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## **Child Soldiers: Governments agree to ban use of child combatants but treaty fails to prohibit all recruitment of under-18's**

Concluding six years of negotiations, governments today agreed to ban the use of children under the age of eighteen in armed conflicts. The treaty applies to both national armed forces and to non-governmental armed groups. However, it failed to establish eighteen as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment into government armed forces.

In a significant shift, the United States agreed for the first time to end the deployment of under-18's in combat.

"This is a great advance for children around the world," said Jo Becker, steering committee chair for the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. "When backed by political and public pressure, this treaty will help stop the appalling use of children as soldiers."

The Coalition expressed disappointment that the agreement failed to establish an eighteen year age minimum for voluntary recruitment.

"The best way to ensure that children are not used in war is to ensure that they are not recruited in the first place," said Becker. "Unfortunately, many governments based their positions on narrow military interests, rather than the best interests of children."

The Coalition also noted that the agreement creates a double-standard by prohibiting all recruitment of children by non-governmental armed groups but allowing governmental forces to recruit volunteers under eighteen.

The Coalition credited several governments for strong efforts to achieve a prohibition on any recruitment or use of children in hostilities, in particular, Switzerland, Belgium, Uruguay, Portugal, Sweden, Guatemala, the Czech Republic, Ethiopia, Poland, Denmark, Mozambique and Finland.

The treaty is an optional protocol to the nearly-universally ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention generally defines a child as any person under the age of eighteen, but was adopted in 1989 with the lower age of fifteen as a minimum for recruitment and use in hostilities. The protocol was drafted to address this anomaly in children's rights standards.

The protocol includes the following key provisions:

- Establishes eighteen as the minimum age for conscription and for direct participation in hostilities;
- Requires governments to raise their minimum age for voluntary recruitment beyond the current minimum of fifteen, and to deposit a binding declaration stating the minimum age they will respect;

- Prohibits the recruitment or use in hostilities of children under the age of eighteen by rebel or other non-governmental armed groups, and requires states to criminalize such practices;
- Requires government measures to demobilize and rehabilitate former child soldiers, and reintegrate them into society.

The Coalition pledged to monitor compliance with the treaty, to campaign for broad ratification, and to continue pushing for a higher enlistment age in countries that currently recruit under-18's. Countries that have recently adopted legislation raising their recruitment age to 18 include South Africa, the Czech Republic, and Portugal.

The Coalition noted that many delegations made significant compromises in order to achieve an agreement that was acceptable to all governments, and called for swift and universal ratification of the agreement. It will be open for signature and ratification after adoption by this year's UN General Assembly.

The Coalition estimates that over 300,000 children under the age of eighteen are currently being used in armed conflicts in more than thirty countries around the world.

#### **Note to Editors**

The international Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers is headed by a Steering Committee composed of ten regional and international NGOs: Amnesty International, African Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, Latin American Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Quaker United Nations Office- Geneva, World Vision International.

The Steering Committee meets four times a year to agree on Coalition policy and strategy.

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**For more information please call Ben Rowse at Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or + 44 966 361 131 (cell phone)**