



# MASTER'S COURSE IN: INTERNATIONAL MEDICINE-HEALTH CRISIS MANAGEMENT

## Review Article

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### **CHILDREN SOLDIERS. ARE THEY STILL BEING USED TODAY?**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Under international law, the participation of children under 18 in armed conflict is generally prohibited, and the recruitment and use of children under 15 is a war crime. The purpose of this project is to determine if nowadays and why worldwide, hundreds of thousands of children are recruited into government armed forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and a variety of other armed groups. International bibliography showed that such children are robbed of their childhood and exposed to terrible dangers and to psychological and physical suffering. The conclusion is that 66 governments have pledged to abide by an international treaty banning the use of children under the age of 18 in direct hostilities. (Amnesty International, 2011)

Key words: child soldiers, children in war, children in armed conflicts, military schools

## INTRODUCTION

Most child casualties are civilians. But one of the most deplorable developments in recent years has been the increasing use of young children as soldiers. In one sense, this is not really new. For centuries children have been involved in military campaigns - as child ratings on warships, or as drummer boys on the battlefields of Europe. Indeed the word 'infantry', for foot-soldiers, can also mean a group of young people. What is frightening nowadays is the escalation in the use of children as fighters. Recently, in 25 countries, thousands of children under the age of 16 have fought in wars. In 1988 alone, they numbered as many as 200,000.

One reason for this is the proliferation of light weapons. In the past, children were not particularly effective as front-line fighters since most of the lethal hardware was too heavy and cumbersome for them to manipulate. A child might have been able to wield a sword or a machete but was no match for a similarly armed adult.

However, a child with an assault rifle, a Soviet-made AK-47 or an American M-16, is a fearsome match for anyone. These weapons are very simple to use. The AK-47 can be stripped and reassembled by a child of 10. The rifles have also become much cheaper and more widely available - having few moving parts they are extremely durable and have steadily accumulated in war zones.

Besides being able to use lethal weapons, children have other advantages as soldiers. They are easier to intimidate and they do as they are told. They are also less likely than adults to run away and they do not demand salaries.

In long-drawn-out conflicts children also become a valued resource. Many current disputes have lasted a generation or more - half of those under way in 1993 had been going on for more than a decade. Children who have grown up surrounded by violence see this as a permanent way of life. Alone, orphaned, frightened, bored and frustrated, they will often finally choose to fight. In the Philippines, which has suffered for decades from a war of insurgency, many children have become soldiers as soon as they enter their teens. When schools are closed and families fragmented, there are few influences that can compete with a warrior's life. (Bellamy Carol, UNICEF, 1996)

## CHILD SOLDIERS

A child soldier has been defined as a person under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly participates in an armed conflict as part of an armed force or group. While some children wield assault rifles, machetes, or rocket propelled grenades on the front lines, others are used in "combat support" roles as messengers, spies, cooks, mine clearers, porters and sexual slaves. It is not uncommon for them to participate in killing and raping. Today in most of the armed conflicts raging in the world, an estimated 300,000 children are active participants in combat.

In addition some children are recruited into a country's armed forces, even if the country in question is in a state of peace. For example, the United States Pentagon sponsors programs for approximately 400,000 high school boys and girls where children are taught to march, shoot, act and think like soldiers. *More than half of all European States accept under-18-year-olds in their armed forces.* The United Kingdom routinely sends 17-year-olds into combat. According to their official statistics from January 1999, there was a total of 6,676 male and female 16- and 17-year-olds, and over 128,000 cadets from the ages of 10 to 16 in training schools around the country. Similarly, military schools are a common feature across Latin America, Asia and Africa. No area is immune to this issue. (United Nations, 2000)



*"Encouraging young students to join the Army", Source: Military School Review Blog, 2008*

### *How do children become soldiers?*

In 1996, in a special report on the impact of armed conflict on children, Mrs. Graça Machel explained how children become soldiers:

*"Hunger and poverty may drive parents to offer children for service or attract children to volunteer as a way to guarantee regular meals, clothing or medical attention. Some children become soldiers to protect*

*themselves or their families in the face of violence and chaos around them, while others, particularly adolescents, are lured by ideology. Children also identify with social causes, religious expression, self-determination, national liberation or the pursuit of political freedom, as in South Africa or the occupied territories."* (Machel Graça, 1996)

There are other reasons, too. Children are impressionable and can be manipulated easily into becoming ruthless and unquestioning tools of war. Child soldiers committed some of the worst atrocities in Sierra Leone. And the proliferation of lightweight weapons -- requiring no physical prowess or technical expertise to manipulate -- has made it possible for very young children to bear and use arms.

