

Appendix 6 Child Soldiers in Southern Sudan

We saw child soldiers frequently; young boys are present in all militia groupings in the South. NGOs told us that local "social pressures" were strong in support for under-age recruitment, but neither the Matip or Gadet forces seemed to be abducting children to serve as soldiers.

In Nyal, South Sudan, we were able to talk at length with three child soldiers, who had been recruited by the headman in their town of Leer into the faction led by Tito Biyel. The boys were aged 14, 10, and 11. They had not wanted to join; given six months of training, they usually lived in the bush, so as to avoid ambush, and could if necessary manage without food for 3 to 4 days. Often they ate wild fruit and small game. We were told by a UN field worker than many do "enlist" voluntarily because there are no real alternatives such as quality education or civil work.

Early in 1999, letters were circulated by UNICEF to the various faction Commanders, calling on them to release young boys like the ones we spoke to. Some 288 boys were gathered up by RASS, effectively the "social" counterpart of the South Sudan Defence Force, in Thonyor, near Leer.

When the area was attacked in the fighting which broke out in May, 1999, the youngsters ran in all directions but eventually most arrived in Nyal, where Tito Biyel was located.

RASS, UNICEF, and the Norwegian NGO, Rad Baarna, we were later told in Lokichokio, Kenya, have co-operated to complete a list of all the child soldiers in SSDF territory, and that of the original 288, all but 20 had now been re-united with their families.

We were also told that work in SPLA territory is going more slowly, with fewer identified and fewer reunited. It was said that while Commanders at the top of the hierarchy have agreed not to recruit child soldiers and do support demobilization, the attitude may be different among junior commanders on the ground. The analysis from one NGO active in this field was that "child soldiers" is not a big problem in numerical terms, but demobilizing them is certainly a big problem.

This NGO saw a connection, also, between "child soldiers" and traditional or customary law, the transition from boyhood to the responsibilities of adult status. This being linked to the forcible recruitment still being carried by some commanders helped explain the problem. We were also told that in some SPLA areas, villages are expected to provide a number of recruits each year, and this led to "child soldiers" being put forward. One source claimed that there was a policy in the SPLA that every family had to "donate" a son at some point. But there was, everywhere, increasing sensitivity about the need to demobilize the children. One source voiced a worry that demobilization schemes could be "false" like "slave redemption", and designed to raise funds, with the children drifting back into soldiering because of there being no attractive alternatives.

We were also told that it is now Sudan's turn to report to UN on the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, and UNICEF has been working with NGOs to encourage SSDF/SSIM and the SPLM to provide alternative reports, and use the opportunity to look hard at how they might manage the phenomenon better.