

FORGOTTEN YOUTH

Child Soldiers

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Chapter 1

The Problem of Child Soldiers Today

The conflict in Syria, which began in late 2011, is a chaotic situation, with several different armed groups fighting to topple the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The rebel armies and government forces do have one thing in common: They all use child soldiers. Human Rights Watch, an international monitoring group, found that opposition armies fighting government troops in Syria commonly use fighters as young as fifteen, and children even younger take support roles. Boys described to interviewers how they fought on the front lines, served as snipers, spied on government forces, treated the wounded in combat, and carried ammunition and supplies to support the battle effort. Extremist Islamist groups such as ISIS and Nusra Front were particularly aggressive in recruiting children. One doctor with Human Rights Watch reported treating a boy of about ten whose task was to whip prisoners held in an ISIS facility. Although overall numbers of child soldiers in Syria are hard to determine, a Syrian group has documented more than two hundred deaths of what it calls noncivilian male children—a vague reference to boy soldiers and support personnel. The group suspects the actual total is much higher.

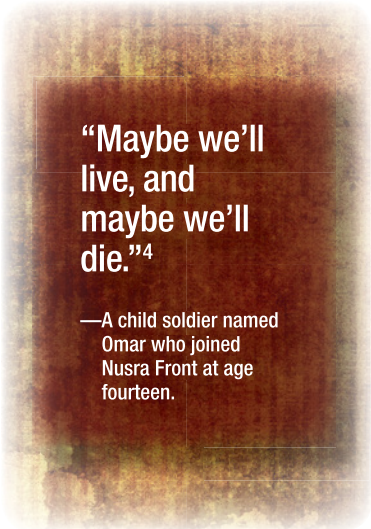
An Urgent Problem in Several Countries

Human Rights Watch discovered that Syrian youth joined armed groups for various reasons. Some lived in battle zones where schools had closed, and were drawn into the fighting from lack of anything better to do. Some had suffered violence from government troops and joined the opposition seeking revenge. Others simply followed the lead of friends or relatives. Constant warfare had left many of the children numb to violence and blasé about

the future—providing the warring parties with an underage army of nonchalant killers. “Maybe we’ll live, and maybe we’ll die,”⁴ said Omar, who joined Nusra Front at age fourteen. Confronted about the recruitment of child soldiers like Omar, commanders among the armed groups insisted they are taking steps to end the practice. Yet youths continue to be drawn into the conflict.

The plight of child soldiers in Syria is not unique. A July 27, 2015, report by the US Department of State reveals that although recruitment of child soldiers is declining in some countries, it remains an urgent problem in many others. The report lists eight governments—Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—that recruit or use child soldiers in their own armed forces or back militias or other armed crews that include child soldiers. In 2014 only a single new child soldier was reportedly recruited in Congo—a vast improvement from past years—but military commanders there are said to provide money and equipment to freelance groups that continue to use children as fighters. Nigeria made the State Department’s list for the first time, due to a government-backed militia called the Civilian Joint Task Force that recruits children to fight the Islamist militant group Boko Haram. South Sudan, which in recent years had made some progress in this area, saw widespread recruiting of child soldiers occur as fighting broke out anew at the end of 2013. In Yemen the Houthi rebel group that toppled the government in September 2014 uses child soldiers as a matter of course. In fact, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that up to one-third of the combatants in Yemen are children.

In an effort to halt the practice, the United States and other Western nations have sanctioned governments that recruit child soldiers, but as a practical matter these sanctions rarely last. In late September 2015, after much deliberation, President Barack



**“Maybe we’ll
live, and
maybe we’ll
die.”⁴**

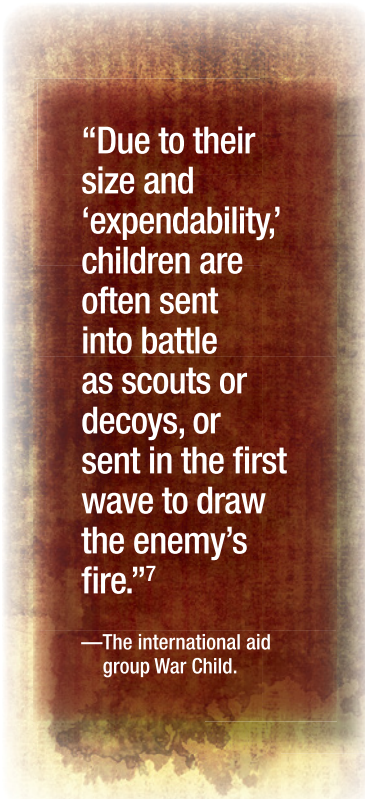
—A child soldier named
Omar who joined
Nusra Front at age
fourteen.

