

**SPEECH BY NAPOLEON ABDULAI DISARMAMENT EXPERT UN REGIONAL
CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DISARMAMENT IN AFRICA**

CONFERENCE ON WAR-AFFECTED CHILDREN IN WEST AFRICA

Notes on Civil Society and Child Soldiers Making History

Mr Chairman

Excellency Janet Graham

General Arnold Quainoo, Member of the Council of State

Madam Nana Agyeman Rawlings

Distinguished friends

First, let me thank the organisers for this opportunity to speak on general and specific issues on war-affected children in West Africa. This region with a population of some 300 million people is one of the most conflict prone regions of the world.

This region seems to accept the 'unacceptable', that war is a normal process. This opinion needs to be challenged by civil society. And by civil society I mean the rich fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially and functionally based units. The strength of civil society is measured by the peaceful coexistence of these units and by their collective capacity to simultaneously resist subordination.

Civil society is an important element in the search for a just society, a society that protects children, and a society that sees children as its future. A society with a weak civil society is doomed to disaster; hence the urgent need to strengthen the capacity of West African civil society.

Civil society cannot stand by and watch the over 120,000 African children classified as 'Child Soldiers', which in our opinion is a wrong term. Child combatants may be the appropriate term, as General Ishola Williams will explain in his presentation. Having 120,000 children in various wars on the Continent is not acceptable!

There are 300,000 children worldwide under the age of 18 serving in government and anti-government forces. In Africa, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Rwanda, Angola, Burundi, Somalia and nearer home, Liberia and Sierra Leone, are some of the examples of countries where the systematic abuse of children as child combatants is the norm rather than the exception.

According to a recent report published by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers the 'Ethiopian government forces engaged in armed conflict against Eritrea, and clans in Somalia