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Child soldiers being actively recruited as frontline fodder in at least 13 countries

Ten years after international guidelines were established to stamp out the recruitment and use of child soldiers, under-age fighters are still actively being recruited in at least 13 countries.

Fighting forces are recruiting and using child soldiers within Afghanistan, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Nepal, Phillipines, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. Government forces are also implicated in countries such as Southern Sudan, where the SPLA is re-recruiting children who have already been released from their own ranks.

* In Uganda 1,500 children are still held by the Lords Resistance Army. Another 10,000 children associated with the LRA are still unaccounted for.

* In Sri Lanka, at least 5,000 children have been recruited since 2001. Despite the ceasefire signed in 2002, the threat of re-recruitment is once again so strong that parents are afraid to let children leave the house.

* An estimated 11,000 children are currently involved with militias in DRC.

* Children as young as eight are being recruited by the government army of Southern Sudan.

* Around 75% of former girl soldiers in Liberia reported having suffered sexual abuse or exploitation.

* In 2005 over 8,000 children were still fighting in West Africa, with another 20,000 in the process of or waiting to be released.

Despite the fact that the Cape Town Principles, guidelines to eradicate the use of child soldiers and protect those released, were established by the international community in 1997, the situation is still dire. Hundreds of thousands of children are still living in misery due to association with armed groups and forces.

Child soldiers are subjected to brutal intimidation, often forced to commit atrocities as military 'training', and then used on the frontline. Whether violently abducted, coerced into signing up or 'volunteering' because they have no safe alternative, they get no access to school or healthcare and are exposed to abuse and exploitation. Girls taken to become army 'wives' are often subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. When released, ex-child soldiers are frequently rejected by society, refused access to school, and find it impossible to re-enter 'normal' life after so long immersed in violence. Girls as young as 12 have to deal with rape, and care for babies in isolation without any support from the community.

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Bisimwa, 14, Democratic Republic Congo

"When I went to war it wasn't a good life because I carried guns. I don't know how many people I killed. Some of my friends died. I left the armed group because I was about to die of cold. Here we suffer too much."

On February 5, the international community has a crucial chance to improve the lives of all children associated with armed groups when they meet in Paris to establish new guidelines - the Paris Principles - to help eradicate the use of child soldiers.

Margaret Douglas, Chief Executive, Save the Children Australia: "Being recruited by armed forces has a devastating effect on children's lives. They are immersed in violence, are subject to terrible abuse and are forced to forfeit love, play, education and hope. It is inconceivable that ten years after international guidelines were set up to protect children from recruitment, so many are still being horrifically exploited. Children can't wait. Governments and the UN must show their support for the Paris Principles and commit to stamping out the use of child soldiers and looking after those who have been released."

Save the Children is calling on:

- * All governments and armed groups immediately to release all children associated with fighting forces, and to put a stop to all on-going recruitment and re-recruitment. This must not be dependent on a ceasefire or permanent peace agreement.
- * All governments to ensure they have signed and ratified all relevant international law to protect children from unlawful recruitment and use, and to adhere to The Paris Principles.
- * The UN and the Human Rights Council to adopt the Paris Principles by way of resolution, recognising these bodies as the leading international instrument on the obligations of states and others in this area.
- * Donors adequately to fund programmes to ensure released and demobilised children can return to normal life. Current reintegration programmes are not protecting them sufficiently. Funding for such activities should be set at a minimum of five years.
- * The international community to ensure special provisions are made for former girl soldiers and their children, to lessen the risks of forced early marriage, isolation, re-recruitment or health implications of sexual violence.

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