Recruiting children by force is not uncommon. Armed groups take children as they pass through villages. Some groups have specifically recruited orphans and nurtured their loyalty.

Even girls are not spared. In case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia and Uganda, it was found that reportedly a third of child soldiers were girls. Girls have fought in Kosovo for the Kosovo Liberation Army and in Turkey for the Kurdistan Workers Party. (United Nations, 2000)

***Why are girls considered child soldiers? Don't they just accompany the men and boys who do the fighting?***

Girls usually fulfill multiple roles. While they are frequently recruited and used for sexual purposes, they are virtually always also involved in other military tasks, including combat, laying explosives, portering, and performing domestic tasks.

Girls not only fight on the front lines but provide domestic labor and serve as "wives". From the age of 13 they may be given to boy soldiers or adult commanders. They have no choice: those who refuse are killed or raped. Of course, many of them soon become mothers who must take on the added responsibility of providing food for their children. It's a grueling existence, and malnourishment, exhaustion and mistreatment take a high toll. (UNICEF, 2003)

In addition to pregnancy and motherhood, repeated sexual assault can also lead to infection, disease (including HIV/AIDS), uterine deformation, vaginal sores, menstrual complications, sterility and death, as well as to shock, loss of dignity, shame, low self-esteem, poor concentration and memory, persistent nightmares, depression, and other post-traumatic stress effects. (Hymphreys Gary, 2009)



Source: *Michelle Chen for the South China Morning Post, Clamor, INTHEFRAY.COM, 2008*

### ***How many child soldiers are there?***

It is not possible to give a global figure for the number of child soldiers at any one time.

The reasons that exact figures cannot be calculated are various. For example, military commanders frequently conceal children or deny access to observers. Armed groups frequently operate in dangerous, inaccessible zones to which observers do not have access and many children perform support roles and are therefore not visible in military operations.

The way in which children are recruited also prevents accurate documentation. Children are recruited both formally and informally. In some situations they stay in their communities and report only when required and often for short periods of time, for example when fighting escalates or to build strength while negotiating a demobilization package. Child soldiers also shift between groups or are released and then recruited by a different group. Many children are killed or die of injuries sustained or illnesses caused by the hardships of military life. Child soldiers often reach the age of 18 while in the ranks and are no longer

considered children. The years spent as a child soldier then become invisible.

*Which country or region has the worst record for using child soldiers?*

Unfortunately child soldiers exist in all regions of the world and in almost every country where there is armed conflict.

Africa has the largest number of child soldiers. Child soldiers are being used in armed conflict in Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sudan.

In Asia thousands of children are involved in fighting forces in active conflict and ceasefire situations, although government refusal of access to conflict zones has made it impossible to document the numbers involved. Myanmar is unique in the region, as the only country where government armed forces forcibly recruit and use children between the ages of 12 and 18. Child soldiers also exist in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand, where they are mainly associated with armed opposition groups, factional or clan-based groups or groups composed of ethnic or religious minorities.

In the Middle East child soldiers are reportedly used in Iran, Iraq, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in tribal groups in Yemen.

In Latin America up to 14,000 children are estimated to be involved with armed political groups and army-backed paramilitaries in Colombia.

In Europe under-18s are believed to be involved in Turkey and a range of armed groups in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, although the numbers are impossible to establish given the lack of information available.

*Why is the minimum recruitment age for child soldiers set at 18? Surely in many "non-western" societies children assume "adult" responsibilities far below this age?*

The Coalition bases its work on international legal standards for child protection. The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets the age of majority at 18 years. It states that children and youth below 18 require special protection because of their physical and mental immaturity.

