

Child Soldiers in Africa: Solutions to a Complex Dilemma

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Abstract

This article focuses on the dilemma of using child soldiers in violent conflicts throughout Africa and on ways of resolving it in the future. The first section briefly examines some important domestic and international aspects and dimensions of the problem. Then, attention is shifted to particular individual countries on the continent in which the use of children in battle has been most prevalent during the past decade. The next section reviews some recent efforts by the international community to assuage the crisis, offers recommendations on how they can be improved, and raises alternative ideas for new strategies and initiatives. Finally, a conclusion ties all this information together and suggests a hopeful future for the children of war-torn countries in Africa.

In recent years, the use of child soldiers by both government forces and insurgent groups in African countries such as Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, and Sudan has been harshly condemned by the international community. Past efforts to alleviate the problem have been somewhat ineffective and many children continue to engage in violent conflict either voluntarily or against their will. The dimensions of this terrible dilemma are complex and widespread, stemming from both domestic and global forces. There is still hope, however, for the children of these war-torn nations. Many countries and international organisations are joining together to develop new strategies that will discourage the use of child soldiers and punish those groups and governments that do. It is extremely important that the United States support these endeavours in their early stages so that effective measures can be implemented that may one day help solve the problem.

Introduction

Throughout most of its history, the African continent has been no stranger to violent conflict. In the past decade alone, the world has witnessed widespread genocide in Rwanda, interstate war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and bloody, protracted civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both government forces and insurgent groups have become increasingly reliant upon the recruitment of children to help fight their battles. In addition, these young individuals sometimes serve as sex slaves for high-ranking military officials or are sold into slavery in exchange for weapons, money, and other scarce resources. This disturbing trend has received much attention in recent years from political leaders, human rights activists, and other members of the international community. Several initiatives have been launched during the past decade to help alleviate the problem. Much work still remains, however, before an effective strategy can be developed and implemented that will discourage the use of children in battle.

Dimensions of the Problem

The use of children in violent conflict is a serious problem that continues to plague both the African continent and the international community as a whole. According to a recent report released by The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 serve as child soldiers with government armed forces and armed opposition groups worldwide, with over 120,000 of them located in Sub-Saharan Africa alone (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). In some of these countries, it is not uncommon to even find 7 and 8-year-olds engaged in battle. Some children voluntarily join government armies or insurgent groups, while others are abducted and

forced to fight against their will. There are many reasons why the recruitment of children, both boys and girls, in particular African nations has continued to increase over the years. In addition, the problem is often exacerbated by several domestic and international factors. Some of the more salient features of this disturbing trend are worth reviewing.

Proliferation of Small Arms

The proliferation of light, inexpensive weapons in many African countries in recent years has greatly contributed to the recruitment of child soldiers for battle. One U.S. State Department report notes:

During the Cold War, state-to-state arms transfers to Sub-Saharan Africa involved primarily heavy, high-maintenance equipment such as jet fighters, helicopters, transport aircraft, and tanks. After the collapse of Communist governments in the former Soviet Union and its East European allies, state-to-state transfers declined while commercial and illegal arms trafficking in light weapons increased. The consequent widespread availability of cheap weapons, easy to use and maintain (AK-47s sell for as little as \$6 in some African countries), fuels destruction throughout the continent.

U.S. State Department 1999

In previous years, weaponry was still somewhat complex, heavy, and bulky and children were limited to mainly support roles when participating in violent conflict. The increased availability of small arms, however, has allowed even the youngest of individuals to engage in direct combat. Very little effort and training is required for a 10-year-old to use an automatic weapon that weighs only a few pounds but still results in massive slaughter. Additionally, the relatively low cost of such weapons allows them to be bought by some of the poorest communities on the continent. The same report vividly demonstrates this point by stating, "In some countries, it is easier and cheaper to buy an AK-47 than to attend a movie or provide a decent meal" (U.S. State Department 1999).

