

**Committee/Council:** Special Conference

**Issue:** Eradicating the military use of children in war-torn areas

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## Introduction

*“According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all Member States shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons below the age of 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities and that they are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces”.* Although it is stipulated that recruiting child soldiers is unlawful, recruitment of child soldiers is a rooted issue in the world. The use of children in hostilities dates back to ancient times with several citations from Greek mythology and the Bible.

Other widely known examples of the use of child soldiers were in the World Wars I and II. The youngest child soldier in the World War I was in the Serbian army. He was 8 years old. He joined the army after the deaths of his parents, grandmother and seven siblings by troops.



According to the Homeland Security Institute, there are four different reasons behind the recruitment of child soldiers, which are *“born into a radical environment, forced into it, recruited or persuaded, or self-radicalized”*. Especially in developing countries, the youth constitutes a considerable percentage of the population. Therefore, the use of child soldiers in hostilities can provide a rise in the total manpower of the armed group, which is why child soldiers have been used for centuries. However, recruiting a child soldier destroys the childhood of the child and wipes off his/her innocence. Thus, all Member States must come up with a solution to put an end to the recruitment of child soldiers in order to preserve children’s innocence and childhood in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## Definition of Key-Terms

### Child Soldier

According to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), which views this issue as of paramount importance, a child soldier is *“a child associated with an armed force or armed group is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular*

*armed force or armed group in any capacity – including, but not limited to, combatants, cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. The term “child soldier” is discouraged as it does not accurately reflect the range of roles in which boys and girls are recruited and used for military purposes”.*

In other words, a child soldier is a person under the age of 18, who is used by an armed group for any purpose extending from being cooks to partners to have sexual intercourse.

### Radicalization

Radicalization is the process of having too extreme views on a religious, political or social idea that contradicts with the popular views, which may result in facilitating violence.

### Recruitment

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, recruitment is “*the process of adding new individuals to a population*”. In this context, recruitment means enrolling of new novice soldiers to an armed group.

### Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)

DDR is a program initiated by the United Nations in order to achieve stabilization in post-conflict areas. It has three steps. **Disarmament** is the collection of small weaponry from citizens of a country. The next step is **Demobilization**, which is the controlled release and evacuation of ex-combatants. And the last step is **reintegration**, which means the adaptation of ex-combatants to civilian life with a proper job and income. DDR programs ensure a smooth adjustment of ex-combatants to civilian life.

## **Background Information**

### History

As said, child soldiers’ existence dates back to antiquity. David’s service to King Saul is also an example of the use of child soldiers in the Bible.

#### Pre-World War I

In 1212, there were over thousands of children in Children’s Crusade, who ended up being subjects of slavery at the end of the crusade. In the 1800s, Napoleon benefitted from his “*Orphans of the Imperial Guard*”, which consisted of orphans aged between 14 and 17. Furthermore, 15-year-old American Bugler John Cook received a medal of honor following the bloodiest day in the US history, Battle of Antietam. Again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia forced Jewish children into military practice in military schools, which started as early as 8 years old.

## World Wars

At the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, stunning movement of nationalism captured the attention of the youth and many children joined armed forces voluntarily. In doing so, they often showed themselves older and this fact was revealed, after the combat when they were wounded. In addition, those children joined the war together with their families. Therefore, they sometimes had to witness their siblings or fathers dying during combat.

After the World War I, the preceding organization of the UN was formed. The League of Nations basically had the same goals as the UN and following the world war, they arranged, drafted and signed the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child. The Declaration aimed to prevent all children against “every [any] form of exploitation”.