Virtually all nation states have pledged to implement the provisions of the Convention.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict came into force in February 2002. It deals specifically with the use of child soldiers. It bans the direct use of all children under the age of 18 in hostilities and prohibits all military use of under-18s by non-governmental armed groups. While government armed forces are permitted to recruit volunteers from the age of 16, they must take steps to ensure that the recruitment is genuinely voluntary. Many "non-western" states were involved in drafting and negotiating the Optional Protocol and many have pledged to abide by its terms and to end the use of child soldiers. (Forbes A. Victoria, 2008)

There is continuing debate about the age of adulthood in "western" and "non-western" countries. For example, the governments of Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the USA continue to recruit under 18 year olds into their armed forces, although they are not allowed to vote. In some Middle Eastern countries on the other hand, the age of majority is higher than 18 years. In many countries where children are recruited - either legally or illegally - families, communities, activists, academics, doctors, lawyers and former child soldiers themselves have spoken out against the practice. They have argued for laws and other measures to protect children from the dangers and trauma of involvement in hostilities or other military activity.

***Does the Coalition support the recruitment of under 18 year olds into government armed forces?***

No. The Coalition campaigns for a complete prohibition of all recruitment and use of under-18s for military purposes by any armed force. Even if they are not sent to fight, young recruits in government armed forces are frequently exposed to bullying and other forms of physical or sexual abuse, hazardous training activities, and to harsh discipline and difficult living conditions.

***Some child soldiers are known to have committed human rights atrocities. Shouldn't they be punished for such crimes?***

Child soldiers, even those who have committed human rights abuses, should be treated first and foremost as victims of adult crimes - the



prosecution should be prioritized of those who unlawfully recruited and used them.

However, there will be cases where a child soldier was clearly in control of his or her actions, was not coerced, drugged, or forced into committing atrocities. In such cases, not holding children accountable may deny justice to the victims. Acknowledgement or atonement, including in some instances prosecution, may be an important part of personal recovery and may contribute to successful reintegration of former child soldiers into their families, communities and society at large. However, in any criminal justice process involving a former child soldier, international standards on juvenile justice must be adhered.



Source: *Amnesty International ad campaign "300,000 child soldiers dream of being children", France, 2007*

***Most child soldiers are used by non-governmental armed political groups. How can they be stopped from using child soldiers?***

Non-governmental armed groups are not bound by international law in the same way as governments. However, child soldier recruiters may face prosecution by the International Criminal Court, established in 1998. The statute of the court defines the use of children under 15 in hostilities as a war crime. The court announced its first investigations in 2003, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, where child soldiers have been extensively used by armed groups. In 2006 it prosecuted a Congolese warlord for recruitment of child soldiers.



The Special Court for Sierra Leone issued its first indictments in 2003, including against former Liberian president Charles Taylor. The indictments included charges of recruiting or using children under the age of 15 in hostilities. The court was established in 2002 to prosecute those suspected of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the 1991-2002 war.

Prosecutions of child recruiters may serve as a deterrent to armed groups in future. Some armed groups are seeking international legitimacy and support for their political objectives. Negative publicity arising from child soldier use might undermine such support and lead to pledges and action to stop the practice. Armed groups may also respond to pressure from governments tacitly supporting their activities or providing military or other assistance. In some cases armed groups may be open to negotiations with governments or the UN aimed at demobilizing child soldiers. If children continue to be used, the Coalition considers that the international community should act decisively with targeted sanctions and prosecutions to stop the operations of such groups. (UNICEF, 2003)

**Fig. 1 Angolan children in war**



**Figure 1**

Some 200 children 8 to 16 years of age, one third of whom were girls, were interviewed about their war experiences in a recent study carried out by the Christian Children's Fund. Two thirds of the children were natives of Huambo and Bie provinces; the rest were from eight other provinces. The interviews took place in schools, at camps for the displaced, on the streets and in orphanages. While the children selected were from a wide range of environments, they were not a representative sample. Nevertheless, the 200 interviews report traumatic experiences undoubtedly shared by many other Angolan children. Source: Study by Christian Children's Fund, 1995.

### *Turning kids into killers...*

Military commanders use proven tactics to produce unquestioning obedience in these homesick children while transforming them into killers. New recruits are often forced to kill or perpetrate various acts of violence against others, including strangers, escapees or even members of their own village or family. Coercing the children to harm or kill people they know has the added benefit of discouraging them from attempting escape, as they know they will no longer be welcome back home.

