali to become a focal point for training, documentation and research, with an outpatient clinic for severely traumatised children and families.

The effects of such experiences on children, and its subsequent documentation, was of vital importance to services providers, not only in this country but around the globe. Hopefully it will contribute to provide more insight on effective healing treatments and understanding of child survivors. ■

The next issue of Transitions will publish letters from our readers. If you would like to respond to any of the articles in this issue or comment on any area related to refugee survivors of torture or trauma please send your letters to Helen Basili at STARTTS, PO Box 203, Fairfield, NSW 2165.