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USA leads in blocking efforts to stop use of child soldiers

Geneva -- The proposed ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, which is close to being adopted by the International Labour Conference, fails to prohibit the use of children in armed conflicts.

The USA, supported by the UK and the Netherlands, lobbied hard to prevent an outright prohibition on using child combatants. The purpose of the Convention is to protect children under 18 from the most hazardous and exploitative forms of child labour.

Amnesty International welcomes the drafting of such a Convention* but is alarmed at its failure to prohibit the participation of all children in armed conflicts. [* Full title: "ILO Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour".]

More than 300,000 children under the age of 18 are currently fighting in conflicts around the world. Hundreds of thousands more are members of armed forces who could be sent into combat at any time.

"Participation in armed conflicts is an extremely hazardous activity. It is simply unacceptable to allow children to be killed, injured and traumatized as a result of their participation in armed combat", Amnesty International said.

Proposals for a total ban on using child combatants came from all African governments as well as the governments of Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Spain and Uruguay and the Trade Unions.

The USA position was also endorsed by the governments of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Portugal, San Marino, Sweden and Turkey.

After closed-door negotiations, delegates could only agree to prohibit "*forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflicts*".

"Participation in armed conflicts is hazardous regardless of whether the child is forcibly, compulsory or voluntarily recruited," Amnesty International said. "A convention on the worst forms of child labour should protect all children from participating in armed conflicts."

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