

CHILD SOLDIER IN AFRICA

Op-ED

By: Evis Karfa



“A child soldier has been defined as any person under 18 years of age who forms part of an armed force in any capacity, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members, as well as girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.”¹

“For the purposes of this Convention, the term “the worst forms of child labour” comprises: a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict [...].”²

These two paragraphs are an example of the large number of international conventions that address the issue of child soldier. UNICEF estimates 300,000 child soldiers in 30 countries³. The number might not look that impressive to some but the detrimental long term effects on societies that are trying to rebuild themselves are devastating.

Children get recruited, usually by force, by militant groups that are pro or against a particular government. The age of child soldiers varies but the earliest age that has been documented is four years old and this was among the ranks of the Ugandan National Resistance Army in 1986⁴. The children that are unable to carry a gun participate in other duties such as scouts, porters, sex slaves or “wives”, cooks and so on.

The recruitment and training of children involves a lot of brutality and torture, which they experience but are also forced to see it and even commit it on a daily bases. Alcohol and drugs are regularly used on children to bust their confidence and make them more aggressive while

¹ Secretary General of the United Nations, Report to the Security Council, S/2000/101, 11 February 2000.

² International Labour Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999, Article 3.

³ UNICEF. UNICEF Fact Sheet 2007: Child Soldier. <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>. Accessed on April 4, 2011.

⁴ Verhey, Beth. Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating. Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23. World Bank. November 2001.

less sensitive to the human suffering of others. The reason why children get recruited and involved in civil wars is due to their young age - easily to scare and mold them into anybody.

Africa is a continent where child soldier is widespread. The violent conflicts in this continent tend to take years and decades to be resolved – an environment and time that molds the psychology and social skills of children involved for the rest of their lives. This situation creates victims from both sides – on one side the civilians get tortured and killed; on the other, perpetuating and witnessing torture and murder destroys the human soul of the children involved in such actions.

Child soldier is not just a matter of age. It is a matter of destroying the social and moral fabric that keeps a society together. If the women get tortured and raped systematically, if the men get tortured and killed continuously and if the children are not spared any of such tortures and even forced to participate in them, what does the future hold for communities and nations whose people have been brutalized emotionally and physically? Questions like this become more difficult to answer to when we talk about development and peace in practice.

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social integration of a child victim of [...] armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.”⁵

In practice, this international convention article is translated into prevention, demobilization and reintegration of children. In prevention, advocacy is being used as the primary tool to raise awareness of the issue through media and monitoring and documenting child rights abuses⁶. Demobilization is another step that refers to child soldiers leaving the army and integrating into civil society. This process can last a long time pending family tracing and it is very difficult. During this time, trauma interventions are needed for the children. The last process is reintegration of children into their communities. An issue that is important here is that the cultural traditions play a very important role. Because of the civil war and the crimes that come with it, it takes a lot of trust and time for the children and their families and communities to re-learn to live together again. Many African cultures have cleansing ceremonies where children can be cleaned from the actions of the past and restart a new life⁷. These ceremonies are very important because they restore trust on both sides. The reintegration process is important to happen according to the moral code and traditions of the communities involved. It is also important to note that all policies and practices need to be gender sensitive. Girls that have been raped and bore children face another level of difficulties, which need to be addressed.

However, the reintegration process of child soldiers cannot be successful in the long run if the youth in Africa is not seen as an important political force. In pastoral societies in Africa, the

⁵ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1990, Article 39.

⁶ Verhey, Beth. *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*. Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23. World Bank. November 2001

⁷ Verhey, Beth. *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilizing and Reintegrating*. Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23. World Bank. November 2001

age system is often used to regulate the interaction of people inside communities⁸. What this means is that youth is expected to defer to elders who are seen as leaders. Even in the formal political arena, there is not much of mobility of people in the government or in leadership. Consequently, being young in Africa means being disadvantaged and marginalized in the political, social and economic life⁹. When power and resources get monopolized by the political elite, young people get involved in opposition movements that often turn violent. Lack of opportunities and not being in control of ones life creates a vicious cycle where a society probably will not be able to prevent another civil war. Building democratic governance and transparent procedures that value merit rather than nepotism and patronage will create mobility in politics and economy, where the youth can get involved and participate based on their education level, skills and merits. This would be the direct solution to the heart-breaking child soldier phenomenon.

⁸ Abbink, Jon. 2005. Vanguard or vandals: youth, politics and conflict in Africa. Chapter 1: Being young in Africa: the politics of despair and renewal. Boston: Brill, Leiden.

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