

The Right of the Child and the Phenomenon of Child Soldiering in Africa

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The lives of children and women are the truest indicators of the strength of communities and nations. If the youngest and the most vulnerable are left to find their way alone, a country violates the rights of its people and sabotages its future as an equal partner in the global economy - Carol Bellamy.

Every child should have the best possible start in life; every child should receive a good quality basic education; and every child should have the opportunities to develop his or her full potential and contribute to society in meaningful ways. And when we say every child, we mean every child, without exception - Kofi Annan.

Abstract

The phenomenon of child soldiering is horrendous and international but not novel in the annals of human history, as popular imagination would have us believe. However, within the context of 21st Century civilization, the scourge is worrisome enough particularly as it manifests distinctively in the war-ravaged regions of the African Continent. The article identifies the motivation for child soldiering, the international framework put in place for holding the phenomenon in check and the programmes initiated by international organizations to assist ex-combatants out of child soldiering, as well as the factors that limit the efficacy of such programmes, pointing the way forward by way of policy initiatives at national, international organization levels.

INTRODUCTION

The upsurge of the phenomenon of “child soldiering” in the 21st Century, particularly in the African Continent, is viewed as an unwholesome development - as something which is barbaric and abnormal - but it is not unprecedented in world history. From antiquity (in the Mediterranean basin, in Greek mythology, during the Battle of Waterloo where French drummer boys led Napoleon’s initial attack, only to be gunned down by Allied soldiers; and during the Battle of Berlin when “Hitler’s Youth” formed the fulcrum on which revolved the German defences), the use of minor in military campaigns (as aides, charioteers, as armour bearers for adult warriors (such as David’s service to King Saul in the Bible) had been practised, even though such practices were decidedly against cultural morals. Though it was considered a cruel practice, the Romans, nevertheless, made use of children in war. That was an era in which the entire family participated in a war effort. During World War 2, Robert Baden-Powell had recruited and trained 12-15 year old boys as scouts in order to free the limited number of men for the actual combat. The boys’ success is what led to Baden-Powell founding the Boys’ Scout Movement, a youth organization originally run along military lines. The use of children in wars in this era was, more often than not, in self-defence, and it never constituted an institutionalized practice. In recent times, however, nations NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers have come to work together within international organization and non-governmental organization framework to find ways of putting an end to child soldiering, to disarm, demobilize and re-integrate child soldiers. The need to curb the menace is ardent, for, as scholars have rightly pointed out, “... failure to effectively rehabilitate child soldiers in one State will threaten not only the post-war stability and security of such a State, but also of its neighbours, and indeed the entire sub-region”. Stylized facts supplied by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers are that more than 500,000 children under 18 have been recruited into State and non-State armed groups in over 85 countries worldwide, more than 300,000 of which are actively fighting as soldiers with Government armed forces or armed paramilitary (opposition) groups worldwide at any one time, even though the recruitment and use of children for combat is outlawed by various international legal instruments - international human rights law, international humanitarian law, labour laws and criminal laws such as the Conventions on the protection of the Child (www.child-soldiers.org). The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) defines child soldiering as “a unique and severe manifestation of trafficking in persons that involves the recruitment of children through force, fraud or coercion to be exploited for their labour or to be abused as sex slaves in conflict areas” (<http://www.unicef.org>). The involvement of “kids”, “kids with guns”, “baby” or “child” soldiers, “Guardians of the Peace” (as they are called in Burundi), “under-aged children” in modern warfare has been described as a “potential time bomb” as such children are “re-circulated into normal societies and communities with little or no re-orientation, and into an atmosphere of pervasive want, deprivation and

increasing crimes” (Sesay and Ismail in Sesay, 2003:5). These Government and paramilitary forces commit such egregious crimes against children as they are not only brainwashed, given military training, given drugs and sent into battle to kill (as fighters), but are also used as baits, sex slaves, spies, porters, cooks, guards, servants, messengers, transporters of food and ammunition/supplies, and even as human shields - as when they are sent into minefields ahead of regular troops and serve as human mine detectors or are deployed for suicide missions/suicide bombings. Some child soldiers have been forced to commit atrocities against their families and communities in order to have them stigmatized and ensure their rejection by their home communities.

