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Afghanistan**

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Child Soldiers in Afghanistan

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BACKGROUND

The use of children as soldiers involves placing children in a situation of conflict, whether by government forces, government-backed paramilitary groups, militias or self-defence units. All over the world, more than 500,000 children are associated with armed conflicts. According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, more than 300,000 of these children are actively fighting as soldiers with state forces or armed opposition or insurgent groups. The average age of these children ranges from 14-18 years, and some are as young as nine years old.

The older child soldiers receive basic weapon training and are trained to go onto the battlefield. Younger ones are employed for domestic functions – as cleaners, cooks or personal attendants. Other functions include using these children as sex slaves or for espionage.

Enlistment of such children is both voluntary and forced. In either case, the recruitment and use of children for combat is outlawed by international human rights law, humanitarian law, labour law and criminal law. Although these laws are in place, there is no enforcement mechanism to speak of. Child soldiers provide expendable combatants, which is why armed groups tap into this demographic segment to widen their recruitment base. The biggest strength of child soldiers lies in their susceptibility to indoctrination and subsequent activism. Whether coerced into combat or volunteering their services, they adapt quickly.

Lack of infrastructure, health and sanitation, schools and safety, drive children towards exercising the only available option. Most of them children have been orphaned or have lost their

families in wars that have sometimes spanned decades. In the absence of educational or vocational opportunities,



Source: worldnews.about.com
Children as young as 12 are armed and sent into the battlefield

children are forced to find shelter and sustenance and often their only resort is to turn into combatants. The militia or the army provides them with the means for sustenance and an honorable existence.

THE AFGHAN SITUATION

Afghanistan has been at war for nearly three decades now. Not only has the war wiped out an entire generation, it has also marred the potential of a return to normalcy. Arms have infiltrated the very psyche of the Afghan and the children are no exception. Children were recruited by both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, although both vehemently deny recruiting children.

While the Taliban was in power, numerous atrocities were committed and those in the Northern Alliance now view the present war as an opportunity to avenge the injustice meted out to them then. As a Northern Alliance commander is reported to have proudly said, "Our cause is so great that even our children want to join us

in fighting the enemy.” The Northern Alliance has a documented record of using children as young as 11 to fight the Taliban, even though the Northern Alliance say their soldiers must be 18 to join.



Source: news.bbc.co.uk
As members of the militia, these children undergo rigorous and traumatic experiences

The Taliban denies both conscription and the use of child soldiers, but reports of the use of child soldiers by the Taliban continue to appear. A widely publicized beheading carried out by a child reinforces these accusations. In its defence, the Taliban stated that every Talib, irrespective of age was unified against the infidel forces. Whatever the intentions in airing the beheading might have been, it made clear that the Taliban’s young recruits were being put through traumatic experiences. The striking similarity between the arguments posited by the two sides hint at a larger national discourse that places family and honor above age and security, thus endangering the children that are part of this conflict situation.

Moreover, the military recruitment of children stems from the basic need to reinforce troops on the battlefield. As during the Spring Offensive, every major move or setback on the ground necessitates further enlistment. According to the UN Special Mission in Afghanistan, the Taliban and United Front (Northern Alliance) each have a typical strength of 30-40,000 fighters. These numbers become difficult to sustain as a lot of Afghan youth have already been recruited or have lost their

lives in the war. Child soldiers, thus, offer a practical alternative.

In Afghanistan, since 2003, there has been no report yet of the recruitment of under 18s in the setting up and training of the Afghan National Army (ANA). This might be in part attributed to the international character of the coalition that continues to train the ANA. Also, the passage of a presidential decree in May 2003 banning the recruitment of persons under the age of 22 years to serve in the army was followed by the accession of Afghanistan to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibiting the involvement of children in armed conflict. Although a positive development, it does not prevent the use of child soldiers by non-state actors, which is a more complex issue.

Military Recruitment

The factors contributing to the voluntary or coerced military recruitment of children emerge from the highly unstable environment in the country. The most pressing problem is the survivability of the children. Mortality rates are amongst the highest in the world. Due to lack of sanitation, disease is widely prevalent. A quarter of all children die before they



Source: UNICEF Afghanistan
The NGO “Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium” (SAB) is running a successful programme for 500 former child soldiers and street children.

reach their fifth year. Of those who survive, the war has killed or injured many. Of the 200,000 people that have become

disabled due to the war, fifty percent are children. Landmines, polio, collateral damage from the war, all contribute to the disfiguration of Afghanistan's future generation. Child trafficking is an increasing problem; in 2004, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported 300 cases.

The case of female child soldiers merits special attention. Girl children, whether they are soldiers or not, are vulnerable to a larger extent – human trafficking, prostitution, sexual exploitation, rape or other physical and sexual abuse is rampant. The effects of these crimes against them results in a physically traumatized, psychologically scarred female populace that falls victim to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and social ostracism.



Source: UNICEF Afghanistan
Also on offer are literacy programmes for former child soldiers. This picture depicts a class for female children.

The absence of a regional context is conspicuous in the definition that classifies persons under the age of 18 as children. In spite of the absence of a situation of conflict, seldom do under-18s in this part of the world have access to school or even

clean water. They become the breadwinners of the family by performing odd jobs. Supplementing the family income is imperative and this responsibility which is that of an adult in the developed world falls on the child in Afghanistan. According to the National Human Development Report of 2004, Afghanistan is the seventh poorest nation in the world. Those children who escape death or injury must contribute to the livelihood of the family. While most work at petty jobs to survive, they are physically and sexually exploited by their employers.