However, during the World War II, child soldiers were used by both Allied and Axis forces. On the Axis forces’ side, Hitler Youth was the primary source of child recruitments. The organization imbued the ideology of Nazi Germany to the youth, which resulted in the radicalization of the children. On the brink of war, Hitler Youth’s population was just over 8.8 million. As the war began, the population dropped to 1 million with many above 18 leaders and members recruited for the national army. This left only young people in *Hitler Youth*. As a result, 16 and 17 year old teenagers were in charge of 500 boys. Simply put, *Hitler Youth* was a million young people in an organization, which indoctrinated them with Nazi ideology and trained them to fight for their country. Eventually, the war was nearly lost and Hitler’s regime utilized the children in *Hitler Youth* to execute suicide missions.

There are also reports that the child soldiers in Nazi Germany were treated with sweets.

On the other hand, Jewish resistance to the actions of Nazi Germany consisted of 100,000 children. Also, both in the Soviet army and the US army, orphans voluntarily joined the army. In the US army, many children signed up for the army by showing themselves older while some were as young as 12 years old.

## Current status

### Child soldiers in terrorist groups

There is an estimate of 200,000-300,000 child soldiers currently present in the world. The vast majority of these child soldiers are in insurgent groups. Children are enlisted in terrorist groups under four categories according to the Homeland Security Institute.

1. They may be born into a radical environment if they are children of people that are already in those groups.
2. They may be forced into joining the terrorist groups by several threats.
3. They may be self-radicalized by the propaganda of the terrorist groups.
4. They may be brainwashed and persuaded to follow radical ideologies.

These children usually have the most brutal tasks such as killing all members of the family in order to break all ties with them and acting as suicide bombers in various regions of the world, such as in Istanbul, Paris, Brussels, etc. Furthermore, a number of female child soldiers are negligible equal. However, they are not used for the same purpose. Female child soldiers are usually raped and forced into marrying older men within the armed group.

Moreover, in the last few years, terrorist organizations have been using all aspects of social media to broaden their propaganda, which increased the number of Westerners finding their way into the insurgent groups as Homeland Security Institute reports.

### Child soldiers in national armies

Not only insurgent armed groups recruit child soldiers but also as of January 2011, 11 Member States, including the UK, use child soldiers in their national armies whether for combat purposes or intelligence purposes. Those 11 countries have not signed the *“Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict”* so legally they are able to recruit those child soldiers if they are above the age of 15.

### Why are they recruited?

First of all, children are easy and open targets for terrorist organizations. They are easy to be brainwashed and indoctrinated. Likely to what *Hitler Youth* did in Nazi Germany, non-State armed groups take young children under their roof and educate them according to their radical ideologies.

Additionally, children ensure a new generation of soldiers for the future. Eventually, current members of terrorist groups will die and there must be younger generations to ensure the continuity of terrorist groups.

Most importantly, children make obedient soldiers. When a terrorist organization takes the child and raises him/her for years, children tend to view their elders as family. Thus, it creates loyalty between the child soldiers and the terrorist leaders, which causes them to not question any orders and fulfill the order given by insurgent groups.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### The Syrian Arab Republic

Syria is currently in a civil war while the so-called Islamic State captures strategic points in its territory. In 2014, Syrian Human Rights Committee reported that there were over 800 child soldiers recruited by the Islamic State. Although this seems like a small figure, as the adult soldiers in ISIS continue to drop out, the Committee believes that the group recruits 300 more child soldiers every

month to fill up space. In doing so, ISIS offers economic support, food and shelter to families in exchange for their children.

Unlike many other armed groups, ISIS does not use child soldiers because they provide a small advantage in combat. Child soldiers have the same duties and treatment as adult soldiers according to the CNN. In addition, ISIS propaganda is influential throughout the world and leads to self-radicalization. It is known that there are child soldiers, whose nationalities are French, Australian and British. Since the recruitment rate of children in ISIS increases rapidly, both governments and the UN are highly concerned by this issue.



### Nigeria

Similarly to Syria, Nigeria also hosts a deadly terrorist group in its territory.

Boko Haram uses child soldiers to conduct its suicide bombing missions. Its recruitment of the youth is frightening for the international committee because of several reports, where 10-year-olds wore a bombing belt and organized attacks on civilian-populated points. Furthermore, most of the child soldiers in Boko Haram voluntarily attend the armed group in order to free themselves from being a target for the terrorist group.