Although child soldiering is prevalent in Africa and Asia, it is, nevertheless, a global phenomenon, as armed groups in the Americas, Eurasia, and such groups as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the Middle East also use children, particularly for suicide bombings. In fact, Europe, Asia, North America and Latin America account for 60% of child soldiers in the world (Sesay and Ismail in Sesay, 2003:12). According to Article 1 of the 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which entered into force in 1990, “a child is a human being below the age of eighteen years ...” Child soldiers are recruited and used by Government forces as well as by opposition groups such as the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone; the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL); the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for democracy (ULIMO); Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD); the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda; the Sierra Leonian Army (SLA) the Sierra Leonian Civil Defence Force militias (CDF); the Ivorian Patriotic Movement of the Far West (MPIGO); the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) of Central African Republic; and the Ivorian Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) (*Human Rights Watch Report*, 10 (3) (A) July 1998. Child soldiering is also the norm in Burundi, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan Uganda, and Zimbabwe, where Robert Mugabe’s Government sponsors a youth militia called “the Green Bombers” who are armed, provided with narcotic and deployed to embark on the worst acts or urban violence in recent history.

THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD

Although the concept of children’s rights is a relatively new one globally, hardly anyone can today question the fact that children should and do have rights. Proof of the wide acceptance of Children’s rights consists in the fact that the UN Convention on the Right of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989 entered into force in record time in September 1990 and, till date, retains the distinguished honour of being the treaty with the highest number of ratifications (as at 1 January 2000, 191 UN Member-States had ratified the Convention). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) - the African counterpart to the Convention on the Rights of the Child - was adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU in 1990. Admittedly, many, even without the formal knowledge of the principles of child development or of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, endorse the view that children have the right to love, care and protection, good health, nutrition, and opportunities to learn. In Africa, children are highly cherished and are socially valued, so much so that their presence, absence and number determine the social status accorded an individual, couple or family. From a purely societal standpoint, childlessness is stigmatized and regarded as a reproach.

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) contains 50 Articles which could be broken down into three broad categories:

- **Provision Articles** which recognize the rights of children to minimum standards of health, education, social security, physical care, family life, play-creation, culture and leisure;
- **Protection Articles** which identify the rights of children to be safe from discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, substantial abuse, exploitation, cruelty, injustice, including the right to special protection in times of war and protection from abuse in the criminal justice system.
- **Participation Articles** which concern civil and political rights, thus acknowledging the right of children to freedom to express their opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural and political life; the right to be heard; the right to have access to information and freedom of association; the right to due process guarantees, the right to be consulted and to be taken account of.

Despite the ratification of the UNCRC, and despite wide-spread approval under international law of international legal instruments affirming the rights of children, too many children still experience acts of cruelty - killings, severe physical beatings/smacking, deprivations, rape, child abuse and neglect, child trafficking, child labour - so that too many children the world over are still outside the protection of society. These abuses are a violation of Article 6 of the UNCRC, which provides that every child has an inherent right to life –a provision which obligates State Parties to the Convention to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child. Too many still see their rights flagrantly abuse and/or threatened.

Women’s relative powerlessness and vulnerability to gender discrimination have serious implications

for the rights and development of children. To the extent that women's status and children's status are inextricably intertwined, improvement in the status of women is the logical starting point for promoting and guaranteeing children's rights. Consequently, violence and discrimination directed against women are injurious to children's development. Available data reveal that maternal ill-health during pregnancy, lack of access to food and medicaments, obstetric complications, lack of post-natal care which all accentuate the syndrome of "Failure to Thrive" constitute the major causes of disease, disabilities and death among children.

