

COLOMBIA

Some of the countries where children are being forced to serve as soldiers

CHAD
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

SUDAN

SOMALIA

UGANDA

CONGO

SOURCE: COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS; THE NEW YORK TIMES

AFGHANISTAN

MYANMAR

PHILIPPINES

ACROSS THE GLOBE, THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN ARE BEING FORCED TO SERVE AS SOLDIERS

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN IN CONGO

ARMED

AND UNDERAGE

Tanzi Bakonzi, 15 and about four feet tall, was on patrol. He stood in front of a burned-out vegetable market in Faradje, a town in northeastern Congo, wielding a rusty machete.

No matter that his enemy was the Lord's Resistance Army, the brutal rebel group whose members have been hiding out in northeastern Congo ever since they were driven out of Uganda five years ago.

No matter that the Lord's Resistance Army has machine guns, mortar bombs, and a penchant for crushing skulls, including those of several hundred people they recently massacred. It is less an army than a drugged-out street gang with military-grade weapons and 13-year-old brides. Its ranks are filled with boys brainwashed to burn down huts and pound newborn babies to death.

"I will cut them," Tanzi vowed.

Here in Congo (also known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and formerly Zaire), a civil war that started a decade ago to oust the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko is now a free-for-all among rebel groups and the government. Those groups are fighting among themselves for a share of the country's timber, copper, gold, diamonds, and other resources. All sides have relied on child soldiers.

But Congo is not the only place where the use of child soldiers has reached epidemic proportions. In other parts of Africa, Asia,

Latin America, and the Middle East, children are being used as combatants, usually against their will. And it isn't just boys: Girls are often pressed into duty as cooks or messengers. Many are subjected to sexual abuse, including rape.

While the number of conflicts involving child combatants has dropped since 2004 from 27 to 17, human rights experts estimate that there are still more than 300,000 child soldiers worldwide. (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, a human rights group based in London, considers a child soldier to be anyone under the age of 18 who is a member of government armed forces or any other armed group.)

PERFECT WEAPONS

In much of the world, particularly in unstable countries, the reality is that when conflict breaks out, children are quickly swept up. According to the United Nations, children are most likely to become soldiers when they are impoverished or separated from their families. In some countries, hunger and poverty drive parents to sell their children into service. And children are often considered the perfect "weapons."

"Child soldiers are ideal," a military commander from Chad told Human Rights Watch. "They don't complain, they don't

Jeffrey Gettleman is the Nairobi bureau chief for The New York Times; additional reporting by Seth Mydans and Lydia Polgreen of The Times; and Suzanne Bilyeu.

"Child solders are ideal. They don't complain... and if you tell them to kill, they kill."

expect to be paid—and if you tell them to kill, they kill."

In Africa, the problem is especially severe: In one country after another, conflicts have morphed from cause-driven struggles, like ending colonial rule, to criminal drives led by warlords whose goals are plunder, greed, and power.

"There might have been a little rhetoric at the beginning," says Ishmael Beah, 28, a former child soldier in the West African country of Sierra Leone and author of the best-seller *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. "But very quickly the ideology gets lost. And then it just becomes a bloodbath, a way for the commanders to plunder, a war of madness."

RECRUITED BY FORCE

The typical rebel leader operating from deep in the bush doesn't care about winning the hearts and minds of his soldiers or gaining the support of the public.

"These are brutally thuggy people who don't want to rule politically and have no strategy for winning a war," says Neil Boothby, a professor at Columbia University in New York who has worked with child soldiers around the world.

Few adults want to have anything to do with these rebel commanders, so manipulating and

abducting children becomes the best way to sustain their organized banditry.

When Beah was 13, Sierra Leone was embroiled in a civil war. Rebels attacked his village, and Beah was separated from his parents. After spending months wandering through his war-torn country, he was forcibly recruited into Sierra Leone's army. Beah was armed with an AK-47, drugged, and taught to kill.

"Killing became as easy as drinking water," he recalls.

At 16, Beah was rescued by UNICEF workers and sent to a rehabilitation clinic in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. Two years later, after recovering from drug addiction and trauma, Beah came to the U.S. He graduated from Oberlin College in Ohio in 2004 and now travels on behalf of UNICEF to raise awareness of the plight of child soldiers.

Another former child soldier, Emmanuel Jal, was forced during the 1980s to fight in the civil war between northern and southern Sudan. When he was 7, his mother was killed in the conflict. In his memoir, *A Child Soldier's Story*, Jal recalls being taken to Ethiopia, where he was recruited by a rebel group based in southern Sudan. He was rescued by a British aid worker and now, at 28, he is a successful rap musician in London.

Of course, Africa didn't invent the practice of using underage soldiers. During World War II, Germany drafted

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adolescents. So did Iran in the 1980s, when it gave 12- to 16-year-old boys plastic "keys to heaven" to hang around their necks as they cleared minefields during the Iran-Iraq War.

Today, Myanmar (also known as Burma) has one of the world's highest rates of child-soldier recruitment. Thousands of boys, some as young as 10, are purchased, kidnapped, or terrorized into joining the country's army.

'AN AFFRONT TO HUMANITY'

In Colombia, approximately 8,000 children are fighting in armed rebel groups battling the U.S.-backed government. The rebels have used boys and girls as combatants and spies, and to plant mines and explosives. According to UNICEF, the global economic slump could drive more Colombian children into these groups, because recruiters often entice them with offers of money.

In the Philippines and Sri Lanka, children are being recruited by rebel groups. In Afghanistan, there have been reports of children being used as soldiers or suicide bombers by Taliban and other insurgents. And in the Middle East, Palestinian children in the West Bank and Gaza have been sent into Israel as suicide bombers.

The U.N. calls the use of child

soldiers "an affront to humanity." In 2002, it called for the age of combatants to be at least 18. (The U.S., which allows voluntary enlistment with parental consent at 17, and the United Kingdom, which sets the minimum age at 16, are among the countries that haven't signed the agreement.)

Since 2002, international justice has begun catch up with those who use children as soldiers. In 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone convicted three commanders on charges related to child recruitment. And Thomas Lubanga, a Congolese warlord, faces similar charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

UNICEF works with human rights groups to support demobilization programs aimed at getting child soldiers away from armed groups and helping them reunite with their families.

But as lawlessness spreads through parts of Africa, armed movements are expanding from the bush to urban-area slums. Despite the efforts of the U.N. and human rights groups, children are bound to be exploited and used as soldiers.

As Jal notes, he was only 9 when he fought in his first "battle"—a murderous raid on an Ethiopian village. But an elder told him, "The gun does not know who is old or young."



A girl (far left) and boy soldiers from countries around the world.

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