A female, who fled from the terrorist group, reports how Boko Haram is recruiting child soldiers. She says, *"They came to us to pick us. They would ask, 'Who wants to be a suicide bomber?' The girls would shout, 'me, me, me.' They were fighting to do the suicide bombings."* The young girls are not brainwashed by the insurgent group, but instead, they want to free themselves from endless hunger and sexual abuse. Overall, the global community lacks to protect the rights of the Nigerian children, which increases and eases the recruitment of child soldiers by Boko Haram.

### Afghanistan

Until the Syrian Civil War, Afghan refugees were the biggest refugee group for over 3 decades. For 30 years, the unstable situation in Afghanistan never ended with hundreds of armed conflicts. With the unemployment rate of 40% and the dependence on foreign donor's rate of 61%, the government of Afghanistan is not functioning properly. One of the wealthiest terrorist organizations, Taliban, also resides in Afghanistan. Because of the high unemployment rate, families always seek ways of earning money. Even if they can find a proper job, they earn no more than 300 US dollars. On the other hand, Taliban is able to pay more than 700 US dollars to families in exchange for their children. Even though the Afghani youth does not want to be involved in Taliban, they do not have any other choice for their family. Taliban actively uses child soldiers in combat. Human Rights Watch reports that child soldiers were used in the battle of Kunduz last year. Not just Taliban but also Af-

ghan national forces use children below 18 in order to fight Taliban. Therefore, the stabilization of Afghanistan and a reduction of the unemployment rate must be achieved.

#### United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is highly disturbed and concerned with this issue. UNICEF aims the release of all child soldiers from all national armies and insurgent groups. UNICEF is also concerned with the ex-combatant child soldiers. Often, child soldiers, who left the armed group, have no support while rejoining society and civilian life. Therefore, UNICEF's mission is to create a systematic approach to this issue by giving an emphasis on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs. In the organization's perspective, the reintegration programs should be focused on education by providing skills that will help the ex-combatants adapt to the civilian life.

#### International Rescue Committee (IRC)

International Rescue Committee's aim is similar to the UNICEF's. They work with demobilized child soldiers who fled from the armed groups. Through research, the IRC found out that the best way to fully recover a child soldier is through getting him/her fully integrated into its former society before the war. Currently working in DRC, Uganda, Burundi and Liberia, the IRC focuses on cultural help.

#### Chad

Even though the Civil War in Chad ended 6 years ago, there is an estimate of 10,000 child soldiers in armed groups at the moment. After 6 years, the government of Chad tried to disarm and reintegrate child soldiers into civil society. However, the inadequacy of educational facilities and shelter, combined with the poverty in the country makes the reintegration of child soldiers impossible to achieve. Thus, the country must be stabilized and improve its facilities soon so that the child soldiers in armed groups can be integrated into society.

#### The Democratic Republic of Congo

Every 1 in 10 child soldiers is in DR Congo, a figure that explains why DR Congo is a major party to this issue. 30,000 child soldiers are found in both the armed groups in DR Congo and its national army. Moreover, the UN strongly believes that 15%-30% of all new recruits are children. Because children provide a strategic advantage in combat by taking advantage of the moral inability of many people to kill children, child recruitment rate is really high in DR Congo. At last, even though the DRC government signed international documents like UN Security Council Resolution 1341, Amnesty International stated that these signings were no more than "public relation exercises".

#### South Sudan

South Sudan is the newest UN Member State, which joined the organization in 2011. While South Sudan was gaining its independence from Sudan, Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was the rebellious group against the Sudanese government. After declaring its independence, the SPLA became the official army of South Sudan. However, due to its rebel origin, there are still hundreds of child soldiers in the SPLA, who are defending their nation as a part of the national army.