Some groups also practice cannibalism, making young recruits drink the blood or eat the flesh of their victims. While recruits are often told "*It will make you stronger,*" Wessells argues that "*the real motivation is to force children to quiet their emotional reactions to seeing people killed and demolish their sense of the sanctity of life and their tendency to show respect for the dead.*"

In addition, drugs are administered to deaden the effects of conscience: amphetamines, crack cocaine, palm wine, brown-brown (cocaine mixed with gun powder), marijuana and tranquilizers help disengage the child's actions from any sense of reality. Children who refuse to take the drugs are beaten or killed, according to Amnesty International. One rehabilitation camp director told Wessells that recruits "*would do just about anything that was ordered'* when they were on drugs.

Revenge is also used as a motivator. Ishmael Beah's commanders told him to "*visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.*"

While these tactics are very successful, the violence will still affect young consciences. "*Initially most children experience a mixture of disgust, guilt and self-contempt,*" writes Wessells. "*These normal reactions reflect the strength of children's deeply held civilian morals and social commitments not to murder or to hurt friends. Faced with the magnitude of their actions, children may also rationalize their actions by telling themselves, 'I didn't want to do it. I had to follow orders or I would be killed.'*... Other children may see such acts as surreal, as if they occurred in a dream world, and they may feel quite split off or dissociated from them. This splitting process is a normal self-protective reaction to the strain induced by the enormous gap between children's previous morals and the atrocity they have been forced to commit... The

*children's former values might not be lost so much as suspended."*  
(Wessells Michael G., 2006)

### *Learning peace...*

Children who are rescued from combat, or who survive until the conflict's conclusion, face an enormous challenge in trying to return to normal civilian life.

In the past, while immediate physical needs would often be met (food, water, shelter, security, family reunification), former child soldiers had difficulty processing their experiences and reintegrating within their communities. Many were stigmatized as rebels and failed to make the transition. Aid organizations and international governmental organizations such as UNICEF now recognize that children who have been soldiers need more than physical help. They need healing from emotional difficulties and traumatic experiences, protection from re-recruitment, training and education in peaceful roles, and a careful reintroduction into their communities. As a result, DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) provisions are now included in peace accords. These clauses are specifically intended to help facilitate victims' successful return to society without fear of stigmatism and rejection.

The rehabilitation process includes drug withdrawal and psychological adjustment but also recovery from posttraumatic stress disorder, the symptoms of which include nightmares, flashbacks, aggressiveness, hopelessness, guilt, anxiety, fear and social isolation. NGO programs include games and activities that emphasize trust-building and opportunities to practice nonviolent conflict resolution. Drawing, storytelling, music and drama are often used as ways for the children to communicate and process their experiences. (Beah Ishmael, 2007)

While they have not always succeeded the first time, NGOs involved in these rehabilitation programs have gained a wealth of experience following the recent conclusions to some long-running African conflicts. The UNICEF-initiated Paris Principles have attempted to capture this knowledge, providing guidelines for effective disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. Sixty-six governments have endorsed the principles and *"have pledged to work for the release of all child soldiers from fighting forces, and to support programs which genuinely address the complex needs of returning child soldiers."* As a result, children are successfully being returned to communities equipped with the tools

needed for the often difficult transition back to a peaceful civilian life. (Doek E. Jaak, 2008)

### *Where there's war...*

With the good work being done for former child soldiers, is it possible to foresee a time when children will no longer be sent into battle? The answer seems to lie in the phenomenon of war itself. The "Child Soldiers Global Report 2008" proclaims that *"despite the best efforts of UN agencies, NGOs and others, large-scale releases of children from armed forces or groups have rarely taken place before hostilities end. Indeed, where armed conflict does exist, child soldiers will almost certainly be involved."* The same report adds, *"Reality dictates that an end to conflict will produce the most concrete results."*