All these causes have combined to drive these children into armed militias with their promise of security (from exploitation), honor (in fighting for a cause) and a vocation (salaries are promised). Thus, although these children might be forced into military service as victims of their circumstances, eventually they turn into perpetrators of crime. By breeding an entire stratum of its society into criminals, the military recruitment of children destroys the social fabric of the country. Being raised in the corridors of conflict, these children grow up to be adults prone to violence, feeding into the vicious cycle of conflict already in place.

Preventive Measures

Rehabilitation

There ought to be two objectives of any programme of rehabilitation. The first is to disarm the child soldiers and provide them with shelter and care. To this end, the UN-backed Child Soldiers Demobilization and Reintegration Programme has an objective of demobilizing 8000 child soldiers throughout the country. Across 15 districts, it has reached a total of nearly 4000 such demobilizations. Offering education, health facilities, security from armed groups and other options to reintegrate the child into civilian life are being propounded so as to give these former child soldiers alternatives to soldiering. However, many issues remain, most conspicuous of which is the exclusion of girl children from Demobilization,

Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) programmes.

Education

The larger framework that will reconcile these contradictions is based on educating the youth in the country, thus arming them not with weapons but with a higher degree of employability. Education is a long term solution and the initial hiccups are many. To keep children in education means keeping them out of conflict and away from the lure of military life – an enticing option to children who have known no other way of life. In 2003, UNICEF estimated that there were 8000 former child soldiers in Afghanistan. Although these children had voluntarily forsaken their weapons, they are a long way from reintegrating into civilian life.

Reintegration

The second step, thus, would be to provide them with education and alternate vocational opportunities to prevent a relapse for these children. Making children more independent of their families and/or armed groups requires an investment in their education and well-being. To deal with anti-social behavior, distorted psycho-social characteristics and violent or abusive conduct, an intensive commitment to their recovery and settlement is imperative. In 2003, 4 million children returned to classrooms including 1.2 million girls. The Government of Afghanistan is now promoting an equal education for boys and girls. According to the World Bank, the literacy rate under 15 was estimated at 29 per cent in 2004. Hence, the regulation of drop out rates and the rehabilitation of children become imperative for the success of the education programme.

Justice

As perpetrators of heinous war crimes, adults are recognized as terrorists. But, children are no different. The cause-effect relation driving child victims into becoming

child soldiers blurs the distinction between victim and victimizer.

Both as victims and perpetrators of crimes in war, child soldiers are entitled to receive and be brought to justice. There are two steps involved in the process – the protection of child soldiers' rights as children and the prevention of further erosion of their rights. Corrective measures must include the setting up of suitable juvenile detention facilities for children who have been found guilty and who cannot be immediately shifted to a safe and secure environment.



Source: UNICEF Afghanistan
Rehabilitation includes provision of food and shelter.

International Norms

There is some important legislation in this regard. The first is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000 and that came into force in 2002. The Protocol prohibits governments and armed groups from using children under the age of 18 in hostilities; bans all compulsory recruitment of under 18s; and raises the minimum age and requires strict safeguards for voluntary recruitment.

Although the enforcement of this legislation on non-state armed groups is hard to ensure, the efficacy of the Protocol is increased manifold by vesting the responsibility of keeping such activity in

control with the governments of the respective countries.

Child protection has also been incorporated in UN peacekeeping mandates. The UN Security Council has also recognized the phenomenon of soldiering by children as a particular threat to international security and addressed it through its resolutions. In Resolution 1612, passed on 26 July 2005, the UN Security Council established the first comprehensive monitoring and reporting system for enforcing compliance among those groups using child soldiers in armed conflict. Resolution 1612 requires the groups cited by the Secretary General for continued use of child soldiers to immediately create and implement concrete, time-bound action plans for ending these violations. All UN peacekeeping missions and country teams have been immediately charged with assisting these groups in creating the action plans.

The objective is not only to get the state parties to the conflict to join and ratify the treaties and conventions, but also to be able to enforce these laws and put an end to this menace. To this end, objective international standards of security provide a parameter for national governments to base their strategies and actions on.

CONCLUSION

The tragedy with child soldiers is that not only do they distort the present but also that they quell any hope for the future. In conflict-ridden or post-conflict scenarios,

the need for stability gains precedence over the development of society. Child soldiers reverse both these processes, deferring the return to normalcy by decades and generations.

The very scale of the waste of the human resources of Afghanistan makes it hard for any structure of control to evolve. Without a solid structure of security or governance, it will be increasingly difficult for these child soldiers to join mainstream society. A framework must come into place in Afghan society that helps build a secure future for these children. And in building such a future, these very children must play a vital role. Any nation-building process in Afghanistan must be inclusive of these children.

The initiative has been taken in the form of international legislation, aid and support. The onus, however, lies in the hands of the Afghan people themselves. The representatives of the people must demonstrate the political will to bring this issue to the forefront and to deal with it seriously. The presence of at least three child detainees in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba by American forces brought to the fore the question of how and why these children were turning into “very, very dangerous people”. It would only be natural therefore to take steps to stop this from continuing.