Obama announced that the United States will continue to provide military assistance to four countries (including Nigeria and South Sudan) that use child soldiers. “The decision is disappointing,” says Jo Becker, director of the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, “particularly since Obama has a powerful tool at his disposal—the Child Soldiers Prevention Act—that allows him to withhold US military aid until governments end their exploitation of children in war.”⁵

No Means of Escape

Despite the efforts of international organizations like Human Rights Watch and UNICEF, child soldiers remain a key component of warfare in the twenty-first century. UNICEF defines a child soldier as “any child—boy or girl—under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity.”⁶ This definition shows that child soldiers are not only those who wield weapons or carry ammunition. Often they are forced to perform services for the group, including as cooks, porters (carriers of supplies and equipment), messengers, spies, smugglers, and even sexual slaves. Some child soldiers are recruited as young as age eight to fight in wars whose causes they barely understand. Once snared in the day-to-day operations of a rebel army, youths may find themselves with no means of escape.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits recruiting soldiers under age fifteen. Nevertheless, such recruiting continues in many battle-torn areas. Children are recruited to become soldiers for many reasons. They can more easily be conditioned to follow orders without question, and they can be brainwashed to express fanatical loyalty. They require less food and water than adults and may have little interest in payment. With their underdeveloped sense

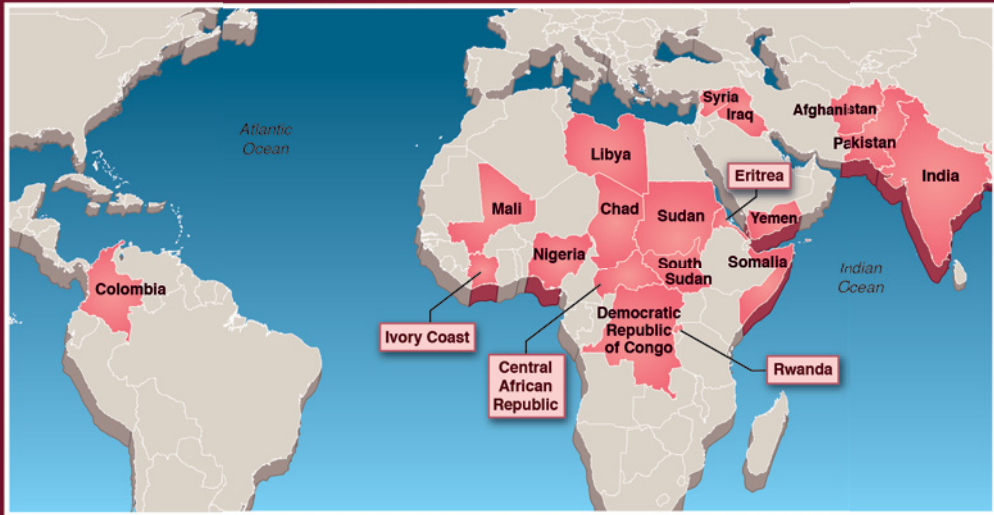


“Due to their size and ‘expendability,’ children are often sent into battle as scouts or decoys, or sent in the first wave to draw the enemy’s fire.”⁷

—The international aid group War Child.

Reported Use of Child Soldiers, 2010–2015

The recruitment and use of child soldiers takes place in many countries. These child soldiers may serve in government armies, rebel militias, terrorist groups, and resistance forces. The map highlights countries in which child soldiers were reported between 2010 and 2015. The numbers in individual countries are hard to determine with accuracy, but experts estimate that more than 300,000 children are actively fighting in conflicts worldwide.



