UN Secretary-General Pledges to “Stamp Out” Use of Child Soldiers

Top UN Officials, 46 governments participate in Red Hand Day Campaign Ceremony

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Yesterday UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the forced recruitment and use of child soldiers as "one of the most appalling human rights abuses in the world today," and stated that "the entire United Nations system and I are determined to stamp out such abuse."

At a ceremony in New York, the Secretary-General accepted a book of "red hands" created by youth from around the world as part of a year-long international Red Hand Day Campaign. Over 250,000 symbolic "red hands" were created during the campaign as an appeal to world leaders to take stronger action to end the use of child soldiers. Yesterday's ceremony took place on the 7th anniversary of the entry into force of the UN treaty banning the use of children in hostilities, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

Four young people, including two former child soldiers, presented the red hands to the Secretary-General on behalf of the campaign. Madeleine, 18, a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of Congo, said, "I am asking everyone here to help punish the leaders who recruit children, to help local communities say "no" to the use of child soldiers, and to give child soldiers the support they need to change their lives."

"The Red Hand Day campaign shows that people all over the world are against the use of child soldiers and want to act," said Julia Price, a 17-year old student activist from Los Angeles. "We are asking the leaders here today to use their influence to pressure every country to uphold international standards and to advocate on behalf of child soldiers."

The Secretary-General commended the "impressive efforts" of the young people who participated in the campaign, and said that the recruitment and use of children in warfare "violates our most basic standards of human dignity."

"We must not rest," said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "until all children who have been recruited or used in violation of international law have been released, and until all children feel safe in their homes, schools and communities, without fear that they will be forced into war."
Other UN officials who made statements at the ceremony included Ann Veneman, the executive director of UNICEF; Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict; and Claude Heller, the ambassador of Mexico to the United Nations and the chair of the Security Council’s working group on children and armed conflict.

Representatives from 46 governments took part in the event. At the close of the ceremony, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Ms. Veneman, Ms. Coomaraswamy and many of the government delegates signed "red hands" to indicate their support of the Red Hand Day Campaign.