Governmental Unwillingness or Inability to Resolve the Problem

A major factor that encourages the use of child soldiers is the unwillingness or inability of African governments to initiate effective measures that will help curb the problem. Even though a majority of these nations have national laws setting the minimum age for recruitment at 18, they are either poorly enforced or not applied at all in practice (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). The case of Sierra Leone serves as an excellent example. Despite government promises and claims to the contrary, up to 30 percent of government-sponsored Citizens Defence Forces (CDF) in some areas are between 7 and 14 years of age (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). Furthermore, many of these laws have built-in stipulations that decrease their effectiveness. For instance, both Uganda and Chad accept children for battle younger than 18 with parental consent and Botswana, Kenya, and Zambia allow for the recruitment of children with the "apparent age of 18" (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). Contradictions such as these undermine the rule of law and set a dangerous precedent for other African countries to follow. Poor record keeping and a lack of birth registration systems throughout the African continent contribute to the problem by allowing children well below the minimum age limit to be recruited. Finally, in cases of protracted internal conflict, governments simply may not have the resources or even the will to enforce these laws and are preoccupied with other political, economic, and social considerations.

Voluntary and Forced Recruitment

African children become active participants in violent conflict by either voluntarily offering their services to armed groups or being coerced to do so against their own will. According to the Center for Defense Information, "It is probable that the vast majority of young soldiers are not forced or coerced into participating in conflict. But they remain subject to many subtle manipulations and pressures that are more difficult to eliminate than forced recruitment" (Isenberg 1997)¹. There are several reasons why young individuals choose to voluntarily join national armies or rebel groups engaged in conflict. For one, there is the enticement of receiving a modest wage that can be directly used to support family members. Since the political, economic, and social institutions of many African countries are in extremely poor condition, many children are left with no viable alternatives for earning money in order to survive other than becoming soldiers. In addition, some youth are motivated by revenge when deciding to join armed groups. A young child may have witnessed the brutal murder of family members or close friends and feel that it is necessary to punish the perpetrators of such acts. Furthermore, some African communities even glorify war and teach children at a very early age that engaging in military combat is an honour for both the nation and family. One recent study conducted in Sierra Leone noted, "Many mothers have remarked on the joy of seeing their ten-year-old dressed in brand new military attire carrying an AK-47" (Isenberg 1997). The need for identity and association is another reason why many young individuals voluntarily join combat groups in Africa. This is especially true for adolescents and young teenagers. In apartheid South Africa, black township youth called the Young Lions adopted an ideology of liberation, which gave meaning to the harsh realities of their existence and conferred a clear sense of identity and direction (Wessells 1997). It becomes apparent that all of these factors greatly influence the decision of many African children to voluntarily join armed groups engaged in violent conflict.

Despite the voluntary participation of many African children in national militaries and insurgent groups, thousands are also forced to do so against their own will. It is not uncommon for local insurgent or military leaders to meet recruitment quotas by kidnapping, press-ganging, or abducting children from their own villages. In Ethiopia, several cases have been reported where armed militias would surround a public facility, order every male to sit down, and then force into a truck anyone deemed "eligible" (Wessells 1997). Once taken by the insurgent groups or local military units, young children are often subjected to brutal methods in order to "toughen them up" and turn them into ruthless "killing machines". This "conditioning" process can include being forced to kill or physically maim one's own friends or family members, participate in torture, rape, and execution of entire villages, and being beaten and sexually abused by the very forces for which they are fighting. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) 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 (Machel 1996). In a recent ABC News report, a 16-year old girl named "Miriam" vividly describes her horrific experience after she and other village members were forcefully taken by the RUF:

Ten men raped me the day I was abducted. I was begging them to leave me alone, but they wouldn't listen. This happened for three days. Then they gave us 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of rice to carry. Later, I was forced to be the wife of a soldier named Mohammed. We were taught how to fire guns. There were over 100 boys and girls, the youngest 6, 7, and 8 years old. There were about 50 my age, and the others were all little ones.
(Abrahamson 2000)

To ease the psychological and physical trauma of "training" and engaging in battle, children are often given amphetamines, tranquillisers, alcohol, and other drugs. This has resulted in the addiction of many young individuals to these harmful substances. Again, quoting "Miriam" from the ABC News report, "If you say no [to taking drugs], they beat you. It makes you feel strong, like a big person" (Abrahamson 2000).

