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Joint Statement: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

Sierra Leone: Special court should prosecute child recruiters

The proposed Special Court for Sierra Leone should prioritise the prosecution of those who have recruited children as soldiers rather than child soldiers themselves, said the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

The Coalition welcomed the inclusion of the recruitment of children under fifteen as a war crime under the proposed court's jurisdiction, in a proposal presented by the UN Secretary General to the UN Security Council today.

"Thousands of children have been abducted by the Revolutionary United Front, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and other groups, subjected to brutal treatment and forced to fight against their will," said Jo Becker, chairperson of the Coalition.

"This court must hold responsible those who have exploited children as weapons of war."

But the Coalition warned that any children brought before the Special Court, either as defendants or witnesses, would require special protection and treatment in line with the principles of juvenile and restorative justice. The proposed Special Court would allow prosecutions of children aged between 15 and 18, unlike the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court which excluded children under the age of 18 from the court's jurisdiction.

"There is no doubt that children have participated in some of the most brutal acts in Sierra Leone," said Becker. "However, many of these children were forced to commit atrocities under threat of death, and often given drugs and alcohol to desensitize them to violence. The focus of prosecution should be those who recruited and used the children, not the children themselves."

"The Court is intended to prosecute persons most responsible for serious violations of the laws of war, and its limited resources would be best used in pursuing adult offenders," said Becker.

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The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was formed in May 1998. Its steering committee members currently include 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, Terre des Hommes and World Vision International and several regional NGOs from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

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