Source: CNN, "Child Soldier Use Around the World," April 29, 2015. www.cnn.com.

of danger, they more readily accept errands in the line of fire. And in many third world locations where conflicts arise, there is no shortage of children available to be exploited. According to the aid group War Child, "As children make the majority demographic in many conflict-affected countries, there's a constant supply of potential recruits. Due to their size and 'expendability,' children are often sent into battle as scouts or decoys, or sent in the first wave to draw the

Children with Kalashnikovs

In the city of Sanaa in northern Yemen, seven-year-old Hassan stands guard at a Houthi rebel-controlled checkpoint. His large dark eyes scrutinize each vehicle that passes through. Now and then he shifts the weight of his Kalashnikov rifle, a weapon that seems almost as tall as he is. Just three weeks ago Hassan was with classmates at school or laughing and playing table football with friends. That was before fighting between Houthi rebels and Saudi-backed government troops forced Hassan's school to close. Within days Hassan had abandoned his books for a rifle and a new job manning checkpoints and keeping watch for infiltrating enemy soldiers. He is eager to do his part for the rebels. "We are fighting to protect our country from the enemies," he declares.

Jamal al-Shami, head of the Democracy School, a local aid organization, blames both sides for the recruitment of child soldiers like Hassan. He notes that children are lured by the promise of money or told it is their duty to defend their tribal groups from outside aggression. As the fighting escalates, more young people find themselves drawn into the conflict. "Schools are closed and children have easy access to weaponry," says al-Shami. "All parties to the conflict have welcomed them with open arms. It's a mess." Millions of Yemeni children find themselves facing the same choices as Hassan. Eleven-year-old Asif carries a rifle and supports the Houthi cause without question. Asif says, "My parents are proud of me and encourage me to fight."

Quoted in Charlene Rodrigues and Mohammed Al-Qalilis, "Yemen Crisis: Meet the Child Soldiers Who Have Forsaken Books for Kalashnikovs," *Independent*, April 18, 2015. www.independent.co.uk.

A perfect example of the African dilemma regarding child soldiers is the nation of Chad in north central Africa, bounded to the east by Sudan and South Sudan. The region of Chad that borders Sudan is poor and politically unstable—a tinderbox for rebel violence. Since 2003 this region has been roiled by the conflict in neighboring Darfur, where rebels took up arms against the Sudanese government, claiming years of neglect. The violence sent

hundreds of thousands of Darfuri refugees pouring across the border into eastern Chad. The Darfuris are held in refugee camps, while more than 170,000 Chadians have fled their homes to live in special sites for displaced persons.

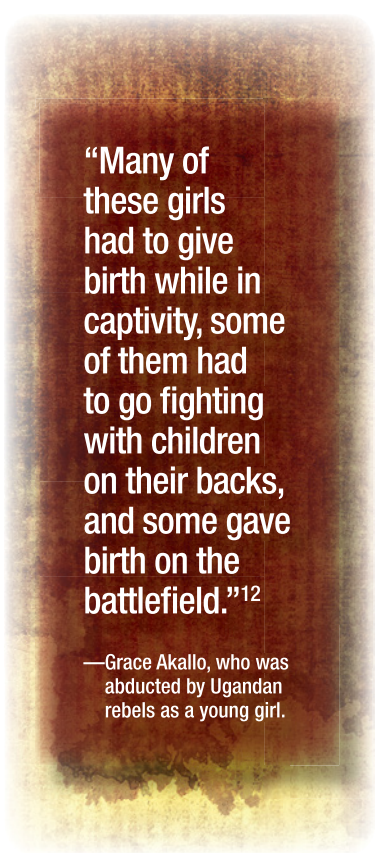
In this chaotic situation, with almost a half million people marooned in temporary camps, armed opposition groups roam freely. The camps are viewed as fertile recruiting grounds for child soldiers. With almost no access to schools or jobs, the residents are desperate for a way out. Rebel groups send children dressed in new clothes into the camps to lure recruits with money—between \$20 and \$500—cigarettes, and promises of more bounty from looting. Those between the ages of thirteen and seventeen take up arms, while children as young as ten serve as messengers and porters. One former child soldier who fought with the Sudanese rebel group Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and later returned to a camp in Chad explained to Amnesty International the allure of the rebel armies. “There is nothing to do here [in the camps],” he said. “There is no work, no school, no money and I am poor. . . . In the JEM I am not paid but, when we are in combat, we take stuff from the enemy.”⁹

In 2011 Amnesty International issued a scathing report about the situation in Chad. More than forty former and current child soldiers from Chad and Darfur described how they were forced to join rebel groups. The Chadian government was criticized for giving amnesty to opposition groups accused of war crimes, including the recruitment of child soldiers. “It is tragic that thousands of children are denied their childhood and are manipulated by adults into fighting their wars,” said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International’s program director for Africa. “This scandalous child abuse must not be allowed to continue.”¹⁰ Perhaps in response to Amnesty International’s exposé, Chad’s government has made some progress in addressing the problem. In 2014 the UN removed Chad from its list of violators that engage in or enable the recruitment of child soldiers.