This perspective suggests that the only way to rid the world of child soldiering is to rid the world of war. But history provides little encouragement that this is possible. The Bible nevertheless makes exactly the same connection between the safety and well-being of children and an end to conflict. Contained within its pages are many passages that describe a time yet future—a time when boys and girls will play in the streets, free of the abuses and the fear with which so many of them live today. It seems that this source of ancient Hebrew wisdom and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers *both* indicate that without an end to war there will be no end to child soldiering. What the Bible offers that others can't, however, is hope that such a conclusion will someday be achieved. (Wessells Michael G., 1997)

Indeed, in these circumstances, a military unit can be something of a refuge—serving as a kind of surrogate family. In Uganda in 1986, the National Resistance Army had an estimated 3,000 children, many under 16, including 500 girls, most of whom had been orphaned and who looked on the Army as a replacement for their parents.

At a more basic level, joining an army may also be the only way to survive. Many children joined armed groups in Cambodia in the 1980s as the best way to secure food and protection. Similarly, in Liberia in 1990, children as young as seven were seen in combat because, according to the Director of the Liberian Red Cross, *"those with guns could survive."* In Myanmar, parents volunteer their children for the rebel Karen army because the guerrillas provide clothes and two square meals a day; in 1990, an estimated 900 of the 5,000-strong Karen Army were under the age of 15.

Finally, children may also have active reasons to want to fight. Like adults, they too may see themselves fighting for social justice—as was often the case in Central America or South Africa—or they may want to fight for their religious beliefs or cultural identity. In more personal terms, they may also be seeking revenge for the deaths of their parents, brothers or sisters. (Bellamy Carol, UNICEF, 1996)

### *Death and disability*

Children may die during a war from direct trauma but it is thought that more die from starvation, illness such as infections or a combination of factors involving the loss of their parents in the aftermath of war. More than 1.5 million children are estimated to have died as a direct result of violence in just over a decade. The children involved in violent conflicts are usually in low-income countries or in disadvantaged communities within lower-income to middle-income countries. It is usually impossible to get accurate numbers of children killed in military conflicts because those responsible, whether they be government armies or military groups, invariably will try and ensure that the media is not accurately informed or that the other side is blamed.

A small community consisted of 28,500 children under the age of 18 years, involved in a 13-month period of war. The results were 215 children wounded and 46 killed. Over two-thirds of the children killed and wounded were boys. Children (both boys and girls) over the age of 10 years were more likely to be killed or wounded than younger children. Most of the children died or were injured as a result of machine gun fire, rockets or bombs, including cluster bombs dropped from aircraft. A study of 94 children treated at a hospital following war-related injuries, found that the majority were wounded during shelling or bombing or leftover explosive devices. Almost 40% of the children had a permanent disability.



*An injured girl moves with the aid of a walker at a hospital in northern Uganda. She had been abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army and was shot through the leg while being rescued by government soldiers. Other injured children sit in the courtyard outside. Source: UNICEF/LeMoyne*

## *Psychological problems*

Children who are either involved in or are witnesses of armed conflict are likely to experience a variety of psychological problems ranging from anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The prevalence of PTSD will clearly vary depending upon the nature of the armed conflict and what the child has observed. The prevalence of moderate to severe PTSD in one study of 234 children aged 7-12 years was just over 40%. One year after the conflict the prevalence had fallen to 10%. The Rwandan genocide was one of the most violent conflicts in modern history. Over half a million civilians were murdered in a few months. A study of over 1500 Rwandan children and adolescents, 1 year after the killings, found that the levels of probable PTSD ranged from 54% to 62%. Ninety-five per cent of the sample were still re-experiencing symptoms. The authors felt that the extreme degree of violence witnessed (over 90% witnessed killings and had their lives threatened, 30% witnessed rape or sexual mutilation and 15% hid under corpses) suggests that psychological resilience may be extinguished and that the prevalence of PTSD may not decrease. Children who are exposed to military violence for prolonged periods may develop aggressive behavior themselves and it is ironic that children in this situation may therefore see armed conflict as a solution to the problems, thus perpetuating the violence. (Rieder M., Choonara I., 2011)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

*"The question of children and armed conflict is an integral part of the United Nations' core responsibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security, for the advancement of human rights and for sustainable human development."* Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a speech to the Security Council, 26 July 2000.

