

## CHILD SOLDIERS FACT SHEET

- Thousands of children under the age of 18 are fighting in current armed conflicts. They serve in government forces, armed rebel groups, and government-supported militias. Some are as young as eight years old.
- Since 2001, the participation of child soldiers has been reported in 21 on-going or recent armed conflicts in almost every region of the world. Currently, children are participating in active armed conflicts in 14 countries or territories: Afghanistan, Burma, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Iraq, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Thailand, and Uganda.
- Children are uniquely vulnerable to military recruitment because of their emotional and physical immaturity. They are easily manipulated and can be drawn into violence that they are too young to resist or understand.
- Technological advances in weaponry and the proliferation of small arms have contributed to the increased use of child soldiers. Lightweight automatic weapons are simple to operate, often easily accessible, and can be used by children as easily as adults.
- Children are most likely to become child soldiers if they are poor, separated from their families, displaced from their homes, living in a combat zone or have limited access to education.
- Many children join armed groups because of economic or social pressure, or because children believe that the group will offer food or security. Others are forcibly recruited, “press-ganged” or abducted by armed groups.

- Both girls and boys are used as child soldiers. In some countries, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and Uganda, a third or more of the child soldiers were reported to be girls. In some conflicts, girls may be raped, or given to military commanders as “wives”.
- Once recruited, child soldiers may serve as porters or cooks, guards, messengers or spies. Many are pressed into combat, where they may be forced to the front lines or sent into minefields ahead of older troops. Some children have been used for suicide missions.
- Children are sometimes forced to commit atrocities against their own family or neighbours. Such practices help ensure that the child is “stigmatised” and unable to return to his or her home community.
- In some countries, former child soldiers have access to rehabilitation programmes to help them locate their families, get back into school, receive vocational training, and re-enter civilian life. However, many children have no access to such programmes. They may have no way to support themselves and are at risk of re-recruitment.
- In 2000, the United Nations adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The protocol prohibits the forced recruitment of children under the age of 18 or their use in hostilities. To date, it has been ratified by more than 128 countries.
- The ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 for use in armed conflict. It has been ratified by over 150 countries.

## THE VOICES OF CHILD SOLDIERS

“The section leader ordered us to take cover and open fire. There were seven of us, and seven or ten of the enemy. I was too afraid to look, so I put my face in the ground and shot my gun up at the sky. I was afraid their bullets would hit my head. I fired two magazines, about forty rounds. I was afraid that if I didn’t fire the section leader would punish me.”

**Khin Maung Than, recruited by Burma’s national army at age eleven.**

“My parents refused to give me up to the LTTE so about fifteen of them came to my house – it was both men and women, in uniforms, with rifles, and guns in holsters... I was fast asleep when they came to get me at one in the morning... These people dragged me out of the house. My father shouted at them, saying ‘What is going on?’ but some of the LTTE soldiers took my father away towards the woods and beat him... They also pushed my mother onto the ground when she tried to stop them.”

**Girl recruited by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka at age sixteen.**

“I was captured in Lofa County by government forces. The forces beat me, they held me and kept me in the bush. I was tied with my arms kept still and was raped there. I was fourteen years old... After the rape, I was taken to a military base... I was used in the fighting to carry medicine. During the fighting I would carry medicine on my head and was not allowed to talk. I had to stand very still. I had to do a lot of work for the soldiers, sweeping, washing, cleaning. During this time, I felt really bad. I was afraid. I wanted to go home, but was made to stay with the soldiers.”

**Evelyn, recruited in Liberia by government forces at age fourteen.**

“I had a friend, Juanita, who got into trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn’t matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn’t hit her. So I shot again. The grave was right nearby. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, ‘You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You’ll have to do this again many more times, and you’ll have to learn not to cry.’”

**Angela, joined the FARC-EP in Colombia at age twelve.**

“Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA explained to us that all five brothers couldn’t serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until two of them died. They told us it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was nine years old.”

**Martin, recruited by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda at age twelve.**