

CHILD SOLDIERS

Issue:

To prevent the use of children as soldiers (broadly defined) in armed conflict, and to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers into their communities so that they may be active citizens in the reconstruction of their societies.

Background:

Throughout history children have been forcibly or voluntarily conscripted into armed factions. 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.

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. 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.

Canadian Position

"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 cooks, porters, messengers, spies, to perform labour and as sexual slaves, as outlined in the Machel Report. In keeping with Canada's position on the Optional Protocol, child soldiers will refer to persons under 18 participating in hostilities.

The challenge is three-fold: (i) to protect children and provide them with alternatives so that they do not become child soldiers; (ii) to remove child soldiers from active combat; and (iii) to reintegrate children into families and communities if they have been soldiers.

Canada's approach is also three-fold: First, through advocacy. Canada is supporting the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu who sees his role as an advocate to raise awareness for the issue of children and armed conflict-- both with governments who use child soldiers, and with rebel groups who specifically target children.

Second, through Development. Through CIDA, Canada has been supporting children in areas of conflict since 1993 by rebuilding schools, and by assisting children with basic human needs such as access to clean water, food, health care and shelter. Beyond this first rank of needs,