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Amnesty International - Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers: Children should not be used in adult wars 12 February Anniversary of the UN "Child Soldiers" Treaty

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On the eve of the anniversary of the entry into force of an international treaty banning child soldiers, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers warned that the problem of child soldiers, far from being solved, is still prevalent.

"Child soldiers continue to be abused as foot soldiers, porters, look-outs and sexual slaves - the problem is not decreasing but, with each new conflict, children are at risk of being drawn into the fighting," said Casey Kelso, Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

The Coalition warned the international community against assuming that the issue of child soldiers could be struck-off simply because their use was now banned by international law. Amnesty International, a founding member of the Coalition, continues to campaign against the use of child combatants.

The issue of child soldiers has been addressed at the UN Security Council, which has taken a landmark decision to name the names of those who are recruiting child soldiers.

In December 2002, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's report to the Security Council identified 23 parties to conflict in five country situations that involved child soldiers: Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Somalia. Not only armed opposition groups were using children: the UN pointed the finger at the government forces of Burundi, DRC and Liberia as abusing children by using them as soldiers.

At the end of January 2003, the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution on children and armed conflict calling on the Secretary-General to include information about protecting children in all his country-specific reports.

"It is essential for the Security Council to make a commitment to accountability to take appropriate action against those using or recruiting child soldiers," said Mr Kelso.

Although 111 countries have now signed the "child soldiers' treaty" recognising that forcibly recruiting children into war is wrong, only 46 countries have actually made a binding legal commitment to enforce the Optional Protocol.

"This first anniversary of the Optional Protocol should not be a celebration but a time to call upon other countries to join the international community in condemning this appalling practice," said Mr Kelso.

Country of concern where child soldiers are being used:

- In Myanmar, for example, an estimated 70,000 children are in uniform in the state army - many are forcibly conscripted by kidnapping or threats of prison at ages as young as 11.
- In Colombia, the Coalition's research estimated that up to 14,000 child soldiers -- boys and girls as young as 10 years old -- are recruited into armed groups paramilitaries and militias.
- In Nepal, some sources indicate that as many as 30 percent of the rights in the Communist Party of Nepal fighting forces are children, and the number is growing each month.

Background

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was formed in 1998. Its founding members include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva, Rädda Barnen for the International Save the Children Alliance, Terre des Hommes. Later, Defence for Children International, World Vision International and several regional NGOs from Latin America, Africa and Asia also joined in the Coalition's activities.

Many Coalition members or partner organisations around the world, from Pakistan to the United States of America, will be celebrating the 12 February anniversary with special events.

Media interviews

For more information about local contacts in your country, or to arrange an interview with the International Secretariat of the Coalition, please contact Casey Kelso, the Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers based in London, at: +44-207-713-2761 or Judith Arenas of Amnesty International at +44-207-413-5810.

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