

## Child soldiers: the role of children in armed conflict

by Ilene Cohn and Guy S. Goodwin-Gill

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Contemporary wars are not fought on demarcated battlefields, but in the neighbourhoods and villages of ordinary people. Today, there are over 50 unresolved wars around the world, compared with only 10 in 1960. Ninety per cent of these are internal, and the overwhelming majority of victims are civilians, not combatants (in contrast to only five per cent in World War I). In the last decade alone, some two million children have died in wars, and six times as many have been made homeless.

Related to this is 'the increased participation of children in hostilities, in terms both of numbers and the immediate and direct nature of their involvement'. Child soldiers are broadly defined as children under the age of 18 who are bearing arms, or carrying out other (often dangerous) military activities such as mine-clearance or espionage. In any single conflict, children may form a substantial proportion of the fighting force. For example, RENAMO appears to have made a policy of recruiting small children. The involvement of Iranian children as 'holy martyrs' in the war with Iraq is well known.

This book, written on behalf of the Henry Dunant Institute of the Red Cross, examines the phenomenon within the context of International Humanitarian Law and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. But the authors emphasise that no action can be taken on behalf of any children - and child soldiers are no exception - without a sound understanding of their daily reality. To describe this, they draw on empirical data from El Salvador, Guatemala, the Occupied Territories, Liberia and Sri Lanka, as well as findings from Afghanistan, Mozambique, Somalia and Uganda.

The picture which emerges is a depressing and complex one. Contrary to what one

might expect, most (but by no means all) under-18s are not physically compelled or coerced into military involvement, in the strictest sense. But they are subject to manipulation, and to all kinds of pressures which they cannot resist. Put most starkly, 'a gun is a meal-ticket and a more attractive option than sitting at home, afraid and helpless'—and this may be especially true for refugees confined in camps. Like adults, children are affected by highly militarised environments. They too are motivated by a range of practical considerations, as well as by their emotional reaction to these. Peer pressure, the desire for revenge, the need to conform with adult expectations, the wish to destroy repressive political structures, fear, distress - all of these may influence any individual's decision to take up arms in civil conflict. For children - particularly children from poor families - who by definition have not reached the age of majority, there may be no practical alternatives. Many describe their experience as fighters with nostalgia: a time when they had a surrogate family, a structure, a role, and even status and relative stability; similar feelings are often expressed by adult war veterans.

Less easy to accept is the cynicism of adults in recruiting children - sometimes as young as six years old - into their wars. Whether they are in clandestine sweatshops or bearing arms, children are preferred for the very reasons that they need additional protection: namely, that they are cheap, docile, and trusting. In the words of one Mozambican child forcibly recruited at the age of ten: 'Kids have more stamina and are better at surviving in the bush, do not complain and follow instruction'. The authors note, almost as if they were describing domestic gadgets or notebook computers, that 'arms technology is so advanced that even small

boys and girls can handle common weapons like M16 and AK47 assault rifles'. What this means in practice is brought home by many poignant photographs throughout the book.

Some readers may find the emphasis on legal matters at odds with the fact that many of the conflicts described fall beneath the threshold of the law. But apart from their conviction that humanitarian agencies have a critical role to play in ensuring adherence to the basic standards provided by the law (and so must know what these are), the authors also give examples of cases where the legal framework has enabled local organisations to be more effective in informing and mobilising potential victims of abuse.

The task of rehabilitating former child soldiers is a daunting one with which humanitarian agencies have relatively little experience. We simply do not know what are the long-term social and emotional consequences for children who have been brutalised by their societies from an early age: who have committed and witnessed atrocities, or sustained terrible injuries, or fought with a cyanide canister around their necks in case they were taken prisoner. But the uncompromising message of the book is that we cannot intelligently deal with the issue by placing such children 'beyond the pale' or in a category outside the rest of society. Nor can we hope that by ignoring it, the problem will just go away.

Cohn and Goodwin-Gill offer a comprehensive and compassionate analysis of the issue of child soldiers, which those who deal with the human consequences of conflict would do well to read.

*Reviewed by Deborah Eade*

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