

## GIRLS WITH GUNS : AN AGENDA ON CHILD SOLDIERS FOR "BEIJING PLUS FIVE"

*"I've seen people get their hands cut off, a ten-year-old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive . . . So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn't dare cry out loud." A fourteen-year-old girl, abducted in January 1999 by the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel group in Sierra Leone.*

*"I'm not afraid. We are prepared to fight. We don't do the cooking here, we fight with our friends". 'Koshe', nom de guerre of a 14 year old girl, fighting with the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998-9*

*"I didn't shout out because he is a sergeant and a higher rank. You don't disrespect your boss". – a 17-year-old British army recruit raped by her instructor in 1997.*

*During a battle at Ampakamam in the north of Sri Lanka in October 1999, 49 children, were among the 140 LTTE cadres killed. They included 32 girls aged between 11 and 15.*

*"At the age of 13, I joined the student movement. I had a dream to contribute to make things change, so that children would not be hungry, later I joined the armed struggle. I had all the inexperience and the fears of a little girl. I found that girls were obliged to have sexual relations 'to alleviate the sadness of the combatants'. And who alleviated our sadness after going with someone we hardly knew"- girl soldier from Honduras quoted in Machel study on the impact of armed conflict on children*

These are the voices of girls who have experienced the most extreme violations of their human rights and distortion of their personal and physical development. They are girl soldiers, among the 300,000 children under the age of 18 who today are fighting in armed conflicts in more than thirty countries of the world. The Beijing Declaration recognised the effects of armed conflict on women and girl children, as a critical area of concern, and the Platform of Action included specific objectives for their protection and participation. But scant attention was paid to this particularly vulnerable group, often invisible victims obscured by the dominant image of "boys with guns". Five years on, as governments, international agencies and NGOs, meet to review the progress made in fulfilling the commitments made at Beijing, the use of girl children as soldiers is an issue that should be given priority attention.

### A global problem

The use of children as soldiers has become a common feature of armed conflicts in every region of the world. In case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia, and Uganda, it was found that reportedly a third of child soldiers were girls. While girl soldiers are most commonly used by armed opposition groups, in many places they are also recruited – voluntarily or forcibly – into government armed forces.

Not all children end up in the front line – many are used as spies and porters, as 'safe' carriers for bombs and even sexual slaves. Their involvement puts other children at risk as everyone becomes an object of suspicion and a potential target. Many suffer physical abuse and other privations – in extreme cases, child soldiers are driven to suicide or murder when they cannot bear the mistreatment any longer.

While child soldiers are often forcibly recruited, often it is poverty, propaganda and alienation that drives them into armies, paramilitaries and militias. Many join armed groups because of they have experienced abuses against their families and communities by the state security forces. Research has shown that the overwhelming majority in almost every armed conflict are drawn from the poorest, least educated and most marginalised sections of society. Those separated from their families or with disrupted family backgrounds, particularly among refugees and the displaced, are especially at risk. The same factors that make girls vulnerable

to other forms of child abuse and exploitation also lead them into child soldiering – hence the need for common strategies for prevention and protection.

The following examples are by no means an exhaustive list, but highlight the global dimensions of this problem:

In northern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army has systematically abducted thousands of children, including many girls, over many years. One 16 year old, Susan, told of her experience: "One boy tried to escape, but he was caught... His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, "Why are you doing this?" I said I had no choice. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms... They said we had to do this so we would not fear death and so we would not try to escape. . . I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me and saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying."

In 1997, a 14-year-old girl was one of several female guerrillas taken prisoner by the Turkish army during an offensive in Turkey's Cudi mountains. She explained that she joined the PKK the previous year and that she received political and military training at a PKK camp in northern Iraq. She was a Syrian national. In 1998, 300 children, more than 10 per cent of the PKK's total number of child soldiers, were said to be girls.

In Sri Lanka, young Tamil girls, often orphans, have been systematically recruited by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since the mid-1980s. The LTTE has claimed that this is its way of "assisting women's liberation and counteracting the oppressive traditionalism of the present system." The Sri Lankan military believes that half of the LTTE troops are women who are called 'Birds of Freedom' by their fellow rebels. Many of them have been recruited as children and are chosen from ages as young as 10 to become suicide bombers. The former military commander in the Tamil city of Jaffna said that the LTTE "first use the girls as spies and constantly tell them they are doing a great service for the homeland cause, " The attention they get makes their tender hearts feel very good, and then the indoctrination starts" they are shown video films and are constantly fed with stories of how Tamils are oppressed and killed." He added that women are deliberately chosen as suicide bombers because they may not undergo as close a body search as men at checkpoints.

In the northeastern state of Manipur in India, there are reportedly 900 to 1,000 girl soldiers fighting with armed groups, approximately 6-7 per cent of child soldiers. In Nepal, Maoist insurgents fighting a 'people's war' have been quite open about their use of children including girls, declaring that: "the increasing participation of women in the People's War has had another bonanza for the revolutionary cause. That is the drawing of children into the process of war and their politicisation." They describe a "large scale rebellion of young girls mostly high school and college girls, from their patrimonial households to join the People's War have been a common occurrence..." A group of young girls from a women's college in the capital city of Kathmandu are reported to have left a joint letter to their parents and proceeded to join the People's War.

In Colombia, armed groups have routinely used children as soldiers, including young girls. In 1997, a former hostage held by the FARC's 36th Front reported that she had been guarded by a girl of 15. Colombian state security forces have in the past also used large numbers of boys as soldiers and, reportedly, girls in auxiliary roles. On 13 June 1998, the UC-ELN abducted 15 females, among them 5 girls, who belonged to the army 14th Brigade's 'Steel Girls' program in Antioquia. It was claimed that the girls were uniformed, armed and used for intelligence gathering.

