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Africa: Day of the African Child: the unending plight of child soldiers

As Africa observes the Day of the African Child, as many as 120,000 children under 18 years old, some as young as eight, may be compelled to spend the day as child soldiers across the continent, Amnesty International said today.

Despite the growing dynamic of peace in many conflict areas in Africa, the inadequate and insufficient response of African governments and the international community to solve the problem of child soldiering is encouraging the continued ruthless exploitation of Africa's children by leaders of armed forces and armed political groups to further their own material and political ends.

Whether in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda, Somalia, children have been abducted in the streets or taken from classrooms, refugee camps or camps for the internally displaced. Many have also been taken from their homes at gunpoint, as their distraught parents looked on helplessly. Others have reported being picked up while playing in their neighbourhood or walking along the road. Some children are known to have voluntarily joined the army or armed political groups after being separated from their families and facing poverty and the collapse of basic social services such as educational and health centres.

Once recruited, forcibly or otherwise, some children are sent to camps for military training and indoctrination. Here, they are mostly subjected to violent treatment. In some camps children have died from deplorable conditions. After a few weeks of training, the children are deployed to the front lines for combat. In DRC, some front line duties have included serving as decoys, detectors of enemy positions, bodyguards for commandants, or sex slaves. Most girl soldiers are sexually exploited or raped by their commanders or other soldiers. Boys and girls are also often used as porters for ammunition, water and food, or as cooks.

At an unofficial camp for internally displaced people in Monrovia, Liberia, several adolescent girls recounted how they had been abducted from Ganta, Nimba County, by former government militia in March 2003; they had all been raped, including **E.B.**, aged 14 years. *"I was coming from church on Sunday morning. They abducted five girls coming from church. They took us to the front line. We had to cook and carry ammunition in the bush. They treated us bad; if I didn't go with them, they would kill me...They brought me to Monrovia and left me here. I want to go to school. I want to go back to Nimba to my people."*

Once on the front lines, children are repeatedly forced to commit abuses, including rape and murder, against enemy soldiers and civilians. **Jean-Noel R.** joined the Burundian armed forces aged 15 in 1998. In the five years that followed before he deserted with serious mental health problems, he served in

several areas of Burundi as well as Katanga, DRC. *"Everything in the army is done through fear. I didn't want to do the things I did. All I did was through fear. Congo was the worst. I saw too many things ... I am very tired."*

The personal price paid by child soldiers is often high: brutalised and deeply traumatised by their experiences, many continue to be haunted by the memories of the abuses they witnessed or were forced to commit. For girl soldiers, beyond the brutality and trauma of rape itself, sexual assault may result in serious physical injury and forced pregnancy, as well as infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Many former child soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. **Benedicte**, who was recruited at the age of 11 by an armed group in Goma, eastern DRC, recalled to Amnesty International what she witnessed on the front lines: *"Several of my friends were killed on the battlefield. And others lost their limbs - their arms, their legs. I remember there was one comrade, a friend of mine, who had his nose blown away. Another had a big hole blown in his face, around his lips and mouth."*

Some former child soldiers who have been demobilized told Amnesty International that they are afraid to return to their communities because the local people witnessed them taking part in crimes.

"The recruitment and use of children under 15 in armed conflict is an egregious human rights abuse, and constitutes war crimes. On this Day of the African Child, African governments should sign, ratify and vigorously implement international standards which prohibit the recruitment and use of child soldiers, notably the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child," Amnesty International said.

"Tackling the practice and legacy of child soldiering is an important element in achieving a durable peace in which the human rights of all are respected. In those countries where disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes are ongoing, priority should be given to child soldiers," the organization urged.

Beyond the legal and political abolition of recruitment and use of child soldiers, economic development and peace building efforts must be addressed, so that demobilization and rehabilitation of former child soldiers are sustainable. If not addressed properly, the legacy of using child soldiers in Africa, and for its children who witnessed and committed crimes, will be profound and enduring.

For access to the Day of the African Child webpage, go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/childsoldiers-africanchild-eng>

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