## Timeline of Events

1212	Children's Crusade took place, where child soldiers ended up being slaves.
1814	Napoleon enlisted many children in the Orphans of the Imperial Guard, which fought in the Netherlands.
1827	Russia signed a law that allows Jewish children to be trained for the army.
1914-1918	World War I took place. Thousands of child soldiers were used by both sides under the effect of patriotism.
1933	Hitler Youth was founded.
1939-1945	World War II took place. Hitler Youth fought on many occasions and Allied forces also recruited many child soldiers by showing them older.
1945	Towards the end of the World War II, Nazi regime sent Hitler Youth members to suicide missions.
20 November 1989	Convention on the Rights of the Child is signed. (Came into effect on 2 September 1990)
1994	Taliban began its operations and in 4 years, they captured the control of Afghanistan until the 9/11 attacks.
25 May 2000	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict is signed. (Came into effect on 12 February 2002)
2002	Boko Haram started its activity in Africa.
2005	A new policy mandate is created for DDR programs.
9 July 2011	South Sudan declared its independence and announced the SPLA, a rebel-origin army which recruited 15,000 child soldiers during the independence war, as their national army.
2014 - present	The so-called Islamic State has been spreading violence throughout the Middle East and recruiting child soldiers ever since.

## Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions, and Events

Children and Armed Conflict (S/RES/1349, S/RES/1460, S/RES/1539, S/RES/1612, S/RES/1882, S/RES/1998, S/RES/2068)

These are a series of resolutions, which repeated the same clauses every year. These resolutions do not take any specific action and are redundant.

### Convention on the Rights of the Child

This is the main convention that outlines the rights of the child, which also points out that no one under the age of 15 can be recruited by armed groups.

### Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

This optional protocol is an amendment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is concerned with the article that says the age limit for recruitments is 15. The protocol increases the age limit to 18.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

United Nations could not manage to take an immediate action that would end the recruitment of children. Up to now, the UN has given more emphasis on collecting information about the reasons behind the increasing number of children recruitment. Basically, the UN is trying to understand the issue comprehensively before taking any action.

On the other hand, there are DDR programs that have been operating throughout the last 25 years. The vast majority of DDR programs are in Africa, in places such as Sierra Leone, Libya, and Somalia. Although many DDR programs end up being successful, a few of them even worsened the situation in countries, which shows the significance of information collection on the reasons behind recruitment. Overall, the attempts to resolve this issue are by no means satisfactory and enough and that is exactly why a holistic solution must be found.

## Possible Solutions

This issue must be handled in two ways: Curbing the recruitment of youth by national armies and curbing the recruitment of youth by terrorist groups. These two issues have completely different solutions than each other so they must be resolved separately.



In order to put an end to the recruitment by national armies, legal steps should be taken. First of all, there are currently 165 parties to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. That optional protocol is binding for its parties so that they cannot have any military personnel under the age of 18. Therefore, by signing the optional protocol, all Member States will be obliged to recruit adults instead of children.

It becomes tricky when the goal is eliminating the recruitment of children by insurgent groups. The international community does not know where child soldiers and how many there are and this problem makes it really hard for disarmament programs to find and disarm child soldiers. Local population's help is vital in order to locate child soldiers because they tend to know far a lot than government officials.

Furthermore, as it is seen in the Boko Haram example, children are fighting over taking part in a suicide mission. They want to free themselves from endless poverty and sexual abuse. Thus, improving the life standards in rural areas is another way to curb the recruitment of the youth. By developing the life standards, the recruitment rate will decrease directly because fewer children will reach up to the armed groups.

Most importantly, DDR programs should be established throughout every country that has child soldiers. As an integral part of DDR programs, educational facilities should be built and cultural help must be given to ex-combatants so that reintegration will be ensured. In establishing DDR programs, there should be cooperation between the UN and other organizations, which are concerned with this issue such as UNICEF and International Rescue Committee. These organizations are knowledgeable on this issue and have been organizing DDR programs for years. Therefore, the UN might benefit from their experience on this issue and work collaboratively.

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