(Washington, DC) - The Obama administration should make good on its pledge to work with recipients of US military assistance to end their use of child soldiers, four leading human rights and humanitarian organizations said in a [letter](#) to President Barack Obama released today.

Amnesty International USA, Human Rights Watch, the Open Society Foundations, and World Vision U.S. said that the Obama administration had failed to secure concrete progress from Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Yemen in ending their use of child soldiers. In October 2010, Obama granted waivers to the four



countries, allowing them to continue to receive US military assistance despite their use of child soldiers in violation of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008. The law went into force in 2010.

*"We have been deeply disappointed to see no discernable progress by any of the four governments concerned as a result of US action,"* the groups said in their letter. *"We have also been disappointed by the administration's failure to articulate its policy approach to this issue."* (Becker Jo, 2011)

The organizations cited continuing use of child soldiers in each of the four countries that had received waivers. In the DRC, government forces retain hundreds of children in their ranks, and military officers charged with recruiting child soldiers have been promoted to high-ranking positions. In Chad, the army has recruited Sudanese refugee children and released only small numbers of child soldiers. In South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army has failed to implement a 2009 agreement to demobilize all children from its ranks, retaining several hundred children. In Yemen, government forces have used child soldiers, and the current uprising puts children at even greater risk of recruitment. (Myerscough Rhea, 2007)

*"Well-placed US pressure on countries using child soldiers could make a world of difference,"* said Jo Becker, children's rights advocate at Human Rights Watch. *"The Obama administration should make clear that without concrete progress in ending their use of child soldiers, Chad, South Sudan, Yemen, and the DRC will not be receiving US military assistance next year."*

When the US government announced the waivers in October 2010, administration officials stated that the four countries had been "put on notice" and that the administration would work with the countries to achieve progress on the issue.

The organizations recommended that the Obama administration make high-level contact with all four governments to demand immediate action to end their use of child soldiers, or suspend outstanding military assistance for FY 2012, and upcoming aid in 2013. (Becker Jo, 2011)

### *The next steps*

As a result of the efforts of the United Nations, the world now knows far more about child soldiers and the plight of children in armed conflict. *The UN and regional organizations have also created a legal framework aimed at protecting children in armed conflicts.* However, far too many children are still serving in armies and armed groups; far too many of them continue to suffer in conflict situations.

In a report to the UN Security Council in July 2000, Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended the next steps Member States should take. They include:

- *ratification* of those Conventions and protocols that protect children in situations of armed conflict;
- *adjusting* national laws to define as national crimes those egregious violations of the rights of children in the context of armed conflict and ensuring that national courts can exercise "universal jurisdiction" in accordance with such crimes as defined by the International Criminal Court;
- *excluding* genocide, war crimes and other egregious crimes against children from amnesty provisions during peace negotiations;
- *concrete steps* to prosecute individuals and corporations involved in illegal trafficking of currency, arms and natural resources that fuel conflicts and lead to the abuse of children;
- *making* any political, diplomatic, financial and military assistance for countries or armed groups contingent on compliance with international child protection standards;
- *addressing* the root causes of children's recruitment and participation in conflict and giving support to local communities trying to provide protection for their children in times of war;
- *financial support* for sustained education for all children both during and after conflict, particularly for former child soldiers and others;
- *including children's concerns* in peace negotiations;
- *systematic training* all UN peacekeeping personnel in the rights and protection of children and women;
- *making the concern of children* central in national priority setting, resource allocation and national policy making during the reconstruction of war-ravaged societies;

- *commitment* of armed groups to child protection standards of the Convention on the Rights of the child and its Optional Protocol and to cooperation in monitoring their adherence to those standards.

### *Why so little progress?*

Though the United Nations have created a legal framework to protect children from armed conflicts, *its actual implementation is painfully slow*. This is partly because international human rights treaties typically bind States, not non-state actors such as armed rebel groups, limiting the reach of human rights law.

Committing to international treaties is one thing, honoring them is another. Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflicts, thinks it is up to the international community to mobilize a movement of political pressure -- naming, shaming and refusing support for armed groups that continue to abuse children. "*We must also reinforce the other pillar of protection -- local standards that say that the abuse of children as a routine part of war is simply unacceptable!*" (United Nations, 2000)

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