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Chad: End the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict

Boys as young as 13-years-old are being used as soldiers by officers of the Chadian national army and armed groups, a report by Amnesty International said today.

More than 40 former and current child soldiers from Chad and Darfur describe how they were compelled to join the groups in testimonies presented in the report “A compromised future: The plight of children recruited by armed forces and groups in eastern Chad”.

“It is tragic that thousands of children are denied their childhood and are manipulated by adults into fighting their wars,” said Erwin van der Borcht, Amnesty International’s Africa program director. “This scandalous child abuse must not be allowed to continue.”

“The Chadian government – and the Chadian and Sudanese armed groups operating in eastern Chad – must immediately stop the recruitment and use of children under 18 and release all children from their ranks.”

Up to half a million people live in refugee or displacement camps in eastern Chad after being forced to flee from their homes following the violence.

These camps prove to be fertile recruiting grounds for children as the residents have little access to education, few employment opportunities and have often lost relatives and friends in the fighting.

A former child combatant of the Sudanese opposition armed group Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) now living in a camp in eastern Chad told Amnesty International: “There is nothing to do here; there is no work, no school, no money and I am poor.... In the JEM I am not paid but, when we are in combat, we take stuff from the enemy.”

Children dressed in nice clothes are sometimes sent to camps with money and cigarettes to lure new recruits, offering between US\$20 and US\$500 to those who join up.

Those aged between 13 and 17 are most likely to be used directly in combat while children as young as 10 are used as porters and messengers.

Though the Chadian government with the assistance of UNICEF launched a demobilization and reintegration program for children associated with armed forces and groups in 2007, this has had little success. The failure of the program is partly due to underfunding but is exacerbated by continued insecurity, extreme poverty and the reluctance of political and military officials to engage with demobilization processes. Many former child soldiers do not go through the demobilization and reintegration process.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the lack of accountability for those suspected of committing human rights violations, including the recruitment of children. There have been no

prosecutions of members of the army and armed groups for recruiting and using children.

Eleven men were arrested in connection with the recruitment of children in a refugee camp in September 2010, but it is not clear what happened to them. As far as Amnesty International is aware these men were never brought to trial.

On 20 January 2011, Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno ordered an amnesty for crimes committed by members of the armed opposition, effectively perpetuating impunity for the human rights abuses committed against children used in hostilities.

“Instead of benefiting from amnesty, alleged perpetrators of human rights violations including the recruitment and use of child soldiers should be investigated. Individuals reasonably suspected of being involved in such crimes should be prosecuted in national courts in trials that meet international fair trial standards” said Erwin van der Borgh.

“President Deby must issue clear orders to all army commanders not to recruit or use children and to cooperate with demobilization programs,” he added. “There is never an excuse to violate the rights of children.”

BACKGROUND

- The security situation remains highly volatile in eastern Chad. Already poor and politically unstable, eastern Chad has been drawn into the crisis in neighbouring Darfur since 2003. Around 260,000 Darfuri refugees live in camps in eastern Chad in addition to more than 170,000 Chadians present in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) sites. Chadian and Sudanese opposition armed groups regularly operate in the area. Other serious human rights abuses take place during clashes between ethnic groups. More details on this can be found here: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR20/012/2010/en>
- At the end of 2010 MINURCAT - the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad – withdrew from eastern Chad by request of the Chadian government. This withdrawal is likely to result in an increase in insecurity and human rights violations in the area.