RAWLINGS CALLS FOR JOINT ACTION AGAINST CHILD SOLDIERS

Accra: Ghana's President Jerry John Rawlings urged West African countries to be among the first to ratify the Optional Protocol on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, raising the minimum age for recruitment and participation in a justifiable combat from 15 years to 18 years. He was speaking at a conference on War-Affected Children in West Africa concluded recently.

"We can indeed set an example for the rest of the world and help to gain global momentum behind this critically important protocol," Rawlings added.

The speakers declared the use of children as combatants in conflicts as inhumane and unacceptable. They urged governments, civil society, and the international community to commit financial and technical resources to end the practice.

Over 130 participants, including representatives of 110 NGOs working for children's welfare, representatives of donor groups and UN organisations, attended the conference organised by Canadian International Development Agency.

Over 300,000 children under 18 years were fighting with government and anti-government forces across the world. About 120,000 of such child soldiers are used across Africa. 16,000 Liberian and 6,000 Sierra Leonean children were forcibly conscripted. Children make good soldiers, as they are young and want to show that they are brave. A majority of these child-soldiers were most times subjected to alcohol or drug-use.

Napoleon Abdulai from UN Centre for Peace and Disarmament also condemned such practices, saying that the destruction of the future of child soldiers has serious repercussions for the future of Africa. He recounted the ordeal of some child soldiers in Liberia who were forced to have sex with dead women.

"We have a number of UN conventions, African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights and declarations, but these are paper tigers. We need to make them real tigers to frighten people who plan conflicts by enforcing them," he added.

It was also felt that the sub-region could add its weight to the ratification of the statute establishing the International Criminal Court, which would have the power to adjudicate on those who perpetrate the crime of utilising child soldiers.

It was recognised that the enrolment of children into illegal armed conflicts deprives them of education, training and culture, and prevents them from being
useful to their countries and as such child protection and investment in their favour must be at the centre of any new development strategy.

# # #

(From the files of Ghanaian Chronicle)