Whether voluntarily recruited or forcefully abducted, children receive treatment on an equal level as their adult counterparts and are used in a variety of ways by armed groups. Many directly participate in violent battles and are oftentimes selected to do so over adults. One young man who was recruited by the Mozambican National Resistance group RENAMO during the 1980s at the age of 10 explains, "RENAMO did not use many adults to fight because they were not good fighters\kids have more stamina, are better at surviving in the bush, do not complain and follow directions" (Isenberg 1997). Others serve in support roles such as porters, lookouts, messengers, cooks, checkpoint officials, and even spies. Sometimes, new recruits may first serve in support roles before progressively advancing to combat. A former child soldier from Burundi states, "We spent sleepless nights watching for the enemy. My first role was to carry a torch for grown-up rebel leaders. Later I was shown how to use hand grenades. Barely within a month or so, I was carrying an AK-47 rifle and even a G3" (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). Finally, young girls may be used as "sex slaves" by male soldiers and rebel leaders and are forced to marry and bear children for them. In the end, these young victims of war are left physically and psychologically traumatised with no medical or economic assistance from state institutions.

Countries Most Affected by the Problem

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has identified ten African nations that have been most affected by the problem of child soldiers: Angola, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda. All of them have suffered politically, economically, and socially from the practice and continue to do so to this day. A brief examination of some of these countries will be sufficient to demonstrate the magnitude of the crisis on the African continent.

Angola

For over 20 years, Angola has experienced a bloody civil war in which the use of child soldiers has been a common practice. Both government and UNITA (National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola) forces have actively recruited children of all ages to engage in violent conflict. Between 1980 and 1988, it is estimated that every third child in the country had been involved in some military aspect of the civil war (Taylor 2001). Furthermore, the government has lowered the minimum conscription age for military service on many occasions since 1993, with the latest revision set at 17 years old (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). Forced recruitment of young individuals still continues even today, especially in several suburban areas near Luanda and the rural countryside. Recent figures place the number of children actively engaged in combat in Angola at over 3,000 (Taylor 2001). Even worse, the crisis seems to be spreading to neighbouring countries. According to some recent reports by the National Society for Human Rights:

Child soldiers are being recruited on Namibian soil for use in armed combat in Angola. This recruitment

of "voluntary" soldiers under the age of eighteen has escalated in the last three years and is being actively endorsed by the Namibian government. These child soldiers are reportedly as young as fourteen years old and are said to have been trained to be exceptionally ruthless.

(Inter-Church Coalition on Africa 2001)

There have also been claims that military commanders are collaborating with Namibian police officers and paying them to find new recruits (ReliefWeb 2001). It is clear that the problem of child soldiers is no longer a domestic concern for the Angolan government alone, but a regional one that threatens to severely weaken the moral, political, and social fabric of its bordering states.

Burundi

Along with Rwanda, Burundi currently has one of the lowest recruitment ages for military service on the entire African continent. It appears that either 15 or 16 years of age seems to be the set standard, but this is difficult to confirm because copies of national recruitment legislation are impossible to find (ReliefWeb 2001). Estimates regarding the number of child soldiers actively engaged in combat vary widely. One source suggests that in 1998, there were between 800 and 1,000 children between 14 and 17 in the regular armed forces alone (ReliefWeb 2001). In recent years, the proliferation of military schools throughout the country known as "training centres" has increased youth recruitment and exacerbated the problem. Again, it is difficult to ascertain exact figures, but one report claims that the number of children attending these schools surpasses 36,000, with all of them being members of the armed forces (Taylor 2001). This surge in recruitment has led some organisations to believe that anywhere between 8,000 and 10,000 child soldiers are currently taking part in hostilities throughout the country (ReliefWeb 2001). As the government continues to foster a climate of militarism and condones the use of young individuals in combat, Burundi will continue to suffer the ravages of war and the loss of its children. If the future well being of a nation is determined by the development of its youth, then Burundi's future looks bleak as young individuals are urged to solve their problems violently instead of in an atmosphere of dialogue and compromise.

Liberia

Despite claims by the Armed Forces of Liberia that individuals under the age of 18 are not recruited for military service, evidence indicates that all factions have recruited large numbers of underage children to engage in violent conflict, especially during the height of the country's protracted civil war. A report released by Human Rights Watch estimates that during the disarmament and demobilisation period from 1996 to 1997, over 18% of National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) soldiers were between 8 and 17 years of age (Taylor 2001). Of this number, 69% were between the ages of 15 and 17, while 27% were anywhere from 12 to 14 (ReliefWeb 2001). To this day, evidence still remains of past mistreatment and neglect of Liberia's youth. Many former child soldiers still remain physically and psychologically traumatised. Some continue to be addicted to drugs and alcohol given to them while in the military, and the number of homeless children and abandoned infants in Monrovia still remains extremely high (ReliefWeb 2001).

