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Child Soldiers: Root Causes and UN Initiatives

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Let me begin my talk to you today with a description of my visit to a Maoist army cantonment site in eastern Nepal in December. The cantonment was set up after a peace agreement. In this cantonment were child soldiers recruited by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in their struggle against the Nepalese state. We had earlier met many young people who had been recruited by the Maoists with false promises, who had run away because of abuse. But these were another group, those who for some reason or another had chosen to remain. We were allowed to meet these children to have a discussion about their future. They were teenagers and about a third of them were female. Initially they were hostile. One of them told us to go away. "We are soldiers, we want to remain as soldiers, we want to be part of the armed forces, we do not need your help," he said. We had come to rescue them- they did not want to be rescued.

Then we began a conversation with them about the future. We spoke of the many opportunities that are available to young people, opportunities that could be provided to them if they came to a civilian environment. We spoke of computers, of technical skills, of entertainment; we spoke of other child soldiers around the world and what they had done with their lives. After awhile their eyes stopped having that glazed over expression.. They began to listen. When we left, they remained skeptical but no longer hostile. This would then be the beginning of a long conversation.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD

Before we begin our discussion of child soldiers, we must first ask- what do we mean by childhood? A great deal of discussion among academics has focused on the construction of childhood in different societies. For the most part, international law, influenced by the research of Piaget and his followers¹, accepts the fact that there is a link between chronological age and cognitive development; that there are stages in the development of cognitive thinking, especially the ability to make moral judgments, and that eighteen is the age where such development is complete. For this reason, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other subsequent documents has stated that eighteen is the age of maturity.

Academics who are anthropologists², influenced by recent work by psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky³ and others who point to the influence of everyday life experience in the formation of moral judgment, argue that childhood is a

construction that differs from place to place. As David Rosen, Professor of Anthropology at Farleigh Dickinson, writes “adopting a single universal definition ignore that childhood is understood and experienced in different societies in divergent ways”³. He argues that straight 18 is part of the modern “politics of age” and an aspect of “norm entrepreneurship” that characterize humanitarian advocacy.⁴ – At a UN gathering he presented a slideshow of children that voluntarily joined and fought with the military both in the war of independence and in the civil war in the United States. He points to the fact with regard to initiation rites in most tribes and ethnic groups, the age varies from 14-16 thus recognizing an early end to childhood.

Susan Shepler, Professor of Anthropology at University of California at Berkeley also concurs with this approach of childhood as a construction of a particular community. Focusing on Sierra Leone, she has outlined how the prevalence of child labor along with child soldiers was an acceptance that children could work, accept responsibility and need not be protected as expected in other societies. She also points to the initiation rituals in secret societies for young adolescents, both male and female. Joining an armed group was often seen as an extension of that ritual. These cultural factors, once understood in Sierra Leone, helps us understand how, when the social framework⁵ disintegrated due to war, these bizarre manifestations could take place. – For both Rosen and Shepler, understanding the cultural context was an absolute precondition to understanding the phenomenon of child soldiers.

There is no doubt that “straight 18” – children are children till they are eighteen- the backbone of international instruments with regard to children, is an aspirational statement, a product of international norm creation. Embedded in this “politics of age” as Rosen calls it is that children should enjoy their childhood for as long as possible; though one recognizes their “agency”, they should be protected from harm and exploitation. Most importantly, they should not be given duties or burdens that prevent them from going to school and learning for a better future. These are the assumptions of this international normative framework as set out in international instruments. As the mandate of the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict is evidence, nothing binds nations together more than the need to protect children. There is a universal consensus on this issue, at least in terms of aspiration, judging from the number of signatories to the CRC as well as the unanimity before the Security Council with regard to Security Council Resolution 1612. The issue is then to turn the aspiration into practice in all parts of the globe. To do this, it is important to understand the research of anthropologists

such as Shepler and Rosen- we cannot dismiss the cultural factors that define childhood in different societies. The cultural context and how we negotiate its terrain will determine whether international norm creation has local resonance. Unless we understand these factors we will not be able to devise effective programmes to prevent the recruitment of children or to reintegrate them back into their communities.

WHY ARE CHILDREN RECRUITED

Before discussing why children are recruited, we must come to terms with the fact that child recruitment is not always forced and that many children seem to join military groups willingly. For a long time, the Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda model of forced recruitment, where many children were abducted, dragged and then beaten into submission was the archetype for the campaign on child soldiering. There is no doubt that many groups abduct, intimidate and coerce children to join them. Families are sometimes asked to give a child each to the cause. Brute force is often used to take children away. Let me tell you the story of Moi- a young man I met from northern Uganda. He was playing with his friend when the LRA attacked his village. He was abducted with his friend and made to carry the loot from their village. On the way to the LRA camp, his friend fell and broke his ankle. The commander of the group just shot his friend in the head. Moi was taken to the camp and was beaten, drugged and trained to be a child soldier. He was made to attack his own village and kill and steal from family and friends. After years of this activity, Moi had a crisis of conscience and escaped to a UNICEF funded project where I met him.

