



Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Uganda, Angola, Burma, Sierra Leone... the list is much longer than this. In 2002, there are more child soldiers than ever before. They are being sent into battle by helpless parents and brutal dictators. Even the United Kingdom sent sixteen year-olds into battle in the Falklands War. They are brutalised and traumatised, but children are malleable and cheap, and are easily trained to kill. JENNY QUEEN reports on this appalling situation of those who are

UNDER ARMS & underAge

“I was a boss. A strong fighter. When the big men were running we small boys stayed behind.”

– Junior Davis, aged 12,
Former Liberian Child Soldier

“It’s easier if you catch them young. You can train older men to be soldiers; it’s done in every major war. But you can never get them to believe they like it.”

– Gwynne Dyer, *War*

Photography by **ROBERT SEMENIUK**



There are, at this moment, more than 300,000 child soldiers in active service in an estimated 41 conflicts around the globe. These are boys and girls ranging in age from seven to seventeen who act as porters, cooks, soldiers and providers of sexual services. They are recruited, they volunteer, they are sold by their families, and they are forcibly pressed into service. The problem is far-reaching and almost impossible to address by remedy of traditional international law.

Child soldiers are nothing new – there are scores of recorded instances of the use of children in historical battles, from the French Revolution to the US Civil War. But changes in the way we make war, in the manufacture of small arms and in global economics has made the problem increasingly common. One Swedish watchdog group, Rädde Barnen, recorded a 16 percent increase in the numbers of child soldiers in just three years, between 1995 and 1998. Perhaps the most pressing question raised by these figures is “Why?”. Why has the latter part of the 20th century seen a world-wide increase in the numbers of child soldiers? And why children at all?

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF ARMED CONFLICT

“If an entire community or group perceives a risk to its own survival, validation or acceptance of the participation of its children in the struggle will be difficult to resist.” – Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohen, *Child Soldiers*.

In order to understand the reasons why child soldiers are becoming ever more attractive to military groups, it is helpful to consider some of the political and societal changes of the last century. The end of the Cold War has seen dramatic changes world-wide in the nature of armed conflict. According to Dr Mike Wessels, today’s conflicts are “increasingly internal... ethno-political conflicts, characterized by butchery, violence against women, and atrocities sometimes committed by former neighbors.”

A significant result of this trend is the militarization of daily life for many children around the world. What this means is that, in these militarized zones, children are accustomed to the presence of armed patrols, a visible police force, military leaders in high governmental positions and other intrusions of the military into daily life. A vivid example of this type of intrusion is the

Tamil LTTE presence in some Sri Lankan schools. One report tells of a playground in which toy guns are mounted on see-saws and pictures of young “martyrs” are prominently displayed. In the face of this kind of heavy militarization, the involvement of entire societies – young children included – in the act of making war is really not out of the ordinary.

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When armed struggle becomes a part of daily life, children have no choice but to accept it. When violence touches them personally, in the form of the death of a friend or family member, or perhaps by the destruction of their home, they feel helpless and frightened. Involvement in the military is one way to take control of that helplessness. In Liberia, after a brutal government counter-insurgency campaign which left countless children orphaned, human rights workers noted a substantial increase in the numbers of children joining anti-government militias, in an attempt to exact revenge.

In heavily militarized zones, there are also societal pressures on children to join in the struggle. There have been many reports on the pressures young Palestinians face to join in the struggle against Israeli domination. A West Bank psychologist has written that many children become involved in violent acts, such as throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, in order to demonstrate their identification with the group, in essence, “to be one of the guys.” While parents naturally worry for their children’s safety, this behavior is nonetheless supported by the community at large.

On a micro-level, changes in weapons technology have also made it possible to include children in modern warfare. During the earlier part of the 20th century, rifles were heavy, unwieldy and difficult for small children to operate. In recent decades, improvements in small arms technology have yielded lightweight and relatively easy to operate weapons like the M-16 rifle and the AK-47. The unintended effect of these “improvements” is that children can now be made into more effective fighters with comparatively little training. As one human rights worker puts it, “In some places, if you’re as tall as a rifle, you’re old enough to carry one.”



A boy fighting with a Karen National Liberation Army, in Myanmar.