Rwanda

Along with Burundi, Rwanda currently has the lowest recruitment age for military service in Africa.

Legislation adopted in 1977 sets the minimum age for volunteers at 16, but allows the Ministry of Defence to make exceptions with respect to the age and educational level of recruits (ReliefWeb 2001). Thousands of youth actively participated in the 1994 genocide throughout the country. In 1998, at least 2,893 minors were being held in Rwandan detention centres as genocide suspects (ReliefWeb 2001). Further compounding the problem is the fact that many secondary schools in Rwanda refuse to accept former child soldiers for enrolment. With no alternatives left, these children often decide to return to military service. The latest figures indicate that anywhere between 14,000 and 18,000 children are recruited into the armed forces every year (Taylor 2001). In addition, there have been recent reports that Rwandan youth are being abducted and forced to join both the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPA) and several armed factions fighting President Laurent Kabila's armed forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (ReliefWeb 2001). As in the case of Angola, the crisis is spreading to neighbouring countries and having devastating implications for the region.

Sierra Leone

Graphic media images of traumatised youth with amputated limbs have brought much international attention to the problem of child soldiers in Sierra Leone in recent years. According to one journalist, "Sierra Leone has one of the world's worst records for recruiting children as soldiers. Between 1992 and 1996, the period of the worst fighting between the Government forces and the RUF (Revolutionary United Front), an estimated 4,500 children were forced to fight on both sides" (ReliefWeb 2001). Current estimates are difficult to calculate since the problem is so widespread. While one report states that over 3,000 child soldiers are currently living in the bush with the RUF, a Civil Defence Forces commander claims that he has the same number of youth stationed in a single district in the eastern part of the country (ReliefWeb 2001). Interestingly, Sierra Leone has an extremely high number of young females in the armed forces and militia groups. It is estimated that a third of all underage soldiers are girls (ReliefWeb 2001). Even though the level of violence has decreased since 1999 due to the efforts of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the ruinous effects of the prolonged civil war on the country's youth can still be seen. Many former child soldiers are left homeless, sick, poverty-stricken, and incapacitated due to the brutality they suffered in combat.

Sudan

Since the outbreak of civil war in Sudan nearly two decades ago, the use of child soldiers has been a common practice among government armed forces in the north, the SPLA in the south, and a host of militia groups throughout the country. Some groups have become somewhat dependent upon recruiting children for military service due to a lack of adult volunteers. In 1993, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) began a project to reunify willing underage soldiers with their families, but the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) refused to cooperate with the program and decided to retain them for combat when needed (Human Rights Watch 1995). Like other nations examined in this work, the problem is not confined to Sudan's borders, but has spilled over to neighbouring countries. A 1994 Human Rights Watch report describes how the SPLA maintained large camps of boys between 14 and 16 years of age in Ethiopia for induction into battalions known as the "Red Army" (ReliefWeb 2001). The relentless fighting has resulted in the massacre of thousands of children in combat and has caused many to flee to nearby Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. Additionally, the government supports camps in the southern part of the country that are used to train soldiers, many of them children, for a Ugandan opposition group known as the

Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Finally, both government forces and insurgent groups engage in the practice of abducting children and selling them into slavery to generate income for the purchase of weapons (Zihindula 2000).

Uganda

Uganda is currently experiencing internal conflict between government forces and several rebel groups, most notably the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the south-western part of the country and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the north. The Concerned Parents Association estimates that about 90% of LRA soldiers are abducted children and believes that the group could not operate without them (ReliefWeb 2001). This figure is somewhat startling since the group is estimated to number around 12,000. Some reports indicate that LRA members commit heinous atrocities through an initiation ritual in which children are forced to gang up and kill other children with clubs, rocks, and pieces of firewood (Taylor 2001). Males between the ages of 12 and 16 are often targeted for abduction, but females are taken as well and are often forced to be "sex slaves" and wives for high-ranking officials. As previously mentioned, the group is known to have training camps for these abducted children in southern Sudan.

