

THE FACTS ABOUT CHILD SOLDIERS

"I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me, saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying."

— Mary, a 16-year-old demobilized child soldier forced to join an armed rebel group in Central Africa

A Global Problem

Child soldiering is a unique and severe manifestation of trafficking in persons that involves the recruitment of children through force, fraud, or coercion to be exploited for their labor or to be abused as sex slaves in conflict areas. Government forces, paramilitary organizations, and rebel groups all recruit and utilize child soldiers. UNICEF estimates that more than 300,000 children under 18 are currently being exploited in over 30 armed conflicts worldwide. While the majority of child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, some are as young as 7 or 8 years of age.*

Many children are abducted to be used as combatants. Others are made to serve as porters, cooks, guards, servants, messengers, or spies. Many young girls are forced to marry or perform sexual services for male combatants. Male and female child soldiers are often sexually abused, and are vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Young females are at high risk of unwanted pregnancies.

Some children have been forced to commit atrocities against their families and communities. Child soldiers are often killed or wounded, with survivors suffering multiple traumas and psychological scarring. Their personal development is often irreparably damaged. Returning child soldiers are often rejected by their home communities.

Child soldiers are a global phenomenon. The problem is most critical in Africa and Asia, but armed groups in the Americas, Eurasia, and the Middle East also use children. All nations must work together with international organizations and NGOs to take urgent action to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate child soldiers.



A child soldier victim in northern Uganda.

What the United States Is Doing

- The Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* assesses foreign government actions to combat trafficking, including protecting child soldier victims.
- In FY 2004, the United States Government spent more than \$81 million on anti-trafficking efforts abroad. For example:
 - ◆ USAID is funding a program to rehabilitate children who were abducted and trafficked by a terrorist organization to bases in southern Sudan and northern Uganda, and to protect children who travel on foot nightly from villages into towns to avoid abduction.
 - ◆ In Afghanistan, the Department of Labor is funding a program that has demobilized nearly 4,000 child soldiers and enrolled them in education and counseling programs.
 - ◆ In the past three years, the Department of State's Bureau of African Affairs funded programs in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia for reintegrating former child combatants.
- In 1999, the United States ratified International Labor Organization Convention 182, which recognizes the "forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict" as one of the worst forms of child labor.
- In December 2002, the United States ratified the UN Optional Protocol on the Use of Children in Armed Conflict that makes the minimum compulsory recruitment age 18.

* UNICEF, "Fact Sheet: Child Soldiers" <http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/childsoldiers.pdf>