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Burundi: Demobilise and reintegrate child soldiers

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Burundi and the leaders of all current and former armed political groups to immediately cease the use and recruitment of child soldiers and genuinely engage in the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. Military leaders have fuelled Burundi's 10-year armed conflict by recruiting and abducting children, destroying their childhood and jeopardizing their future. Amnesty International stated today in a new report entitled *Burundi: Child soldiers - the challenge of demobilisation*.

"Tackling the practice and legacy of child soldiering is an important element in achieving a durable peace in which the human rights of all are respected," Amnesty International said.

Children, even those under age 15, have been cynically used as a cheap and expendable tool of war. Children have been abducted and torn from their families. Others have been driven to volunteer as a result of social exclusion and family breakdown, or after witnessing atrocities. Poverty and years of war have made it easier for a whole generation of children to be drawn into the armed conflict.

"Regardless of how they were recruited, child soldiers are likely to have witnessed or participated in extreme violence, as well as to have been the object of abuse. The legacy of children having spent years within the armed forces, primarily learning the art of violence, will have lasting repercussions on the country and its citizens unless the problem is urgently addressed," the organization added.

The Burundian armed forces and Burundian armed political groups have recruited and used child soldiers as porters, informants, "wives" and actual combatants. Burundian child soldiers have fought in both Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many child soldiers have been traumatized, humiliated, ill-treated and brutally punished, as well as exposed through inexperience and poor training to needless danger. Even those used essentially for portering may have found themselves on the frontline during combat as they fulfilled their task of transporting the wounded and the dead.

Pierre (not his real name), age 14, was abducted from his home along with six other children, in Mukike commune, Rural Bujumbura province in July 2002 by the *Forces Nationales de Libération* of Agathon Rwaswa (PALIPEHUTU-FNL), and forced to transport ammunition and stolen goods. He remained with the FNL for two months before being captured and arrested by members of the armed forces.

"The international community and Government of Burundi must as a matter of priority commit to

providing long-term support to facilitating reintegration and offering alternative opportunities to former child soldiers."

Without sustained support, demobilised children may return voluntarily or be forcibly re-recruited to the army or other armed groups, thus perpetuating the cycle of conflict. They may alternatively be compelled to live on the street where they are susceptible to crime and exploitation.

All demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation programs should pay special attention to the needs of female child soldiers, who may have suffered particular trauma as victims of sexual violence. Girls may face particular challenges being reintegrated or may face marginalization or sexual assault during the demobilisation process itself.

Young adults who were child soldiers should be included in such demobilisation and reintegration programs.

Jean-Bosco N was 15 when he joined the Burundian armed forces. For some time prior to his formal recruitment he had been following and working with them. He told Amnesty International that he often saw soldiers shooting civilians as they fled, and that they had received orders to do so. On returning from military operations, soldiers would often torture and ill-treat civilians, disciplined by their superiors only if their abuses were considered too blatant. After being detained and ill-treated on several occasions for disciplinary offences, he deserted. Now aged 19, he is a member of the Peace Guards, an untrained but armed government militia.

"Parties to the conflict have shown little evident enthusiasm for demobilising child soldiers. Their commitment to the process is essential to ensuring the success of the project. Amnesty International is also calling on the international community and donors to encourage Burundian leaders to support the process and to provide sufficient financial and technical assistance to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated approach."

"The international community should sustain interest and engagement in the process and monitor progress of the program as well as in-country developments, to avoid manipulation of the demobilisation project by military leaders or others. Any new recruitment and continued evidence of the use of child soldiers must be strongly and publicly condemned," the organization added.

In order for demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation to be truly sustainable, the Government of Burundi must also address the issue of arms proliferation in the country.

Background

No reliable figures exist on the number of children who have taken part in the conflict over the last 10 years. However, according to United Nations Child Fund (UNICEF) figures, between 6,000 and 7,000 under-18s must now be disengaged, demobilised and reintegrated into society. UNICEF has so far secured agreement with the Government of Burundi and two minor armed political groups, the FNL (Mugabarabona) and CNDD-FDD (Ndayikengurukiye) for the demobilisation and reintegration of their child soldiers, estimated at 3,000 child soldiers.

Since January 2004, 300 child soldiers from government forces and the CNDD-FDD (Ndayikengurukiye) have already been demobilised, and are being integrated into their communities. Plans for the future demobilisation of thousands of other child soldiers are being prepared. Tens of thousands of adult combatants must also be demobilised and reintegrated - a considerable challenge in a situation of extreme poverty and on-going conflict both in Burundi and in neighbouring DRC, and in a region awash with small arms. How this process is managed will have a significant impact on the immediate and long-term human rights situation in Burundi.

For further information, please see: *Burundi: Child soldiers - the challenge of demobilisation*(AFR 16/011/2004) of 24 March 2004

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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