The LRA, however, is not the only organisation guilty of using child soldiers in combat. The ADF has also engaged in kidnapping young individuals from local schools and communities, especially in the south-western part of the country. For instance, on 19 February 1998, the group abducted 30 girls and three boys from a secondary school outside Fort Portal (ReliefWeb 2001). Finally, the effects of the crisis in Uganda do not seem to differ drastically from those of other African nations that have been plagued with the same problem. The country's youth has been left homeless, psychologically and physically scarred, and poverty-stricken, while the dilemma continues to spread into neighbouring states.

International Efforts to Alleviate the Crisis

The international community has made several attempts in recent years to alleviate the problem of child soldiers on the African continent. Numerous global and regional conferences have been held with the intention of initiating concrete measures that would discourage the use of children in combat. In 1999, the Security Council of the United Nations even passed a resolution condemning the practice. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned efforts have had limited success and the recruitment of underage soldiers continues to pose a major challenge to the political, economic, and social development of many African countries. Let us briefly examine some of these most recent initiatives.

Maputo Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers

In April 1999, over 250 representatives from more than 50 nations worldwide met for a four-day conference in Maputo, Mozambique, to address the problem of child soldiers on the African continent. The African Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers opened with a report prepared by The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, which examined the legislation and practices in each African country by both governmental forces and non-state actors. Those attending the Conference were given the chance to respond to the report and submit comments on the situation in their own

particular country and how it could be improved. These comments and suggestions have been incorporated into The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001. Throughout the four-day period, several group sessions were held that addressed important issues related to the crisis. Some of the topics included prevention of child recruitment, demobilisation and re-integration of child soldiers, preventing child recruitment by non-governmental armed groups, and legal and political aspects of the use of child soldiers (American Friends Service Committee 2001). The Conference resulted in the adoption of the Maputo Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers on 22 April 1999, which states, "The use of any child under 18 years of age by any armed force or armed group is wholly unacceptable, even where that child claims or is claimed to be a volunteer" (Maputo Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers 1999). Furthermore, the document demands:

An end to the recruitment of children and calls for the demobilisation and release of current child soldiers;

African governments to take appropriate action against any government or armed opposition group that engages in the practice;

African and international media to support all efforts to end the use of children as soldiers; and

All governments, including those outside Africa, to provide adequate assistance to implement the Declaration's tenets.

Overall, the Conference and its resulting Declaration were a success and an extremely important step in fostering international co-operation to address the issue of child soldiers on the African continent.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1261

On 25 August 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1261, which condemned the use of child soldiers by any nation. Preceding the adoption of the agreement, over 48 speakers gave testimony to the Security Council, voicing their concerns and opinions about the problem worldwide during an all-day debate. Fred Beyendeza from Uganda stated before the Council:

Nothing could be more painful to my country than the systematic abduction, torture, detention, enslavement, mutilation and killing of its children, as has been happening for 12 long years in northern and western Uganda. Terrorist groups often target defenceless women and children between 11 and 16 years of age, at times abducting younger ones of 5 to 9 years, often after massacring their parents and relatives. Violations against children should be classified as crimes against humanity.

(United Nations Press Release 1999)

One woman, Josepha Coehlo Da Cruz, described the situation in Angola:

My country was one of the many that had faced the problem of children in armed conflict for several years. Efforts by the Angolan Government to protect the children caught in the vicious circle and to alleviate their suffering had been consistently hindered by the actions of the bandits that continued to pursue the war in Angola as a means to reach their goals.

(United Nations Press Release 1999)

There is little doubt that the personal testimonies of these and other individuals from war-torn countries helped to influence the Security Council to take concrete steps to alleviate the crisis and unanimously adopt Resolution 1261.

Resolution 1261 is an important global effort to protect the rights of children in many ways. Not only does it address the problem of recruiting youth for military service, it also focuses on many aspects involving their safety, security and well being in internal conflicts and interstate wars. For instance, Article Ten urges all participants in armed conflicts to:

Take special measures to protect children, in particular girls, from rape and other forms of sexual abuse and gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict and to take into account the special needs of the girl child throughout armed conflicts and their aftermath, including in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

(United Nations Security Council Resolution 1261 1999)

Article 14 of the Resolution is particularly important because it, "Recognizes the deleterious impact of the proliferation of arms, in particular small arms, on the security of civilians, including refugees and other vulnerable populations, particularly children" (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1261 1999). It strongly urges the international community to restrict or limit small arms transfers to countries in which the problem of child soldiers is particularly acute or has the potential of becoming so in the future. Even though the overall effectiveness of Resolution 1261 has yet to be determined, it is, nevertheless, an important step in the right direction by the international community to end the use of children in combat.

