

amnesty international

Liberia

The promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers

The lives of Liberia's children have been blighted by 14 years of almost continuous conflict. They have been killed, made orphans, maimed, abducted, deprived of education and health care – and recruited and used as child soldiers.

The use of child soldiers in Liberia

All parties to the conflict - the former government of Liberia and the two armed opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia – have used child soldiers.

Boys and girls as young as seven have been forced to fight, carry ammunition, prepare food or carry out other tasks. Girls have been raped and forced to provide sexual services. Many were given drugs and alcohol and, with little or no training, sent directly to the front line where they were killed or wounded. Those resisting recruitment or refusing to comply with their commanders' orders were beaten or killed.

Children living in internally displaced people's camps have been particularly vulnerable to recruitment, although many children were also abducted from the street, market places, their homes or schools.

There are an estimated 21,000 child soldiers in Liberia. A peace agreement signed in August 2003 and the UN Security Council's decision the following month to deploy a large peace-keeping operation offered hopes of finally ending the conflict. An urgent and adequate response to the plight of these children is necessary to reinforce Liberia's peace process and also contribute to stability in the West Africa region, scarred by years of conflict and insecurity.



A former government child soldier fires into the air, Monrovia, 19 December 2003. ©AP

"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... I want to go to school. I want to go back to Nimba to my people."

14-year-old girl abducted and raped by former government militia in March 2003

Disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration

Priority must be given to the swift disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) of child soldiers.

The DDRR program devised by the UN and other agencies includes specific arrangements for children, ensuring health care, education, skills training, family-tracing and reunification, and responding to the particular needs of girls, many of whom struggle with the psychological, physical and social consequences of sexual and other

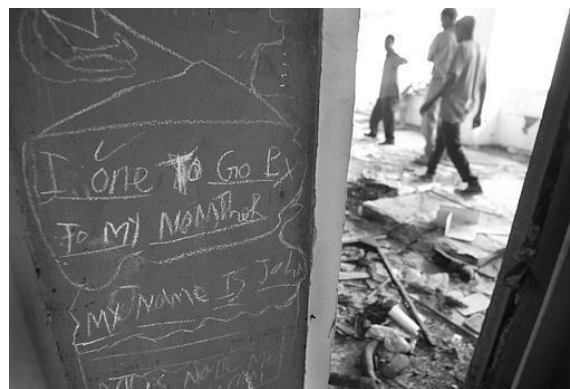
forms of physical abuse, forced "marriage", pregnancy and childbirth.

While immediate disarmament and demobilization is a priority, the needs of former child soldiers, their families and communities do not end there; rehabilitation and reintegration are complex and long-term and require sustained funding and support. Education is crucial and is invariably the priority of former child soldiers themselves, as

many of them told AI delegates visiting Liberia in November 2003. **Ending impunity**

Recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime. The international community and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) have, however, shown little will to bring to justice the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law committed during the conflict. The prevailing culture of impunity has been reinforced by a proposal in the peace agreement that the NTGL consider granting a general amnesty to all those engaged or involved in military activities during the conflict.

International law prohibits amnesty for crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law. Allowing perpetrators to commit human rights abuses without consequences for themselves perpetuates their crimes, denies justice to the victims and undermines confidence in the justice system and the rule of law. Lasting peace – which Liberia's children deserve – will remain elusive unless those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.



"I one to go by to my mother" scrawled on a wall in the derelict Ducor Hotel in Monrovia, where many former government militia fighters were living. ©AP

"To hold guns is not good for children. You cannot sleep good, you cannot eat good food ... Now I see that I will have a good future by going to school."

Nine-year-old boy who fought with LURD forces

TAKE ACTION!

In May 2004, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child will consider implementation of Liberia's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is an opportunity to highlight the plight of Liberia's children, to urge the NTGL to take concrete measures to improve children's lives and to encourage the international community to support the NTGL's efforts to meet its commitments.

Send faxes to the Liberian authorities, urging them to:

- condemn the recruitment and use as combatants of children under 18 and give the highest priority to the immediate disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers;
- work with UN, child protection and other relevant agencies to ensure that the specific provisions made in the DDRR program for child soldiers, including those for girls and victims of sexual violence, are implemented;
- rule out the possibility of any amnesty for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law and work with Liberian civil society and the international community to bring those responsible for these crimes to justice.

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You could also send copies of your letters to the Liberian embassy accredited to your country.

For further information, see the Amnesty International report *Liberia: The promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers* (AI Index: AFR 34/006/2004). Please also visit our online slide show and web action, accessible at www.amnesty.org.

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