

-CÔTE D'IVOIRE- STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

The use of child soldiers in Côte d'Ivoire

On 28 February 2005, there was a violation of the cease-fire, with fighting breaking out in Western Côte d'Ivoire. Members of the *Mouvement de Libération de l'Ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire* (MILOCI), a pro-government militia, launched an attack on the city of Logoualé (450km north-west of Abidjan), against a position held by the *Forces Nouvelles* (the name of the former armed opposition group under whose control the northern part of the country has come since the armed insurrection of September 2002).

UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire, ONUCI, intervened rapidly and arrested 87 combatants, all supposed members of the militia.

Among them, there were two children, age ten and eleven, apparently of Liberian origin. They have now been handed to the care of UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Thirty five African States are abiding by the minimum age for recruitment of 18 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Despite this, 100 000 children are estimated to remain involved in armed conflicts in Africa. Liberia government and rebels forces alone recruited up to 21 000 children, sometimes as young as six years old, over the course of the civil war.

The Cape Town Principles, adopted at a symposium on the prevention of recruitment of children into armed forces and on demobilisation and social reintegration of child soldiers in Africa organised by UNICEF in 1997, define a child soldier as any person under 18 years who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying

such groups, other than family members. This includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.

The phenomenon of child soldiers in Côte d'Ivoire is clearly linked to non-resolved issues in Liberia. It is the result of previous failures to properly demobilise. In Liberia, only 4,300 child soldiers were demobilised. With the end of the war in Liberia, former child soldiers often became street children that the civilian population would continue to fear. The temptation to go back to military life for them is strong. Many fighters from previous wars have "recycled" themselves to continue the cycle of war. Weak State authority and lack of law enforcement officers are also great incentive to cross porous borders into Côte d'Ivoire.

In Western Côte d'Ivoire, since the beginning of the internal conflict in September 2002, several human rights NGOs and the UN have repeatedly reported about the recruitment and use of child soldiers by all the parties in conflict. During a mission in northern Côte d'Ivoire in December 2002, Amnesty International delegates witnessed that hundreds of young people, including minors aged about 14, had been enlisted into the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) which controls the north of Côte d'Ivoire since the September 2002 armed uprising. (See, Amnesty International, *CÔTE D'IVOIRE, Without immediate international action, the country will descend into chaos*, 19 December 2002 (AI Index: AFR31/010/2002).

Several reports also indicated that since the beginning of this armed conflict, children, many of them Liberian refugees in refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire, are recruited by both

government armed forces and armed opposition groups.

Ending impunity

Recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime, if the children are under 15.

There must be swift disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) of child soldiers. It must include specific arrangements for children, ensuring health care, education, skills training, family-tracing and reunification, and responding to the particular needs of girls, many of whom struggle with the psychological,

physical and social consequences of sexual and other forms of physical abuse, forced "marriage", pregnancy and childbirth.

If there is no proper demobilisation, as is the case in Côte d'Ivoire, the regional instability in West Africa will continue to be fuelled by armed groups, which include children, recycling themselves into others' wars.

Looking for survival, the life child soldiers are leading in warfare is shaping a bleak future for them, Côte d'Ivoire and the whole of West Africa.

TAKE ACTION NOW TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS!

Write to the Ivorian Ministers for Children, of Security and of Defence, asking them to:

- Ensure that all armed forces immediately demobilize children under the age of 18 from their ranks and stop further recruitment of children (including re-recruitment of children who have been demobilized), as it is prescribed by national law;
- Immediately remove from positions of command and control any commanders suspected of recruiting and using child soldiers;
- Investigate independently, impartially and exhaustively the use and recruitment of child-soldiers in all parts of the country, ensuring that suspected perpetrators are brought to justice in accordance with international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty;
- Genuinely engage in the demobilisation of child soldiers, facilitating their reintegration into society and providing adequately-resourced rehabilitation programmes which promote a return to civilian life and viable future for former child soldiers in civilian life;
- Ratify and rigorously implement both the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

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You could also send copies of your letters to the embassy of Côte d'Ivoire accredited to your country.

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