Discrimination against, and marginalization suffered by children with disabilities occasioned not by congenital diseases or by malformations but by preventable maternal and childhood diseases and lack of access to adequate healthcare services usually start from childhood. Children's daily plight continues to pose powerful challenges to Governments, and the unmistakable message remains that children's needs must be given priority attention whenever responsible Governments are making decisions about laws, policies, programmes, agendas and money.

Children often have their world shattered and traumatized by conflicts and violence for which Africa is an endemic theatre. Millions of Africa's children as well as children all over the world have their right to live put at risk by a continuum of violence that stretches from household situations (including physical and sexual abuses which undermine child survival and routinely converts children into victims of violence and abuse) to conflict situations at community, national and international levels as a result of which children are exposed to violence. Armed conflicts have deleterious effects on the rights of children: The picture as painted by Dr. The Right Hon. Adeleke Olorunnimbe Mamora, Chairman, Conference of Speakers of Nigerian State Houses of Assembly is instructive:

... in the last decade alone, 2 million children were slaughtered; 6 million were seriously injured or permanently disabled and 12 million were left homeless. More than two-thirds of the situations of armed conflict in the world are taking place in Africa. Few will not have heard about the slaughter of about a quarter of a million in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Fewer still would not have heard about the massive recruitment and use of child soldier in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda. More than 3 million people have been displaced by the war in Sierra Leone. Of these, over 60% are children who have been mutilated, abducted, sexually abused and separated from their parents. All these may sound far away for many of us but we need to reflect our own situations of violent conflicts often occasioned by religious and inter-ethnic crises (Kaduna 2000, Lagos 1999-2000, Ife/Modakeke) ... We need to imagine children screaming in fear as violence disrupts their lives (*The Guardian*, 21 May 2001:46).

THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD SOLDIER

The phenomenon of child soldier is widespread in both developed and developing countries alike, although different patterns could be delineated. There has been recruitment of child soldiers in developed countries such as the United States where under 18-year olds are exposed to military training through such official programmes as Peace Corps and Young Marines, and are subsequently recruited into the United States Armed Forces, and in the United Kingdom where the phenomenon of child soldiering is increasingly taking the form of volunteers into the British military service in an attempt to bridge the persistent shortfalls in recruitment quotas. It is the pervading sense of insecurity or the feeling of incompleteness, which compels authorities to recruit child soldiers in the effort to make up for possible deficiency. The phenomenon has reared its ugly head particularly in conflict-ridden parts of Africa in recent years, thereby raising the problem of international standards on children in areas of armed conflicts, military recruitment legislation and practice, and generally child soldier use in hostilities by Governments and non-governmental groups in the Continent in particular and across the globe in general. The missions of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Global Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, and of other similar NGOs remain advocacy for the protection of children's rights, increased efforts to meet children's basic needs and to expand children's opportunities to reach their full potentials, as well as to see child soldiers successfully through Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Programmes.

Refusal or inability to hold the ugly trend in check could be most destructive. According to Sesay and Ismail (in Sesay, 2003:137), "failure to effectively rehabilitate child soldiers in one State will threaten not only the post-war stability and security of such a State, but also that of its neighbours, and indeed the entire sub-region." Fortunately, International Conventions specifically banning the use of under-aged children in combat exist:

- Article 8.2.26 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) declares the enlistment or conscription of children under the age of 15 into the national armed forces or using them actively in hostilities as a war crime (The International Criminal Court refuses to prosecute anyone who had committed crimes as a child soldier under the age of 18);
- Article 2 of the 1982 International Labour Organization Convention classifies child soldiering among the worst form of child labour;

