

FACTSHEET: CHILD SOLDIERS

The facts

It is estimated that some 300,000 children – boys and girls under the age of 18 – are today involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. Children are used as combatants, messengers, porters and cooks and for forced sexual services. Some are abducted or forcibly recruited, others are driven to join by poverty, abuse and discrimination, or to seek revenge for violence enacted against them or their families.

Children are more likely to become child soldiers if they are separated from their families, displaced from their homes, living in combat zones or have limited access to education. Children may join armed groups as the only way to guarantee daily food and survival.

In some situations, the involvement of children in conflicts as soldiers may even be accepted or encouraged. Children may ‘voluntarily’ take part in warfare, not realizing the dangers and abuses they will be subjected to. Most likely these children are responding to economic, cultural, social and political pressures.

The particular situation of girls in conflicts continues to require further attention. The potential risk of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation of children and women increase during armed conflicts, and specific measures must be taken to ensure their security and to strengthen their decision-making abilities. Still, in many instances, programmes to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers fail to identify appropriate strategies for gaining access to these girls and young women. Ways must also be found to address the needs of girls abducted during war to serve as sexual slaves and who may have no alternative to remaining under the custody of their abductors.

Building a protective environment for children

Ending the use of child soldiers can be extremely challenging, particularly when children are enlisted for combat by armed, non-governmental groups. In addition, modern conflicts are characterized by governmental breakdown, making it difficult to identify and influence those recruiting and using children as soldiers.

Elements already in place

Legislation: In 2002 the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict entered into force. It outlaws the involvement of children under age 18 in hostilities, raising the previous standard of age (15 years) set by the Convention and the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols. As well as requiring States to raise the age for compulsory recruitment and direct participation in conflict to 18, the Optional Protocol requires State parties to raise the minimum age for voluntary recruitment beyond the current minimum of 15.

Another milestone was set in July 2002 when the Statute of the International Criminal Court entered into force, making the conscription, enlistment or use of children under 15 in hostilities by national armed forces or armed groups a war crime.

Monitoring: Violations of the laws of war that affect children need to be properly monitored and reported, so that perpetrators can be held accountable before tribunals or other truth and reconciliation mechanisms. This applies to the recruitment and use of children as soldiers, particularly in light of the provision in the Statute of the International Criminal Court. Adequate monitoring will also promote better understanding of and data on the numbers and situation of child soldiers.

Capacity: During conflict, the capacity of families and communities to protect and care for children is undermined. Nonetheless, their efforts to ensure that their children do not become involved in violence are important and must be supported. The protection of children by families and communities is the frontline in the war against recruiting children into armed groups. Capacity also involves focusing efforts and resources on the most underserved regions and population groups, including displaced populations, to guarantee equal access to quality services, in particular education.

UNICEF's response

Attitudes, customs and behaviours, and practices: A protective environment for demobilized child soldiers must include strategies to prevent their re-recruitment. It should also lay the groundwork for the eventual return to their families and communities.

Governmental and non-governmental commitment: This includes advocacy on behalf of children at the international, national and community level. This could include, for example, promoting ratification of the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and advocating for national law reform and sensitization campaigns. It could also mean engaging in dialogue with non-governmental armed groups to uphold international standards for child protection and securing their commitment to end the recruitment and use of children in hostilities.

Children's life skills and participation: Giving children a voice – and listening to them – will allow children to have a say in their own protection and in the life of their community and country.

Services for victims of abuse: This includes providing protection to former child soldiers during demobilization and social reintegration programmes (education and vocational training) and providing psychosocial support (peer-to peer support, community-based support and psychosocial counselling). It also means promoting family reunification as a key factor for social reintegration and ensuring follow-up care for demobilized children, focusing on long-term social reintegration.

UNICEF in action

Since the mid-1980s, UNICEF has played a key role in advocating and securing the release of children from armed forces and other combatant groups in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. UNICEF and its NGO partners have also provided care, technical guidance and, at

times, financial support for the successful implementation of national programmes for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

In **Angola**, following the signing of a ceasefire agreement in April 2002, a wide process of demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants was initiated. However, an estimated 8,000 children recruited during the civil war were released without going through a formal demobilization exercise. UNICEF is now working to build support for their reintegration into communities, in particular to provide them with health care and schooling. Current initiatives include setting-up child-friendly spaces in demobilization camps, and providing psychosocial counselling and appropriate education and vocational training opportunities.

In the **Great Lakes region of Africa**, UNICEF is working in partnership with the World Bank, other UN agencies, donor governments and the countries concerned to develop a multi-country demobilization and reintegration programme for combatants, including former child soldiers. In Rwanda, UNICEF has worked alongside Save the Children and the International Committee of the Red Cross for the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers following rebel incursions in May and June of 2001 in the Gisenyi and Ruhengeri Provinces. Over 2,000 rebels were either captured by or surrendered to the Rwandan Patriotic Army. Among them were more than 350 children who had been forcibly recruited by rebel forces. All these children and a small number of others who returned to the country afterwards benefited from a transitional period in a rehabilitation centre and reintegration back into their communities of origin.

In **Sierra Leone**, UNICEF was the lead agency for child protection during the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process for child soldiers from 1998 to 2002. Demobilized children were transferred to interim care centres supported by UNICEF where they were provided with health care and psychosocial counselling. They also participated in educational and recreational activities while family tracing and reunification was in progress. Almost all of 6,800 former child soldiers who have been demobilized since October 1999 are now reunited with their families. Access to education and family- and community-support programmes has been key to their successful reintegration.

Since the ceasefire agreement in **Sri Lanka** in February 2002, a significant decrease in child recruitment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been reported, and a number of children have been released and returned to their families. UNICEF is now working with LTTE to help develop an action plan for the social reintegration of children still with them, including providing assistance for returning the children to school and accessing vocational training, as called for in the peace negotiations. UNICEF and the LTTE have also agreed to develop procedures for monitoring and preventing child recruitment in the future.

In southern **Sudan**, more than 3,500 child soldiers were demobilized in phase one of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, which began in February 2001. These children are receiving reintegration support through community centres. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army has continued to demobilize child soldiers, with UNICEF assistance, since October 2001.

Data is being collected on abducted children in **Uganda**, as a tool to advocate for the release of child soldiers. The registration of abducted persons started in 1997, following the intensification of abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. The main purpose of the registration exercise is to support international and national

advocacy for an end to abductions and for the return of abducted children. The data also supports the implementation of tracing and reunification, as well as psychosocial support and advocacy activities.

Definition

For the purposes of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, UNICEF defines a 'child soldier' as any child – boy or girl – under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried, weapons. (Based on the 'Cape Town Principles', 1997)