Not all children however are abducted. In a recent survey of former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and their motivation to join armed groups, it was found that only 9% were abducted or joined out of fear. 34% of these children said they joined for material reasons, 21% said they joined because they believed in the group's ideology, 10% said they wanted revenge and 11% wanted to leave their home. – Even in the LRA,⁷ research shows that many of the children did join willingly for different reasons. –

Despite the acceptance of the fact that many children do go on their own to join armed groups, there is disagreement of how much of this can be termed voluntary, or freely chosen. What is the nature of this agency? Some are of the belief, that

children are not capable of this kind of moral judgment so any choice is not voluntary and that any decision to join such movements must be coerced. On the other side, there are those who celebrate these moments of agency, as freely chosen, as participatory and as an expression of true will, requiring that we as adults respect those choices made by the children. The reality must lie somewhere in-between. Though seemingly chosen, those decisions are also conditioned by material and cultural realities that allow for such choice and therefore must be understood in that context. Without understanding the social and economic conditions that create the space for children to make such choices, it is difficult to either deny children agency or to claim without doubt that the agency was freely chosen.

Any discussion of recruitment must begin with an attempt to understand the material conditions that often drive children to violence. As Oxford University professor Jason Hart writes, in many of these societies, the “profoundly asymmetrical power relations giving rise to systematic oppression” – often colours the political understanding of young people and drives them into action.

Most social scientists agree that poverty is a factor that leads to child soldiering but it is also important to underscore that not all poor children become child soldiers- poverty therefore is only a contributing factor. Poverty lessens options for children and therefore makes child soldiering a possible avenue for their energies. Poverty in some areas also means a lack of access to education and other basic resources and therefore the possibility of any other form of mobility is often non-existent. For some children, especially orphans, joining armed groups would ensure at least one meal a day and some poor parents give their children to the movement in the hope that they will be well fed and housed. In this context, providing infrastructure to combat poverty and implementing development projects that try to grapple with poverty by motivating young people to develop skills and go forward with their lives must be seen as very important to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers.

Discrimination, perceived or real, is often a key motivating factor for children to join the armed groups. It is not unusual that many of the armed groups that recruit child soldiers are drawn from ethnic, class and caste groupings that see their struggle in terms of discrimination and exploitation. Whether it is language discrimination, denial of access to state resources, denial of political representation, the question of equality is central to many of these struggles. Even the Lords Resistance Army played on the perceived sense of discrimination of the Acholi people while they abducted children.

Ethnic, tribal and religious identity, linked to notions of perceived discrimination, is particularly potent in the mobilization of whole communities, including the children. In ethnic and religious wars, families sometimes give their children voluntarily when commanders speak of “defending the community”. Loyalty to ethnic, religious or tribal group becomes the bargaining tool for armed groups where every member of the community is called upon to play their part. Children are very susceptible to these demands and are easily manipulated into contributing their energies for the cause.

Resistance to discrimination often results in brutal suppression by security forces or armed groups of another ethnic group. This only compounds feelings of oppression. As Jason Hart points out the feeling of “humiliation” is key in this struggle.— This humiliation draws on a collective history and strengthens a sense of group identity. Benedict Anderson in his study of nationalist narratives notes that collective humiliation and suffering is one of the key elements related to the development of identity.— Children, being emotionally vulnerable, are easily seduced by such narratives. Many of them have lost loved ones and a personal desire for revenge often combines with nationalist/ethnic/tribal myths to encourage young people to join armed groups.

The recent trend in the formation of self defense groups in communities that are subject to threat from the outside also poses serious challenges. The leaders of the community feel that the children must play their part and help defend their families and their communities. This notion of self-defense may be exploited but is sometimes very real in countries such as Sudan and Chad.

Displacement is another factor that contributes to the phenomenon of child soldiers. According to research done by the University of Pittsburg,— a large number of children are recruited from refugee camps. Jason Hart also points to how conditions in the camp are very conducive to children being drawn into violence.— The resources are often meager with very few education and employment opportunities. The camp also heightens group identity and a group sense of grievance. There are often restrictions on freedom of movement, frustrating young people. Families of rebel groups are often in the camps. All this contributes to children being easily recruited from the camp environment. In fact some researchers argue that security around the camps is one way of ensuring that children are not recruited.

Finally it must be understood that war in some societies, after it has existed for sometime, is a “growth industry” with its own logic and trajectory. The supply of arms, control of resources through force, the recruitment of fighters all become part of the political economy. Arms dealers acquire vested interest in perpetuating the war, as do local commanders and local warlords. In such a context children are socialized to accept war as a part of life and to seek advancement within the structures that it creates.