- Article 38(3) of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) forbids the recruitment of children under the age of 15 as combatants in conflicts as well as their victimization;
- the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights prohibits a child under the age of 18 from being drafted to take part in armed conflicts;
- Article 22 of the 1991 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) prohibits the recruitment or direct participation in hostilities of anyone under the age of 18;
- Several other legal instruments adopted by African States, including the 1996 Yaounde, the 1999 Maputo, and the 2000 Accra Declarations, all aim at the eradicating child soldiering from the African Continent.
- the 1999 International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ratified by over 150 countries) which prohibits the forced or compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 for use in armed conflict.
- the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts (which came into force in February 2002) raised the minimum requirement age from 15 to 18 years and is regarded as an important landmark in that it specifically prohibits the use of child soldiers (by defining a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years”): In specific terms, Article 4 of the Optimal Protocol
 - outlaws compulsory recruitment of children under 18 years of age by armed forces (Government and non-Government);
 - obligates ratifying States to ensure that members of their armed forces under 18 do not take direct part in combat;
 - raises the minimum age for voluntary enlistment into armed forces to 16 years and includes specific measures requiring proof of a wish to enlist by the volunteer or his/her parents;
 - outlaws the recruitment or participation of anyone under 18 years in insurgency groups and rebel forces “under any circumstances”.

As for the Nigerian child, he is most vulnerable and has very little to show for being born in a country so richly endowed. He becomes an integral part of the proverbial dilemma of representing an epitome of poverty in the midst of plenty, a child from a disadvantaged country reveling in squalor but in the midst of abundant natural endowments, as his present is precarious and his future uncertain and insecure, owing largely to planlessness and misapplication of resources. Not long ago, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced that over 300 million children across the globe are in the grip of starvation, a large chunk of which is to be found in Africa and Asia. In order to address such inconsistencies, the Obasanjo administration introduced the Home-Grown School Feeding and Health Programme designed to provide lunch every school day in public schools - a laudable programme whose implementation had been shoddy and generally unsatisfactory and not embraced by most State Governments. Equally disturbing is the dismal failure of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) to achieve the basic objectives of wresting Nigerian children from unprofitable and dangerous engagements and making fundamental education not only attractive but also mandatory and universal. Instead, many Nigerian children have not been captured by the school system as they are left to the vagaries and vicissitudes of life, which dominates the wider society.

MOTIVATION FOR CHILD SOLDIERING

A number of “push” and “pull” factors exist which have encouraged the proliferation of child soldiers on the African Continent.

- Child soldiers are often physically abducted from their homes, communities, schools, playgrounds, etc and forced into combat, both by Government and non-Government forces. So, children are not naturally attracted to join the forces on their own, as such. They are compulsorily removed from the safety of their homes and schools and forcibly put in armies or armed groups such as RENAMO of Mozambique, the Lord’s Resistance Army of Uganda, etc.
- Children make for cheap and obedient fighters and, because of their youthfulness, far easier to mould into effective and expendable combatants.
- Some children became child soldiers in order to avenge the death of their parents in the conflict. A particular child soldier in Sierra Leone interviewed by Human Rights Watch revealed that he “joined the LURD specifically to be able to get a weapon to kill my former commander who had destroyed my family house”. Some joined in order to avenge their commanders for the confiscation of their allowance.

The unsuccessful nature of the disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme may have accounted for some ex-child soldiers going back to enlist and fight in the regional wars. According to a Human Rights Watch Report,

Several ex-combatants from Sierra Leone went on to fight in the region’s war despite having completed

skills training, and in some cases, even though they had started to earn a living by their trade. They said the prospect of earning several hundreds of dollars was too much of a temptation, when compared to toiling at less than one dollar a day ... You can have disarmament from here to eternity, but if they don't have jobs, they'll soon be looking round for another war.

- The proliferation of light but sophisticated weaponry (an estimated 500 million small arms and assault weapons worldwide) has facilitated child soldiering in no small way. These are inexpensive, durable, small, lightweight, easy to maintain, simple enough for 10-15 year old to handle. Evidently,

The recruitment of child soldiers in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars was also facilitated by the widespread use of light, inexpensive weapons - the AK47s, AK48s, Kalashnikovs that require no physical prowess or technical expertise to manipulate ... light weapons ... (are) easily affordable to factions because of the cheap price of an AK47 (\$5), or the equivalent of the price of a goat or chicken in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sesay and Ismail in Sesay, 2003:17).

