

**DRAFT Discussion Policy Paper on Child Soldiers****1. Introduction**

The child soldier phenomenon is a complex and multi-faceted global problem. Child soldiers are active in zones of combat in Latin America, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. They belong to both government and rebel forces. Some child soldiers are volunteers, while others are abducted and forced to serve in combat situations. Estimates in 1996 put the number of child soldiers serving in the world at 250,000. In their book, *Children the Invisible Soldiers*, Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin claim this figure is not static: "Once child recruitment starts, it tends to escalate, leading to ever more children becoming involved at an increasingly younger age".<sup>1</sup> The danger for children in zones of conflict is immediate, but the ramifications for countries whose children have become socialized as soldiers is long-lasting and possibly devastating for future generations.

It is this complex of variables that presents the biggest challenge: how to create a general policy approach that will apply to all cases of child soldiering and will help to minimize the number of child soldiers and facilitate their re-integration into society. This paper will sketch out the dimensions of the child soldier problem and suggest several options for a Canadian initiative based on discussions in the first meeting of an interdepartmental working group (WG) on children and armed conflict.

**2. Proposed Definition**

"Child Soldiers" can be broadly defined to include child fighters with weapons, and also the many ways in which boys and girls "serve armies": as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, to perform labour and as sexual slaves, as outlined in the Machel Report.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with Canada's position on the Optional Protocol, child soldiers will refer to persons under 18 participating in hostilities.

**3. Background**

Throughout history children have been forcibly or voluntarily conscripted into armed factions.<sup>3</sup> In the late 20th century, however, the use of children as soldiers has escalated due to the advent of light weapons technology, the rise of intra-state conflict, and the increase in irregular forces. Child soldiers are a wide-spread phenomenon with documented cases on all continents. Although the literature attempts to quantify the extent to which child soldiers are employed in Africa, Latin America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East as data varies dramatically.

Of the documented cases, Africa is one of the continents most studied as the phenomenon of child soldiers is acute. In Liberia for example, Human Rights Watch estimates that between 40 to 60 thousand children have fought in that country's civil war. In Uganda and Southern Sudan, child soldiers as young as eight and ten years of age have given testimony on the brutality experienced by themselves and others-- many younger and weaker than themselves.<sup>4</sup>