WHY CHILDREN?

“These fighters make more disciplined, brave, and... nationalistic soldiers. They make the best fighters.” – A Burmese Shan MTA commander, on his preference for child soldiers.

Even if we accept that the nature of warfare has changed, that conflicts tend to be less government-driven and often involve the whole of the community, we are still left wondering why children? How can it be worth it to end innocence and sacrifice the future? Certainly the Goodwin-Gill assertion holds some truth: a community unable to see a future, fighting for its very existence, will use any means available. But there are other causative factors that make children very attractive targets.

Economic factors play a huge role in explaining why so many societies sacrifice their youngest members to warfare. The states and regimes which use child combatants are among the poorest in the world. Simply put, there are not enough resources to go around. In many societies, children are more economically expendable than adults. The recent global shift away from agrarian economies has made large families less of a financial asset. Adding to the problem, in nearly every region where child soldiers are used, internal conflict has resulted in economic devastation. As a result, traditional

industries in which children have participated economically (such as light agricultural work or craft labor) have been slowed or halted. Under such circumstances, children are less valuable to their families and communities, and are placed at a

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greater risk of becoming combatants.

While forced recruitment is certainly a problem in child-soldiering scenarios, many children choose to join military groups of their own will, largely for financial reasons. There are reports of Liberian children as young as seven who joined the government AFL forces because, as one Red Cross worker put it, “those with guns could eat.”

Some children join voluntarily, others are sold by their families. While it is true that a child may contribute to the family income, when pressed, many families agree to sell their children for economic compensation. In other cases, families may pressure children to join the military in order to contribute more directly to the household income. It is a matter of simple, but chilling calculation: if a child costs his family more than he can bring in as a soldier, he is at risk. >



Gun culture: Somali street kids control the streets of Mogadishu in the service of war lords.

Across the board, children from wealthier families are less at risk of becoming child soldiers. Wealthy families are often required to buy their children out of service, or send them away from home to avoid forced recruitment, but they are spared the fate of poorer families. According to one report, when LTTE violence broke out in Sri Lanka in 1987, families with the available means sent their children away from militarized zones. In response, LTTE rulers decreed that no male between the ages of 15 and 35 could leave LTTE strongholds without first purchasing an “exit pass,” costing up to \$300,000 rupees (about \$3800 Australian). As a result, poorer families were forced to surrender their sons to a brutal paramilitary group to ensure their own survival.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking cause for children’s attractiveness to military regimes is their psychological malleability. They are obedient, eager to please and more vulnerable than adults to political propaganda. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian military leaders used children to clear mine-fields in advance of the army. A report by the Center on War and Children records that these children were “armed with headbands with religious slogans and khaki jackets bearing the message that they have the ‘permission’ of the imam to enter heaven, along with keys on chains around their necks ensuring such entry.”

It is no secret that children are more susceptible than adults to coercion, intimidation and old-fashioned behavioral conditioning. They are also



enticed by the excitement of battle. In the same report, one Liberian human rights worker says he was “convinced that the bulk of 9 and 10 year-olds in the NPFL’s Small Boy Units joined for the ‘Rambo-esque’ adventure of it.” For many military commanders, it is this enthusiasm which makes children ideal recruits.

In his controversial book, *On Killing*, US Lieutenant Dave Grossman explores the reasons behind the military’s preference for young recruits. He argues that adult soldiers have an aversion to killing, even in combat scenarios. This aversion cannot be conditioned out of adult recruits, but research in combat psychology suggests that younger soldiers are less likely to avoid killing when subjected to conditioning techniques like those

currently used in the US military’s basic training. As a support for this theory, he cites firing rates between the Second World War and Vietnam. In WWII, the firing rate (or the percentage of available soldiers who were firing their weapons) was between 15 and 20 percent. When this figure was released, the army moved to address the problem by instituting training programs designed to inure recruits to violence. As a result, the firing rate in Vietnam was close to 95 percent. Grossman offers an additional reason for this dramatic increase: the soldiers in Vietnam were, on average, the youngest ever in an American war.