- A background of abject poverty or economic hardship which drives many children into premature military service. Many of the child soldiers are from the world's poorest countries. The wars the kids are supposed to fight were precipitated and exacerbated by poverty. The human development indices of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire demonstrate the extreme poverty of the West African sub-region. For instance, it has been shown that the war-torn West African countries are the least developed 20 countries in the world and occupy the least rankings on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI) that measures a country's average achievements in three aspects of human development - longevity (life expectancy), knowledge (literacy rate and school enrolment), and standard of living (GDP per capita): For 2004, Sierra Leone occupies the lowest possible HDI ranking which was 177; Burkina Faso occupied the 175th position; Cote d'Ivoire was ranked 163rd; while Guinea was the 160th (<http://hdr.undp.org/2004/>.) One source confirms this predicament:

The population of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire have long suffered from a vicious cycle of bad governance, economic decline, political upheaval, conflict-related violence and impunity. Decades of corruption, tribal favouritism and exploitation by their leaders, and the inevitable economic decline which followed created a fertile ground for the formation of rebel insurgencies made up largely of unemployed and frustrated youth (Stephen, 1999:63-4).

Where the majority of parents were unable to financially and materially support their children on account of their abject poverty, the easiest way for them to survive was for them to accept the forceful recruitment of their children into the army. However, because the eventual re-integration of such children was incomplete and the children remained idle and unemployed, next time around when conflict brewed, most of such children were not forcibly recruited; they voluntarily enlisted into the army.

- The volatility of the African Region which is war-prone or war-infested accounts for the prevalence of child soldiers. It is estimated that in 1999 alone, African conflicts accounted for 11 of 27 violent conflicts, equivalent of 40% of total global estimates. If we note that under 18 year olds account for more than 50% of Africa's estimated 600 million people, there is indeed cause for increasing prospects of child soldiering in the Continent - as we presently have in Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, etc. Kaplan (1994) has singled out West Africa as a "security predicament" bedeviled by "post-modern wars", "intra-State wars", "small wars", "limited wars" or "ethnic conflicts". As Sesay and Ismail (2003:140) succinctly observe,

Countries in the Third World with the highest child soldier populations are usually also war-torn societies: Afghanistan, Angola, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines (were) all protracted civil conflicts.

- Some of the "pull factors" encouraging child soldiering in the Continent are "the material benefits to be derived from carrying guns": These are promises of payment in dollars and the opportunity to loot. Children are usually motivated by the recruiters' promises of financial compensation or reward, usually in American dollars, and by the opportunity to enrich themselves through looting. They are sometimes promised cars, drugs, food, jobs as civil servants or in the new army, if the mission succeeds. The prospects of self-enrichment after the capture of a capital are high. Some of them were told: "If Monrovia falls, whatever you lay hand on is yours", and the attraction was that "no rebel would like to lose the opportunity to loot a capital city". A combatant could get rich from goods (television sets, cars, generators, building materials, electrical installations, valuable and assorted goods looted from supermarkets and wholesale stores, video sets, clothes, etc) looted and pillaged abroad. Such goods could either be sold back to their owners as a goodwill gesture or they could become wares in the illicit cross-border trade conducted by rebels. Combatants sometimes embark on mining diamonds which is more profitable than disarming ((Human Rights Watch Interview July-August 2004). According to a military Commander when RUF and Liberian Government troops attacked Guinea in 2000 in the

operation codenamed “Laspan”,
The SOP (Standard Operations procedure) of that operation was not to loot, but to destroy. However, people had to loot because that was the only way we were paid. My boys who were on the operation brought me a car engine, freezer, video, tapes clothes, jeans, boots and money (Human Rights Watch Interview, Monrovia 28 February 2004).

