

### **United Kingdom: U-18s: Child soldiers at risk**

"The United Kingdom is the only country in Europe which routinely sends children under the age of 18 into armed conflict", said Amnesty International today launching the new report entitled *United Kingdom: U-18s: Child soldiers at risk*. "The UK government's policy on recruitment and deployment of children in armed conflict can lead to great risks for under 18-s, including deaths, injuries, bullying and being traumatized."

The report criticizes the United Kingdom for undermining the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child signed last September and states that the recruitment and participation in hostilities of anyone below the age of 18 could ultimately jeopardize their mental and physical integrity.

The chances of deployment for UK armed forces recruits are not theoretical and no exception is made for children. Under-18s were deployed to the Adriatic Sea and in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis. In April 1999, the media reported that the youngest tank driver, a 17-year-old, was "ready for battle" and had already been deployed in Macedonia. Jason Burt, 17, was killed in 1982 in the battle of MT Longdon, in the Falklands, while serving in the Parachute Regiment. According to his mother, soon after getting "his wings" at 17 he tried to donate blood, but he was told that he was too young. And he was also too young to join 1 Para which was about to be deployed in Northern Ireland. Yet Jason Burt was not too young to be sent to war. In a letter to his family, he wrote he had wanted to join the armed forces and potentially to go to war, but had not expected he would be going so soon. His father stated: "I kept saying he was just a boy, but they kept saying he was a professional soldier."

There has been a sharp increase in the annual recruitment of under-18s into the UK armed forces. Between March 1998 and March 1999, 9,466 under-18s were recruited representing approximately a third of the total intake.

Children are a favoured target for recruitment as a means to address difficulties of the UK armed forces in recruiting and retaining staff. Amnesty International calls on the government to develop a consistent policy of investment of resources in targeting different age-groups for recruitment instead of just targeting the most vulnerable young people in the UK. "Children should not be providing the solution to the difficulties faced by the armed forces in recruiting and retaining service personnel," added the organization.

"Arduous training programs and training with live ammunition, to which under-18s are subjected, may violate the government's obligations to ensure and protect the best interests of the child, particularly their rights to life and physical and mental integrity" said Amnesty International. Training has proved on several occasions to be lethal. From 1982 to 1999, the Ministry of Defence recorded the deaths of 12 under-18s during training schemes, exercises, and other forms of training. Injuries suffered during training are also of concern. From 1996 to 1999, 407 injury incidents involving under-18s were recorded.

There are also cases of bullying and ill-treatment. In 1999, a court martial in Aldershot, Hampshire, heard the case of five army instructors accused of having ill-treated some teenage recruits, all aged 18 or under, between 1 September and 12 November 1996. The recruits were subjected to humiliating practices such as a mock execution, simulating sexual acts, eating disgusting substances, bathing

with scouring powder and various forms of physical assault. In May 2000 a 17-year-old rifleman was found not guilty of the charge of desertion after he argued that he had been systematically bullied, including from his superiors; that he had been dragged out of his room, forced to strip and to sing with others jeering at his genitals; he was then forced to run naked around the barrack block.

The report also highlights the difficulties encountered by children and their parents in understanding the nature of the commitment to serve in the armed forces. For instance the "Notice Paper" setting out the terms and conditions of service is complicated and difficult to understand. It is not made adequately clear, for example, that an under-18 could be deployed in armed conflict.

In June 1999 the media reported a case of a mother who had written to the government in 1997 about the health conditions of her son who had been deployed with the Queen's Own Highlanders during the Gulf war when he was 17 and returned "totally broken". "I never dared to think that they would send him into battle before he was 18. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have signed the training contract", added the mother.

Amnesty International urges the United Kingdom to ratify the Optional Protocol as soon as possible without any reservation; and to adopt a policy of not deploying under-18s in situations of armed conflict or in any other peace-keeping or similar mission. The organization also urges the government to implement a policy of maintaining the civilian status of under-18s during the training.

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