

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, INTERNATIONAL
FEDERATION TERRE DESHOMMES, INTERNATIONAL SAVE THE CHILDREN
ALLIANCE, JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE, QUAKER UN OFFICE**

News Service 122/98

GENEVA, 30 JUNE 1998
AI INDEX: ACT 76/01/98

International campaign launched against the use of child soldiers

Geneva – A new coalition of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) against the use of child soldiers was launched today in Geneva and New York. According to latest estimates, more than 300,000 children under 18 years of age are fighting in armed conflicts around the world and hundreds of thousands more are members of armed forces who could be sent into combat at any moment. Although most recruits are over 15 years of age, significant recruitment starts at 10 years, and the use of even younger children has been recorded.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has been formed in response to the failure of negotiations within the United Nations to agree a prohibition on keeping children out of armed forces. The Coalition is calling for the adoption and implementation of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child to raise the minimum age for military recruitment and use in hostilities to 18 years. The current international minimum age is only 15 years, although most countries do not accept under-18s in their armed forces.

Speaking in Geneva at the launch, the Coalition Coordinator, Stuart Maslen, declared that: The use of children as soldiers has no place in a civilised society and must be stopped. The Coalition is calling upon the international community to ensure children are given strict legal protection against involvement in armed conflict.

The Coalition is being headed by a Steering Committee of six NGOs – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance (represented by Swedish Save the Children), Jesuit Refugee Service, Geneva, and Quaker UN Office, Geneva. It will be coordinated by a small Secretariat based in France close to Geneva.

Information on the numbers of child soldiers in the world, including the recruitment ages in governmental armed forces, is also being published on the Internet by Swedish Save the Children (<<http://www.rb.se>>), which holds the world's most comprehensive database on the subject.

The objective of the Coalition is in line with the Plan of Action concerning Children in Armed Conflict adopted by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1995. The Plan of Action commits the Movement to promoting the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation in armed conflicts of children below the age of 18 years and to taking concrete action to protect and assist child victims of armed conflicts. Close links are also being established between the Coalition and the United Nations.

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For further information contact Amnesty International's Press Office in London: +44 171 413 5566.

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NEW YORK, 30 JUNE 1998

AI INDEX: ACT 76/01/98

Governments must stop the use of child soldiers: new research estimates 300,000 child combatants world-wide

New York – Today, a new international coalition called on the world's governments to establish an effective ban on the growing use of child soldiers. The latest research on child soldiers estimates that more than 300,000 children under 18 years old are fighting in armed conflicts around the world, the coalition of human rights and aid groups reported.

The new Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers said that hundreds of thousands more children are members of armed forces who could be sent into combat at any moment. Although most recruits are over 15 years of age, significant recruitment starts at 10 years, and the use of even younger children has been recorded.

Current international standards allow children as young as 15 to be recruited into armed forces and participate in hostilities. Efforts through a UN working group to raise the age to 18 have been blocked by the United States and a handful of other countries.

The United States, which currently accepts 17-year old volunteers into its armed forces, has vigorously opposed an 18-year minimum, despite the fact that 17-year olds make up less than one-half of one percent of its active forces.

"The narrow self-interests of nations like the United States should not be allowed to stand in the way of global protections for children in armed conflict," says Jo Becker, chair of the Coalition's steering committee and a representative of Human Rights Watch. "With public pressure and political will, we can stop this reprehensible practice."

The Coalition is being established by six international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service (Geneva), International Federation Terre des Hommes, the Quaker United Nations Office (Geneva), and Swedish Save the Children (on behalf of the International Save the Children Alliance). The coalition is working in close cooperation with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and key UN agencies and bodies. The Coalition is campaigning in favour of an international ban on the recruitment and participation of children under the age of 18 through the adoption of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Previous estimates of the number of child soldiers ranged between 200,000 and 250,000. Information on the numbers of child soldiers in the world, including recruitment ages in

governmental armed forces, is also being published on the Internet by Swedish Save the Children (www.rb.se), which holds the world's most comprehensive database on the subject.

A press conference in New York on June 30 will include a former child soldier from Guatemala, along with Olaru Otunnu, the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, Stephen Lewis, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, and Jo Becker of Human Rights Watch and the Coalition.

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