- The posture or disposition of the United States towards international efforts, through international treaties, to prohibit the phenomenon of child soldiering, represents a tacit encouragement to it. Failure on the part of the United States to sign major treaties on the protection of children’s rights; United States’ attitude of consistently blocking international efforts to raise the minimum age for soldiers from 15 to 18; and the propensity of the United States to provide arms transfer, military aid and military training to countries using children in armed conflicts - all give the impression of US encouragement of child soldiering. The non-ratification by the U.S. of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions; and the International Criminal Court (ICC) which makes targeting of civilians and civilian institutions and the conscription/enlistment of under-aged children and their active participation in hostilities as war crimes are part of this encouragement. According to McManimon (1999),

As of November 1998, the U.S. was providing military support to 11 of the 22 Governments engaged in armed conflicts whose armed forces or supported paramilitaries were known to use children under 17 (Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, Colombia, Congo-Brazzaville, Pakistan, Peru, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda) ... In 1997, U.S. companies were authorized to sell Colombian State entities 30,000 grenades, one million rounds of ammunition, and 7,000 M-16 assault rifles.

The United States has caused a Canadian inmate of the U.S-run Guantanamo Bay Prison Camp in Cuba, Omar Khar, 15 by July 2002 when he was accused of throwing a grenade that killed US Delta Force soldier, Christopher Speer, in Afghanistan to stand trial for war crimes (on charges of murder, attempted murder, spying, conspiracy and providing material aid for terrorism”, after denying him the status of a juvenile inmate (Savage, 2008).

- Failed States must be identified as the cauldron and plethora of child soldiers. Bassey (in Sesay, 2003: 35,60)), has shown that conflagrations characterized by the “absence of legitimate sovereignty manifested in collapsing central Governments” and “accompanied by the rise of novel warfare strategies such as ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, mass rape, banditry, starvation and the use of mercenaries” are a common feature of the failed States “underdeveloped States”, “weak States”, “quasi-States”, “shadow States” in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi. Robert (1990:69) corroborates that “...What we are witnessing is not some entirely new form of conflict but rather adaptations in a type of conflict that is historically rooted in the structures and processes of weak States”.

CHILD SOLDIERING AND TRAUMATIZATION

Child soldiers perpetuate tremendous amount of destruction and are reciprocally traumatized in the process of brainwashing, military campaigns, etc. Writing on the Liberian situation, Sesay (2003:177) reveals that

Child soldiers have been engaged in various forms of initiative violence inculcated from routine exposure to brutality reinforced by repeated showing of Rambo and Kungfu videos, and further facilitated by the regular abuse of drugs

Child soldiers were drugged and exposed to films displaying violence as a way of making children fearless and remorseless fighters. Such initiation rites were designed to reinforce their desire to kill, and their invincibility, and they were told that tying “country cloth” at the war front protected them from “the white man’s bullets”, provided they observed all the rules and regulations and rites associated with it. The child soldiers were indoctrinated to believe that they were “bullet-proof” and therefore super-human. Being forced to shoot or to kill was another initiation rite experienced by many child soldiers, even as some of them got killed in the front lines by more experienced faction soldiers. Others were physically and mentally incapacitated by the torture and drugs, which were sometimes forcibly administered to them, while anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, bed-wetting and recurrent nightmares became symptomatic of the phenomenon of the post-trauma stress disorders (Gbla in Sesay, 2003:178ff). Very instructive was the transformation of child soldiers into killers who committed “the most horrific atrocities ... intrinsically linked to the breakdown of society’s structures and morality in the context of the crisis of the post-colonial State”. Bassey (in Sesay, 2003:45) recalls that

Under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs and violent psychological pressures ‘to make them lose their previous identity to presume a new one’, they seem ‘to have committed the most cruel atrocities’.