The Plight of Girl Soldiers

Armed groups also do not hesitate to recruit or abduct girls as soldiers and support personnel. Experts estimate that 30 to 40

percent of child soldiers are female. With the advent of lightweight weapons such as the AK-47 rifle, young females are fully capable of taking part in combat. Like male child soldiers, females who are abducted by rebels often are beaten, rapidly trained to fire a



“Many of these girls had to give birth while in captivity, some of them had to go fighting with children on their backs, and some gave birth on the battlefield.”¹²

—Grace Akallo, who was abducted by Ugandan rebels as a young girl.

weapon, and forced to serve in the front lines on deadly missions. They may be used as human shields or decoys in an ambush. Many combine their fighting role with duties such as cooking, cleaning, and laundering in the rebel camps. Girls may become trusted fighters in the close-knit rebel bands, where group safety depends on each soldier’s prowess. Ironically, some girl soldiers may experience something that was rare in their home life: equality with males. According to a Care International report on child soldiers in Colombia, “For some girls, belonging to an illegal armed group gives them a sense of power and control that they may not otherwise experience living in a relatively conservative, ‘machista’ [chauvinist] society.”¹¹ Such hints of equality pale before the hardships suffered by a girl soldier forced into service, robbed of her childhood, and indoctrinated to violence.

Faced with imminent death on the battlefield, females are also vulnerable to another aspect of the child soldier’s life: sexual abuse. Girls are frequently taken as sexual slaves to serve the whims of a commander. Some are assigned as camp wives to other soldiers. Few female child soldiers escape sexual abuse of some kind. Thus, they run the risk of getting pregnant at an early age—and possibly having to undergo a brutal abortion—as well as contracting AIDS or some other disease. Grace Akallo, who was abducted by Ugandan rebels as a young girl, has testified to the sexual abuse she and other young girls suffered. “Most girls

were sexually abused, including me,” says Akallo. “I was lucky I did not return home with a child, or get infected with HIV or any other disease. . . . Many of these girls had to give birth while in captivity, some of them had to go fighting with children on their backs, and some gave birth on the battlefield.”¹²

Many experts believe girl child soldiers have been overlooked in efforts to police the problem and return child soldiers to society. Those who serve in roles other than fighting may be ignored by disarmament programs focused on soldiers who turn in weapons. Armed rebel groups and militias are rarely prosecuted for rape and sexual abuse of female child soldiers, even when these crimes are obvious and rampant. Returning a former

A female teenager joins male youth at a rebel training camp in the Kurdistan region of Syria. Experts estimate that 30 to 40 percent of child soldiers are female.



Source Notes

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1. Quoted in Spike Johnson, "The Hard Life of Burma's Child Soldiers," Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, April 9, 2015. <http://pulitzercenter.org>.
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3. Quoted in Siddharth Chatterjee, "For Child Soldiers, Every Day Is a Living Nightmare," *Forbes*, December 9, 2012. www.forbes.com.

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11. Quoted in Amy S. Choi, "Nearly Half of Child Soldiers Are Girls," *Salon*, February 21, 2013. www.salon.com.
12. Quoted in Isabelle de Grave, "Former Girl Soldiers Trade One Nightmare for Another," Inter Press Service News Agency, June 14, 2012. www.ipsnews.net.

Organizations to Contact

Amnesty International USA

5 Penn Pl., 16th Floor
New York, NY 10001
website: www.amnestyusa.org
e-mail: aimember@aiusa.org

This is a global movement of people dedicated to fighting injustice and promoting human rights. It seeks to investigate and expose human rights abuses, educate the public and mobilize support, and help transform societies to be safer and more just.

International Rescue Committee

122 East Forty-Second St.
New York, NY 10168-1289
website: www.rescue.org
e-mail: communications@rescue.org

This organization is a global humanitarian aid and relief group founded in 1933. It works to restore health, safety, education, and economic well-being to those devastated by military conflict or disaster.

SOS Children's Villages

1620 I St. NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20006
website: www.sos-usa.org
email: info@sos-childrensvillages.org

SOS is an international aid organization that cares for more than eighty thousand children in 133 countries. Its mission is to build families for children in need while helping them shape more positive futures and share in the development of their communities.

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