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Liberia: Fulfilling the promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers

The children of Liberia have been killed, made orphans, maimed, abducted, deprived of education and health care - and recruited and used as child soldiers, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

The report, entitled *Liberia: The promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers*, calls on the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), leading representatives of parties to the conflict and the international community to ensure an end to the use of child soldiers and also that the needs of former child soldiers are met fully as the peace process unfolds.

"As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child opens its thirty-sixth session today, high on its agenda will be Liberia where children's lives have been devastated by years of conflict."

"There are an estimated 21,000 child soldiers - both boys and girls - in Liberia. They include not only children who have been given guns and forced to fight or forced to carry arms and ammunition, but also girls who have been abducted, raped and forced to provide sexual services," Amnesty International said.

All parties to the conflict - the former government of Liberia and the two armed opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia - have used child soldiers.

Visiting Liberia in November 2003 Amnesty International representatives met many former child soldiers who recounted their ordeals. With little or no training, they were sent directly to the front line where many were killed or wounded. Those resisting recruitment or refusing to comply with their commanders' orders risked being beaten or killed. Girls described how they had been abducted, raped - often by several combatants - and forced to become the sexual partners of their abductors.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child's examination of Liberia's implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides important opportunities: to promote reinforcement of the rights enshrined in the Convention; to urge the NTGL to take concrete measures to improve children's lives; and also to encourage the international community to support the NTGL's efforts to meet its commitments.

The peace agreement in August 2003 and the UN Security Council's decision the following month to deploy a large peace-keeping operation in Liberia opened the way for finally ending the conflict. Many challenges remain, however, and one of the most urgent is meeting the needs of former child soldiers.

"Priority must be given to the swift disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) of child soldiers," Amnesty International urged. Aborted almost immediately after it began in December 2003, the DDRR process has only recently begun to get underway and concerns have been expressed by officials of the UN peace-keeping operation in Liberia that significantly fewer weapons have been surrendered than the number of combatants presenting themselves for disarmament and demobilization.

The needs of former child soldiers, their families and communities do not end with disarmament and demobilization; rehabilitation and reintegration are complex and long-term and require sustained funding and support. Education is crucial and is invariably the priority of former child soldiers themselves, as many of them told Amnesty International representatives.

UN and other agencies have developed specific arrangements for former child soldiers, 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.

The urgency of responding to the needs of Liberia's child soldiers was highlighted by participants, including the UN Secretary-General, at the International Reconstruction Conference on Liberia in New York in February 2004.

"The commitments made in February by donor governments must be met fully and speedily, including by providing sufficient resources for the DDRR of child soldiers in the immediate, medium and long term," Amnesty International urged.

"Recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime," Amnesty International added. "Although recruitment of children violates both international human rights and humanitarian law, no one in Liberia has yet been brought to justice for these crimes."

In its recent Resolution 1539 (2004) on the protection of children in armed conflict, the UN Security Council strongly condemned recruitment and use of child soldiers, as well as rape and other forms of sexual violence, and recalled "*the responsibilities of States to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other egregious crimes against children*".

The international community and the NTGL have, however, so far shown little political will to bring to justice the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law committed during Liberia's conflict.

"Lasting peace - which Liberia's children deserve - will remain elusive unless those responsible for the crimes against them are held accountable," Amnesty International concluded.

For the full report *Liberia: The promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers* (AI Index: AFR 34/006/2004), visit: <http://news.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf340062004>

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