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**COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF
CHILD SOLDIERS**

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Children: invisible soldiers in the Middle East and North Africa

“Two boys described themselves as assassins. Armed with sawn-off shotguns, they stalked security men in public places, firing at point-blank range and disappearing in to the crowd,” journalist report from armed opposition camp in Algeria.

Thousands of children, some as young as ten, are serving with armed forces, paramilitaries, youth militias and armed groups in the Middle East and North Africa, said the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers as it presented its report on the Use of Children as Soldiers in the region.

Delegates to the Amman Conference on the Use of Child Soldiers in the Middle East and North Africa heard reports of children currently engaged in fighting with armed opposition groups in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Turkey and Yemen.

It was also reported, that in many countries children are given military drill and indoctrination in regular school programs and military life features prominently in the general curricula.

“The countries of this region know at first hand the long-term scars participation in conflict leaves for children and their communities. The challenge now is to ensure such exploitation and abuse is prevented for future generations,” said Rory Mungoven, Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

The Coalition report cites the conflict in Sudan is one of the worst child soldier problems anywhere in the world. Thousands of children, as young as 12, have been forcibly recruited into the armed forces and opposition groups.

The Coalition report states that there is no evidence to date of children being recruited or used systematically by the Palestinian Authority or armed groups in the current *intifada*. It is estimated that less than 1 % of the total Palestinian adolescent population have taken an active part in the clashes with the Israeli Defense Forces and this has been confined generally to demonstrations and stone throwing.

“Most of the children killed have been mere bystanders, in their homes or on their way to and from school,” said Mr Mungoven referring to the *al-Aqsa intifada*.

"We must all support the Palestinian community in its efforts to protect children and prevent their involvement in armed conflict."

KEY POINTS OF THE REPORT

The report on the Use of Children as Soldiers in the Middle East and North Africa analyses 22 countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE and Yemen).

Armed opposition groups

In recent years, children have been actively engaged in fighting with armed opposition groups in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Turkey and Yemen.

In Algeria, the *Armee Islamique du Salut* and *Groupe Islamique Arme* have both been reported to recruit children below 15. Various Kurdish armed groups in northern Iraq, Iran and Turkey have used child soldiers as young as ten. Children have been used as soldiers or guards by Islamist groups, tribal militia and Qat farmers in Yemen.

Expatriate recruitment of children to serve with armed groups in the region

Some armed groups are known to have recruited children from outside the region. In particular the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has held recruitment drives in Swedish schools, the Kurdish community living in France, Germany and the Netherlands.

The Coalition was recently informed of the case of a 16-year old Kurdish girl who is missing since March 1999 after joining a meeting in a Kurdish centre.

Support for conflicts outside the region

Over the past decades there has been extensive political and material support from countries in the region to governments and armed groups that have exploited children as soldiers in other parts of the world.

The Sudanese government has provided support and protection to the Lord's Resistance Army that has been responsible for the abduction and brutal treatment of more than ten thousand children from northern Uganda.

Governments and private groups in the Gulf region have channeled support to warring factions in Afghanistan that have used child soldiers.

Features of military forces in the region

The shift from conscript to professional volunteer armies, together with personnel shortfall, has seen a downward pressure on the age of military recruitment in many countries. Many forces rely on personnel contracted from outside the region.

Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman contract armed forces from Pakistan, Somalia, the UK and other Arab states. While the ages of these military personnel are not known, Pakistan and the UK recruit children from age 16

· Presence of military forces from outside the region, deployed under various alliance and defence cooperation arrangements

Both the USA and the UK recruit under-18s into their armed forces and deploy them operationally. Both used 17 year olds in combat units during the Gulf War; two British soldiers under the age of 18 were killed during operations at that time and many others who returned are reportedly suffering from "Gulf War syndrome".

Militia and youth movements

In Iraq, tens of thousands of children from 10 to 15 years of age receive military training – including the use of weapons, hand-to-hand fighting, rappelling from helicopters and infantry tactics – through the *Ashbal Saddam* or *Saddam Lion Cubs* and other school programs.

In Iran, the revolutionary militia *basij* has traditionally relied heavily on children from the age of 16 to fill its ranks. In the Palestinian Authority, it is estimated that 50,000 children were enrolled in military-style camps organised during summer 2000 by the Political Guidance and Training Unit, a government body.

Positive developments

The Governments of Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia and Turkey have set at least 18 as the minimum age for all forms of military recruitment.

Jordan, Morocco and Turkey became the first countries in the region to sign the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of children in armed conflict.

Highlights from the report

- The armed forces of Mauritania and Israel accept conscripts below the age of 18.
- The armed forces of Israel, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya and Mauritania and the security forces of the Palestinian Authority) accept volunteers below 18.
- The minimum age for volunteering to the armed forces is unclear in Algeria, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE and Yemen.
- Food rations and school examinations have been reportedly withheld from Iraqi youths refusing to join "Saddam's Youth".
- The PKK has systematically recruited children, even creating children's regiments. One of which was run by a committee of five children aged between 8 and 12 years.
- Boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 16 have been trained in combat in Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon. The Israeli-supported South Lebanese Army was notorious for forced recruitment of teenagers before its dissolution.
- Iranian boys as young as nine were reportedly recruited for human wave attacks and to serve as mine sweepers in the war with Iraq in the early 1980s. Their indoctrination to participate in combat included being

given “keys to paradise” and promises that they would directly enter heaven if they died as martyrs against the Iraqi enemy.

·Child soldiers, some as young as 12, fought with Iraqi troops during the Gulf War in 1991.

Note to editors:

Our media officers are happy to arrange interviews, accreditation to the Conference, facilitate opinion pieces and provide copies of the full report or specific country entries. The full media kit is available on-line by visiting our website: www.child-soldiers.org.