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

On 20 November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 44/25 entitled Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document was an early effort by the international community to protect and preserve the fundamental humanitarian rights of all children, including the right to life, adequate health care, and freedom of expression, conscience and religion. One of its major landmarks is that it established an international standard as to what constitutes a "child". Article One of the agreement states, "A child means every human being below eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989).

As the problem of using child soldiers in combat began to attract worldwide attention and condemnation, this Resolution alone was no longer adequate. In response to the impending crisis, the General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts. Although this agreement was ratified and opened for signature on 25 May 2000, it is still not yet in force. According to Article Ten, "The present Protocol shall enter into force three months after the deposit of the tenth instrument of ratification or accession" (Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts 2000). As of December 2000, 74 nations had signed the Protocol and only three had ratified it (Commission on Human Rights 2001). Amongst those who have not is the United States. The key component of the agreement, which is laid out in Article One, prohibits the use of individuals below 18 years of age by a country's armed forces in direct combat. Current U.S. policy allows for the voluntary recruitment of 17-year-olds for military service. This conflict of interest has caused the U.S. to take a firm stance against signing the Resolution. Without U.S. support, the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child will have a difficult time being ratified and effectively implemented.

Other International Conferences

A number of international conferences have been held in recent years to address the problem of child soldiers in both Africa and around the world. Representatives from across the globe have attended these forums in order to bring unique perspectives and suggestions on how to alleviate the crisis. These gatherings have varied in size and scope. Sometimes, they have been hosted by large regional organisations, such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). On other occasions, small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been the main sponsors. Two conferences that deserve mentioning are the International Conference on War-Affected Children and the Amman Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers. Both were inspired by the African Conference on the Use of Child Soldiers held in Maputo, Mozambique, in April 1999.

In September 2000, both the Canadian Government and UNICEF hosted the International Conference on War-Affected Children. This week-long event was attended by a wide array of delegates and representatives from over 50 countries around the world. Also present were members from United Nations agencies, international organisations, and researchers from academic institutions. The purpose of this gathering was to reflect upon efforts to alleviate all forms of child suffering, including the use of child soldiers during the past decade, and to recommend actions for the future. The Conference resulted in several important reports that suggested ways in which all sectors of society, including private corporations, NGOs, foreign governments, regional organisations and the media, can work to alleviate the suffering of children affected by war.

In Amman, Jordan, over 150 delegates from over 20 different countries attended the two-day Amman Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers in April 2001. This event also examined past efforts to combat the use of child soldiers across the globe and explored recommendations for the future. It resulted in the Amman Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers, which was adopted on 10 April 2001. Like many other international agreements to halt the recruitment of child soldiers, it called for an immediate end to the use of individuals below 18 in military combat. It also urged all nations to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts.

On a final note, UNICEF plans to hold a Special Session on Children at the United Nations headquarters in New York in September 2001. During this unprecedented event, the United Nations General Assembly will meet with foreign governmental leaders, representatives from NGOs, and actual victims of war to discuss ways to alleviate child suffering throughout the world. Objectives of the Special Session include reviewing the progress made for children during the past decade and renewing commitments and pledges for specific actions in the coming decade (United Nations Special Session on Children 2001). This gathering of world leaders promises to be a major step in increasing international attention and awareness of the problem of child soldiers and encouraging concrete actions to end its practice.

Recommendations for Enhancing International Efforts

Despite the many efforts in the past decade to eliminate the scourge of child soldiers on the African continent, they have had only limited success and the problem continues to pose a major challenge for

the international community. There are many reasons, some of them extremely complex, why this has been the case. For one, not all parties agree with the principles and outcomes of particular conventions or agreements and refuse to give their support due to conflicting interests. Furthermore, those that supposedly support such initiatives do not always comply with its tenets. Some countries may want to appease and get into the "good graces" of the international community, but may stand to benefit more by using child soldiers in the short term. Finally, one of the greatest weaknesses common to all these efforts lies with the problem of enforcement. It is extremely difficult for supporters of a particular agreement to decide what actions to take against those who refuse to comply with its mandates. For example, although the U.S. refuses to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child, not too many nations are willing to challenge its stance and find it in their best political, diplomatic, and economic interests to remain silent. There are some ways, however, to enhance the effectiveness of both existing and possible future initiatives to end the use of child soldiers in Africa.