Vine (1991:95-96) relates equally gruesome socialization the child soldiers go through:

Soldiers, some as young as 10 seem to have been put through psychological trauma and deprivation,

such as being hung upside down from trees until their individualism is broken, and encouraged and rewarded for killing ... these child combatants, who have been programmed to feel little fear or revulsion for such actions, and thereby carry out these attacks with greater enthusiasm and brutality than adults would

According to a bizarre picture of this horrendous phenomenon as painted by peace and conflict strategists,

Child soldiers, including girls ... trained on the use of bayonet, gun and knife ... took part in indiscriminate looting, looting, burning of houses, rape, amputation of limbs, fingers, buttocks, gouging out of eyes, and severance of ears ... harassment of civilians as well as illicit diamond mining, particularly in 1998 under 'Operation No Living Thing', 'Operation Pay Yourself' and ... 'No Prisoner Policy' ... Some of the child soldiers had also taken to cannibalism ... (Sesay and Ismail in Sesay, 2003:152-3).

The psychological trauma experienced by child soldiers in Liberia has been amply documented. According to Sesay and Ismail (in Sesay, 2003:147),

28% of the child soldiers in Liberia had witnessed the torturing of family members; 63% had their homes destroyed; and 37% were sexually abused. Another 51% shot an average of 10 people; 11% were involved in rape; 17% participated in torture sessions; while 3.2% practiced cannibalism.

Numerous accounts of confessional statements by child soldiers portray a universe as replete with brutality as it was devoid of hope. Children narrate accounts of unspeakable suffering at the hands of armed groups who devastated their villages and communities, left their loved ones dead, robbed them of their childhoods and initiated them into the world of violence, drugs, criminality and a culture of impunity.

Discipline meted to the child soldiers, as reported in the various accounts, had been exceptionally harsh:

The penalty for attempted escape was death. According to one account, "When one child who escaped was captured, the others have to assist in his execution, even if that person were a family member. Abducted boys were forced to watch an escapee killed with an axe to serve as a lesson. Children who were too tired to continue marching or who collapsed under an especially heavy load would be threatened with death. Children suffered extreme hardship and psychological stress from conditions in which the slightest infraction could mean beating or whipping. 'If you don't comply with orders, you would be punished, sometimes killed. Children were beaten with heavy sticks'. (Miguel,R).

Women and girls faced a different type of ogre. They were usually commanded to dance for the troops, and "dancing for the troops" was a prelude or a precursor to sexual relations with soldiers. The girls and women were sooner or later turned to "wives" or "concubines" of soldiers and made to cook, clean, farm, dance and engage in forced sexual relations. The practice of using girls for domestics and for sexual exploitation was common. Those that complained or resisted were beaten and compelled and any of them caught trying to escape was killed or the family punished.

REGIONAL WARRIORS AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Human Rights Watch has confirmed multiple participation and spillover by child soldiers in African regional conflicts: Those child soldiers who took part in the 1991-2002 Sierra Leone armed conflict also participated in the 2000-2001 cross-border attacks on Guinea from Liberia and Sierra Leone; in the 1999-2003 Liberian armed conflict; and in the 2002-2003 armed conflict in Cote d'Ivoire Whereas the vast majority of these "regional warriors" were Liberian or Sierra Leonean nationals, fighters from Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Guineas were also involved". Human Rights Watch has identified the LURD of Uganda as perhaps the most disciplined of the non-governmental forces, based on its efforts to instill respect for civilians, and to discipline or punish its personnel who committed abuses against civilians, and for exercising restraints in committing such war crimes as looting and pillage. Human Rights Watch observes that

In some cases, the introduction of foreign troops into an internal conflict led to a dramatic increase in the frequency and nature of attacks on civilians. A notable example is the Ivorian armed conflict, where the involvement of the Liberian-backed Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and Ivorian Patriotic Movement for the Great West (MPIGO) rebel factions which included hundreds of RUF fighters, members of the Liberian militiamen, and notorious Sierra Leonean and Liberian Commanders like Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie, Kuku Dennis, and Benjamin Yeaten, led to a marked increase in attacks against Ivorian civilians. Both the MJP and MPIGO were implicated in widespread killings, rapes, and abduction of children in and around Ivorian town of Man, Danane and Toulepleu (Human Rights Watch Interview, Monrovia, 12 August 2004).

