

# Children Associated with Armed Groups

A 'child soldier' is any person 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, combatants, cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. Some boys and girls might have been abducted or forcibly recruited; others have been driven to join by poverty, abuse and discrimination, societal or peer pressure, or to seek revenge for violence against them or their families.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- Latest estimates suggest that more than 250,000 children are currently serving as child soldiers.<sup>1</sup>
- In Colombia, an estimated 14,000 girls and boys were used as child soldiers<sup>2</sup> by illegal armed groups.
- In Somalia, an estimated 200,000 children have carried a gun or been involved with a militia since the 1991 collapse of central government.
- In Sudan, in March 2004, an estimated 17,000 children were associated with armed forces and groups.

## BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

### Government commitment and capacity

Advocacy is required on all levels, including promotion of ratification of the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, reform of national laws and awareness-raising campaigns. In times of armed conflict, effective control often lies with non-State entities or armed groups, and it is essential that they respect standards of international law in the same way as governmental actors, including the ban of recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Several provisions of international law

### HUMAN RIGHTS

The **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict** (2000) raises the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities from 15 to 18 (Article 1) and prohibits conscription or forced recruitment below the age of 18 (Article 2). The **Statute of the International Criminal Court** (1998) makes it a war crime to conscript or enlist children under 15 into national armed forces or to use them to participate actively in hostilities in international and internal armed conflicts.

The **International Labour Organization's Convention No. 182** (1999) defines the forced and compulsory recruitment of children as a worst form of child labour, which it prohibits.

address non-State entities, including the Optional Protocol, which holds them to higher standards than governments.

### Legislation and enforcement

International treaties must be respected, implemented and enforced by governmental and non-governmental actors involved in armed conflict.

### Attitudes, customs and practices

When these encourage or tolerate the involvement of children in conflict, changes are needed to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment of children, and to support their return to their families and communities.

### Open discussion

Dialogue about the stigmatization of former child soldiers is often the preliminary step towards family reunification and community reintegration. The media can increase awareness but should be careful not to hamper the chances of former child soldiers for successful reintegration (for example, when reporting on prevalence rates of HIV, real or presumed, among demobilized children). Community

mediation can be essential for family reunification and the reintegration process.

### **Children's life skills, knowledge and participation**

Once children are recruited into conflict there is little they can do to protect themselves. Young people's discussion groups can make them more aware of their rights, and former 'child soldiers' can share their experiences to sensitize their peers. This helps strengthen children's voices so their opinions are considered in efforts to prevent their recruitment and ensure their demobilization and reintegration. Children and women should be involved in the planning and implementation of demobilization and reintegration processes to avoid a bias against children in general and young women in particular, who may not be considered real soldiers.

### **Capacity of families and communities**

Capacities must be built to help families and communities ensure that their children do not become involved with armed forces during conflict. Family reunification at the earliest opportunity is a key factor for social reintegration. Follow-up care for demobilized children, focusing on long-term social reintegration for all war-affected children in a community and embracing the community rather than the child in isolation, is essential.

### **Essential services, including prevention, recovery and reintegration**

Former child soldiers should be protected during demobilization and social reintegration

#### **MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

Failing to protect children from use by armed groups will impede the achievement of at least three of the Millennium Development Goals: universal primary education (MDG 2) as child soldiers often miss out on schooling, reducing child mortality (MDG 4) as children involved in armed conflict often have no access to health care and are exposed to life-threatening situations, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6) as children in armed groups are subject to sexual abuse and exploitation.

programmes – including family tracing, HIV/AIDS education, counselling, education and vocational training. Psychosocial support, such as counselling, peer-to peer support or community-based support, is important. Reintegration programmes need to build on existing resources, supporting local schools, vocational training facilities and health care systems.

### **Monitoring, reporting and oversight**

Violations of the laws of war need to be reported, so that perpetrators can be held accountable before tribunals or through other truth and reconciliation mechanisms. Adequate monitoring will provide better data on the numbers of child soldiers and the conditions they are living in. The implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005), calling for monitoring and reporting of egregious child rights abuses in conflict areas, is crucial.

## **EXAMPLES OF UNICEF IN ACTION**

In **Colombia**, UNICEF works with the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare to assist demobilized children and adolescents, providing them with health and psychosocial care, education for life and work, and legal support, and preparing them for reintegration into their families and communities. Between November 1999 and October 2005, more than 2,500 children benefited from this programme.

In **Sri Lanka**, UNICEF has established a monitoring and reporting system for child recruitment into the armed forces and uses the database to help target advocacy to seek their release. In addition, released child soldiers were provided with catch-up education or vocational training, and families were given micro-credit loans.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Otunnu, Olara A., 'Era of Application: Instituting a compliance and enforcement regime for CAAC', Statement before the Security Council, New York, 23 February 2005, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Country figures are taken from Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldier Global Report 2004*, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, London, 2004.

For further information please contact:  
The Child Protection Section  
Programme Division UNICEF NY  
childprotection@unicef.org  
www.unicef.org