If American basic training techniques can be **“Combat psychology suggests that younger soldiers are less likely to avoid killing when subjected to conditioning techniques.”**

described as desensitizing, in many of the regions where child soldiering is practiced, it is nothing short of dehumanizing. Many military leaders force children to learn by doing, which often means repeatedly exposing them to violence to numb their reactions. One report describes the Colombian paramilitary practice of forcing children to cut the throats of domestic animals and drink their blood. Another details the story of a 14 year-old boy who had once fought for the anti-government RENAMO forces: “I was told to train. I would run, do head-over-heels, and climb trees. Then they trained me to take guns apart and put them back together again for four months. Every day the same thing. When it was over they did a test. They put someone in front of me to kill. I killed.” This is a heart-rending example of the ease with which children’s resistance to violence can be overcome.

Once the transition from child to soldier is completed, the military organization gains what Sri Lankans refer to as “human tigers,” remorseless young killers. The child, however, loses the very essence of his childhood – innocence, compassion, a place in the social order. This is one of the greatest tragedies of the problem of child soldiers. Often reintegration is impossible because the children’s families are frightened to have proven killers in their homes. In cases where female soldiers have been sexually assaulted, they may find that their communities treat them with suspicion, and that they have no prospects for marriage. Even in the best-case scenario, a re-integrated child soldier is

likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome and have difficulty returning to his or her old life.

There are so many disparate factors contributing to the problem of child soldier that it is impossible to point to any one major cause. However, there are a few clear facts. Child soldiering today is almost entirely confined to developing nations. Poverty, political instability and a lack of future prospects all lead to the use of children in armed conflict.

The majority of conflicts involving child soldiers take place between government and rebel factions or between two or more non-governmental armed groups. These groups see themselves in dire circumstances, without a guaranteed future. Their immediate survival is threatened, and they find it necessary to utilize all available resources. Unlike

“Despite all recent attempts by the international community, today more children bear arms than ever before.”

most developed nations, they can see no long-term benefit to investing in their children because they cannot guarantee their ultimate survival. Thus, the use of child soldiers becomes advantageous, and even necessary. Unfortunately, the non-governmental status of most groups that use child soldiers makes international intervention much more complicated. Because non-state actors cannot be bound to inter-state treaties, international law do very little to address the problem.

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND OTHER REMEDIES

One of the more contentious issues in international law as it pertains to children is the age of majority. At what age does a child become an adult? While most Western governments set the age of majority at 18, in many cultures the age that signifies the transition between childhood and adulthood is much younger.

Traditionally, international human rights treaties have placed the age of majority at 15. Both Additional Protocols I and II (1977) of the Geneva Conventions set the definition of a child as “[those] who have not attained the age of fifteen.” In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child set the definition of the age of

majority at 18. Currently, all nations represented at the UN have signed the Convention, with the very notable exceptions the United States and Somalia.

Unfortunately, the Convention did not stipulate that children under the age of 18 are not to be used as combatants.

In May 2000, The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Its main provisions hold that

- ♦ children under the age of 18 may not take an active part in hostilities;
- ♦ children may not be drafted into the armed forces;
- ♦ steps be taken to ensure that children who voluntarily join the armed forces are actually *voluntarily* joining, and that their parents grant informed consent;
- ♦ and states take action to prevent non-state armed groups from recruiting children for an active role in hostilities.

Despite the noble aims of international law, the fact remains that many of the children who are most at risk by the practice of child soldiering have no realistic means of protection. International law is widely known to be impotent in terms of deterrence. As we have seen in a wide variety of cases, from the issue of Iraqi arms inspections to Australia’s handling of refugees, a nation’s status as a signatory to international treaties may have little effect on their governance. Because there is no real means of enforcement, international law remains a well-intentioned but highly ineffective remedy to the problem of child soldiering.

As important as international law may be in raising awareness of the plight of child soldiers, the only means by which child soldiering will be halted is by supporting massive infrastructural improvements in communities where there are high instances of the practice. Because poverty plays such a large role in placing children at risk, it is unlikely that the problem of child soldiering can be addressed without some alleviation of economic factors. NGOs and international aid groups must institute aid or economic improvement programs in communities at risk. In addition, community education programs may help illustrate the long-term costs of child soldiering.

The practice of child soldiering is a complex