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, REHABILITATION & REINTEGRATION (DDRR) PROGRAMMES

The Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes put in place to pull children out of child soldiering had their successes and their failures. The combatants were to be transferred to a cantonment where they would surrender their weapons and register for the Programme. After turning in their weapons to the

UN Peace-keepers, the ex-combatants were admitted into demobilization camps where they received lessons on Civics and Democracy, classes on HIV/AIDS education, and family planning (and sometimes courses on Human Rights). Ex-combatants were given Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA), which was approximately US\$300 per month for the 6-month training period. Each ex-combatant was given an identity card, which bore his/her picture, which enabled the holder to participate in any phase of the reintegration programme. The child soldiers withdrawn from battlefronts had to be taught some trades and basic skills that would make them readily absorbable in a normal society so that they could support themselves and participate in the community reconstruction process. The ex-combatants had to be trained as auto-mechanics, carpenters, masons, tailors, farmers, etc. Some were taken through secondary schools or local universities. But there is evidence that some degree of fraud had crept into the Programme: As one opinion signaled, "There is a significant possibility that many who registered were never, in fact, combatants: only 150 rounds of small arms ammunition (SAA) were needed to enter the Programme". Some combatants had tremendous problems wresting their benefits from the hands of their Commanders, as one Sierra Leonean ex-combatant revealed:

For months, I kept requesting for my card, but my Commander L always said he had misplaced it. I hollered at him and even punched him once, but it didn't matter. I couldn't complain to the DDR Programme because Commander L works for the DDR - in the Computer Room. I learned from my mates that he had the same thing to 20-30 other combatants from different units - in the computer room. He sold combatants' cards and benefits for a profit to his friends, so some non-combatants ended up getting the training that was meant for us.

The \$300 TSA was often "eaten up" very quickly, sometimes within a few days by the daily demands of the nuclear and extended family, by family emergencies such as illness, complicated births or funerals or to support small-scale businesses. But the most serious problem was the corruption of the Commanders who subverted benefits destined to their subordinates to themselves. This was accentuated by the inadequate grievance mechanism to handle complaints and secure redress. Then there was the very natural difficulty of ex-combatants finding jobs after training, owing, in part, to a surplus of ex-combatants offering the same type of skills all over. There is also the odious practice of recruiting combatants from refugee camps.

The key international actors that have worked assiduously to pull children out of the quagmire in which the phenomenon of child soldiering had thrown them – the United Nations the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the European Union (EU) – have helped Governments in various ways to pursue the cause of transparency, development, and the establishment of the rule of law in the war-infested regions of Africa. These international organizations not only investigate and show ready willingness to expose and share information regarding arms shipments, the recruitment of child combatants, and Governments and non-governmental forces that allow their territories/enclaves to be used by proxy armies aimed at destabilizing one another; they are also committed to bringing to justice those State and non-State actors who bear the greatest responsibility for the most serious human rights abuses committed in African armed conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Child soldiering, though not completely an innovation in the world today is a horrendous monster that must be tamed if the various legal instruments and framework on the Rights of the Child must have meaning. National Governments and international organizations such as the AU and ECOWAS bear grave responsibility in ensuring compliance by nation-States with international treaties they have endorsed and ratified, and in ensuring that they prohibit their nations and residents from hiring themselves out as foreign fighters to any of the armed forces rooting for conflicts in the Continent. It is their duty to criminalize and prosecute to the full extent of the law individuals, nationals and non-nationals involved in the recruitment or use of child combatants/mercenary, cross-border funding and who perpetuate widespread and systematic human rights abuses. Recruitment from refugee and displaced persons camps is in violation of national and international laws and standards that protect these populations, and should be respected by all. War-ravaged African countries (particularly Liberia, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea) should emulate the Sierra Leonean example by committing themselves to cease using child soldiers and immediately ratify the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts.

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