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COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

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Steering Committee Members: Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva, Rädda Barnen for the International Save the Children Alliance, International Federation Terre des Hommes and World Vision International and several regional NGOs from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 2200 HOURS GMT MONDAY 11 FEBRUARY

PRESS RELEASE

RED HANDS TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Thousands of red hands, the logo of the 'Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers', were planted symbolically in the grounds of the United Nations Palais des Nations in Geneva to draw attention to more than 300,000 child soldiers still fighting in today's cruel armed conflicts and wars.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs Mary Robinson, today joined children and campaigners around the world to mark the entry into force of a new UN treaty prohibiting the use of children under 18 in hostilities.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict has to date been signed by 94 states and ratified by 14.

"Today we have reached another milestone in our fight to stop the exploitation of children by militaries," said Rory Mungoven, coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. "The growing number of governments and armed groups which have endorsed this international ban shows the tide of international opinion has turned against this appalling abuse of children."

Napoleon Adok, a former child soldier who fought with government armed forces in Sudan from the age of 14, presented Mrs Robinson with letters and drawings from child soldiers and children affected by conflicts around the world.

"I am happy to see the world has finally taken action to end the horror facing children in conflict zones," Napoleon said. "All nations should ratify the Optional Protocol in honour of the millions of children who have lost their lives in war."

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs Mary Robinson called on states not only to ratify the Optional Protocol, but to make binding declarations ending all forms of military recruitment and participation of children under 18 years of age.

"We are urging all governments and armed groups to end the military recruitment of children under 18 and to release and rehabilitate those children already in service," said Mary Robinson. "There can no longer be any excuses for arming children to fight adult's wars."

The Coalition estimates that half a million children are currently serving in government armed forces, paramilitaries and armed groups in 85 countries worldwide; more than 300,000 of these are actively participating in fighting in more than 35 countries.

Similar campaign events to mark the occasion are being organised by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in Bangladesh, Belgium, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines,

Rwanda, Tanzania, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uganda, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Background

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was formed in May 1998 by leading non-governmental organisations to seek to end the military recruitment and participation in armed conflict of all children under 18 years of age. Its steering committee members currently include Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva, Rädde Barnen for the International Save the Children Alliance, Terre des Hommes and World Vision International and several regional NGOs from Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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Information on child soldiers and the Coalition's activities can be found on our website: www.child-soldiers.org