According to official statistics from 1 July 1998, there were 57 16-year-old girls and 632 17-year-old girls in the armed forces among a total of 5,528 minors in the British armed forces.

In 1998, 2,303 17 year old girls were among 10,606 minors enlisted into active duty in the US armed forces (18 per cent of total). Females make up approximately 24 per cent of the 14,743 minors recruited into the reserves. In Australia, there were 925 child soldiers within the armed forces at the end of 1997, 18 per cent of whom were girls. Ironically, the same governments which argue that they need to recruit under 18s to maintain force levels often discriminate against adult women by excluding them from particular combat-related roles. Women are currently excluded from around one third of posts in the British armed forces, an issue currently under review.

#### Sexual harassment, ill-treatment and abuse

In addition to participating in combat, girl soldiers are often required to perform sexual services. In some cases, girls are in fact primarily recruited or abducted as 'wives' or concubines. In situations like Sierra Leone, babies are sometimes drugged into sleep while their young mothers perform their military duties or even carried into battle. Such abuse also leads to a high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, the dangers of pregnancy and/or abortion and associated complications. Adolescent girl soldiers frequently suffer from loss of menstruation brought on by malnutrition and trauma. These girls' experience pose additional challenges for their rehabilitation and reintegration into civilian society.

Even in the most sophisticated armed forces, power relationships make children especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse. In August 1997, a 17-year-old recruit to the British Army was forced to perform a sex act and raped by a drunken instructor while she was on manoeuvres. She told the judge that she "didn't shout out because he is a sergeant and a higher rank. You don't disrespect your boss". The instructor was jailed for seven years in November 1998.

Similar incidents have come to light in the United States. A 1997 investigation by TIME magazine estimated that up to 15 per cent of male recruiters sexually harass females considering recruitment. At one station investigated by the magazine, three recruiters were found to be dating prospective recruits, as well as candidates who had committed to enlist but not yet reported for duty. In 1998 and 1999, three US Army recruiters in Washington State were each investigated for sexual harassment of high school girls. In one incident in January 1998, one recruiter reportedly took a 17-year-old Delayed Entry Program recruit to a park, forced her to put her hand on his crotch and asked her to have sex. He then reportedly refused to take the student home for several hours, driving her to several different locations. A subsequent Army investigation found a second recruiter, the sergeant in charge of the recruiting station, had improper relations with female students and recommended his removal from duty. In May 1999, a third recruiter from the same recruiting station was accused of picking up a 16-year-old female student on her way to school, taking her to her house and asking to have sex with her. In August 1999, the school superintendent acted to ban the Army from recruiting at schools in the district.

In 1998, a damning report was released about sexual abuse and harassment in the Canadian military, in which many young women spoke out. In May 2000, another very critical report on conditions for abused spouses was also released.

#### Towards a global ban on the use of child soldiers

Since the Beijing Conference, there have been important developments in international law governing the use of children as soldiers:

the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child., which sets 18 as the age for all recruitment and participation, acquired the requisite number of ratifications to bring it into force.

the statute for the new International Criminal Court defined the conscription or enlistment of under 15s or their use in hostilities as a war crime and crime against humanity, applying to government armed forces and non state actors alike

the new ILO Convention 182 included forced and compulsory recruitment under 18 among the worst forms of child labour

the UN Security Council, in its first ever thematic debate on a subject of this kind, passed UNSC Resolution 1261 in August 1999, calling on the international community to give concerted attention to this problem

the use of children as soldiers has been condemned in a number of country and thematic resolutions passed by the UN Commission on Human Rights

Most significantly, after years of negotiation, the UN General Assembly last month adopted a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The Optional Protocol, which is now open for signature:

sets 18 as a minimum age for participation in armed conflict;

bans forced recruitment and conscription under 18;

requires states to raise their minimum age for voluntary recruitment to at least 16 and preferably 18;

prevents states unilaterally lowering their military recruitment age;

requires specific safeguards for voluntary recruitment, such as proof of age and parental consent;

calls on non state actors to stop all recruitment and use of children under 18.

Recommendations for Beijing plus five

The Beijing Conference declared that "the girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded". It also recognised the special role that women, properly empowered, can play in the promotion and safeguarding of peace. The Conference and its Platform of Action paid insufficient attention, however, to this darker side of the experience of women and girl children in conflict – in which they become not only targets but weapons of war.

It is time to bring the special needs of child soldiers squarely within the women's rights and development agenda. The Beijing plus Five meeting should include specific reference and recommendations on the issue of child soldiers, including girls, in its declarations and outcome documents, in particular:

Endorse the new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children and Armed Conflict;

Call upon UN member states to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol without reservations, implement it in national law, and set 18 as the minimum age for all forms of military recruitment;

Call upon UN member states to ratify the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Ottawa Treaty on landmines, and ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour;

Call on member states of the Organisation of African Unity which are not yet parties to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child to ratify this instrument, and encourage other regional bodies to adopt similar standards;

Call on governments and armed groups to demobilise any children under 18, including girls, in their armed forces, and to prohibit and prevent any further such recruitment;

Call upon states recruiting girls to review their policies, including in relation to discrimination in the armed forces;

Establish independent, effective and accessible mechanisms to address problems of sexual harassment, ill-treatment and abuse in military forces;

Call for the demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers to be included in all peace agreements and post-conflict reconstruction programs;

Ensure that girls are not discriminated against in demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programs (often they are classified as dependents or camp followers)

Urge international donor support and assistance for government and NGO efforts to prevent this abuse and provide protection and redress to those children affected.

© Coalition to stop the use of Child Soldiers