U.S. Support for the Optional Protocol

In order for the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child to be an effective tool in the fight against the use of children in combat, it must first receive the support of the United States. Current U.S. policy conflicts with the tenets of the agreement by allowing 17-year-olds to serve in the military, even though the total number of individuals falling into this category are less than one-half of one percent (Human Rights Watch 2001). If the U.S. were to sign and ratify the Protocol, other nations could follow suit without fear of displeasing the global hegemony. It is necessary, therefore, that the U.S. be persuaded to adjust its domestic military policy accordingly and support the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child so that it can soon go into effect.

Peace Agreements, Child Demobilisation, and Reintegration

Most past peace agreements in Africa have failed to consider what to do with children that have been engaged in battle once the fighting is over. As previously mentioned in this work, many Rwandan youth were forced to return to military service after hostilities ceased within the country because most secondary schools refused to accept them. It is mandatory, therefore, that any future peace agreements either between nations or governments and insurgent groups include specific measures for demobilising and reintegrating child soldiers back into society. Examples include building schools and providing an education for these war-ravaged youth, creating jobs so that they can support themselves and their families, and initiating health and psychological programs that will allow for a smoother, more effective transition back into society. The most important point to remember when considering such measures is that they must offer viable, realistic alternatives that will discourage children from returning to military service.

Limiting Small Arms Transfers

It has already been determined that a major contributor to the problem of child soldiers is the widespread availability of relatively cheap but deadly small arms on the African continent. The global community must make a commitment to ban or at least limit the sale of these weapons to countries in which the problem is serious or has the potential of becoming so in the near future. Although some agreements, such as the Maputo Declaration on Child Soldiers and United Nations Security Council

Resolution 1261, explicitly call for an end to small arms transfers to states that use child soldiers, many signatory and non-signatory nations do not comply with these tenets due to overriding economic and political interests and continue to do so underhandedly through private dealers on the black market. Currently, it is estimated that of all small arms entering the African continent, approximately 21 percent are from China, 18 percent from Russia, and 14 percent from Western European countries, including Great Britain and France (CNN World View, CNN TV 2000). Those that continue to engage in this practice must be given alternatives and incentives for not doing so by the international community. These can come in the form of increased economic assistance through subsidies, conferring "Most Favoured Nation" trading status on particular states, and fostering closer political and diplomatic ties to stop the practice of small arms sales.

Increased Attention and Awareness of the Problem

The international community should continue to hold global conferences that will generate increased attention to the problem of child soldiers in Africa. One of the key solutions to this growing dilemma lies in education and awareness. As more and more foreign governments, NGOs, academic researchers, and private companies become involved in efforts to end the suffering of children in combat, they bring with them specialised expertise and fresh, new ideas. Furthermore, large amounts of resources are necessary to sustain such undertakings and the greater the number of individuals and organisations contributing to the cause, the better. Finally, a determined, cohesive body of diverse participants might eventually be able to bring pressure upon those who engage in the use of child soldiers on the African continent to refrain from the practice. UNICEF's upcoming Special Session on Children is an important step in the right direction to further increase global awareness of the problem and encourage participation in resolving it.

Conclusion

Even though the inhumane use of children in violent conflict continues to result in much suffering and devastation to many African nations, efforts to stop the crisis are more determined than ever. International awareness of the problem and its causes is constantly increasing and there seems to be a growing consensus that something must be done before it is too late. Recently, there have been some hopeful signs that the global community's past efforts have not been in vain. In February 2001, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) demobilised nearly 2,500 child soldiers from combat zones in southern Sudan (Mwangi 2001:11). Additionally, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone released nearly 600 children in May 2001 (Farah 2001:A20). Despite these positive developments, much work still remains to ensure that children throughout Africa have a promising future. The U.S. must fully support all efforts to limit the transfer of small arms to the African continent and prevent recruitment of children for military service under 18 years of age. Only then can an international consensus be achieved and strong measures be taken to eliminate the use of child soldiers from the African continent.

Notes

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1. It must be noted that the term "voluntary" should be viewed with some skepticism since political, economic, and social considerations often determine the choices that children have in situations of violent conflict. Instead, it may be better to think of "voluntary" as "not coerced".

2. These comments and suggestions have been incorporated into The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001.

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