The material factors contributing to the recruitment of children would not result in child soldiering if the leadership of a particular group was to refuse to exploit the conditions that vulnerable children face. The organization of the armed group is critical to whether children are recruited. It is for this reason that activists place an emphasis on the accountability of these actors. Armed struggle or armed warfare is often chosen by political, ethnic and gang leaders as a means of political confrontation in a particular society or in fighting for the control of resources. However, there are many armed groups that do not recruit child soldiers because they refuse to accept them. These groups are usually ideologically more sophisticated. Unfortunately, if a group decides to accept child soldiers then the potential for exploitation is great.

The armed group often presents itself as a military vanguard of an important cause. The military life and the military commanders become role models for the young people. The military ethos becomes part of everyday life. There is sometimes a call to martyrdom, sacrifice and heroic death, something that often excites romantic young men and women. This can even take the form of suicide killings. This military ethos has logic of its own and is an attraction to vulnerable children. Many young people come to commanders even if they are not abducted. Responsible commanders turn them away. Others, however, see that children actually may make great soldiers. With what psychologists call “underdeveloped” concepts of death, they are fearless in fighting, taking great risk and seeing much of it as a game. They obey commands and pose little threat to the hierarchy. As a result a group begins to employ more and more child soldiers, even to the extent of abducting them. The proliferation of small arms adds to the ease of continuing with this type of recruitment. According to specialists it takes a child on average 45 minutes to master an AK 47.

As many anthropologists points out individual factors also condition whether a child will become a child soldier. As was pointed out earlier, feelings of revenge and a sense of humiliation often drives children into armed groups. Seeing their

parents killed or humiliated, their sisters raped and their community attacked is a powerful motivating force. This often results in adding to the cycle of violence, with revenge leading to counter-revenge and children often becoming victim and perpetrator at the same time.

Some children join armed groups for family reasons.. Domestic violence in the home, dysfunctional families, and the prevalence of orphans in societies affected by AIDS, etc... all lead to children seeking new forms of shelter and security. Many groups assure us that most of the children who come to them are orphans or children who refuse to go back to their parents. This is often true of girl children. They join armed groups for the sense of freedom they may experience away from traditional and often oppressive upbringings. Being a female combatant allows them to transgress gender roles and gender stereotypes, while learning self confidence and leadership skills. This poses major problems for reintegration of girls after the war since the child does not want to go back home. Nevertheless, these seemingly positive factors must be counterbalanced by the fact that in some wars girls are abducted, made into sex slaves and have to play the role of combatant, wife and domestic aid all at the same time.

Some male children, being emotionally vulnerable, are drawn toward role models who express their masculinity through the use of force. This is common in many societies where to be masculine also means the readiness to use force when necessary. This is coupled in some societies with the desire to join an armed group as a means of social mobility. Joining may give access to resources and the ability to wield power and influence in the territory controlled by the armed group. Many children see this as a legitimate avenue of advancement in a society that offers them few other options, though they often lament the fact that they cannot go to school or see their families.

UN INITIATIVES

So what are the international initiatives that try and deal with this problem of child soldiers? It is clear from the analysis of root causes that the leadership of the armed group is a key factor in the recruitment of children. Therefore the fight against impunity, holding these leaders accountable, and deterring them from future action must continue. Though conditions for child recruitment exist because of root causes, it is the decision of armed actors to recruit or enlist these children that is the final marker and unless they are taken to task there will be no possibility of dealing with this issue in a comprehensive way.

The international community has recently begun to deal with the issue of impunity and accountability in a more systematic way. Last year the International Criminal Court indicted Thomas Lubanga of the Democratic Republic of Congo on the charges of recruitment and use of child soldiers. This was the first case to be brought before the Court and the prosecutors decided that they would begin with this path breaking prosecution to send a message that such practices are war crimes and crimes against humanity. Since then three other warlords have also been charged with the recruitment and use of children. Though these are only a few select cases, they have sent out the necessary warning signal. When I was in the Sudan with some of the non signatories of the Darfur peace agreement, they questioned me in detail about the court and the indictments- they seemed preoccupied with what it meant for them. The deterrence effect of even one conviction should be substantial, though we must accept the most fanatical will continue to recruit without concern for the consequences.

It is not only the criminal court that has moved forward on this issue. The Security Council has chosen children and armed conflict as the only human rights issue with which to have a continuous engagement. Under Security Council resolution 1612, they have set up a working group to study the issue in more detail, a monitoring and reporting mechanism that will gather information at the country level on grave violations against children during armed conflict, and they hold out the prospect of the possibility of sanctions against groups that continue to recruit and use child soldiers. This is a unique mechanism. Our office is the facilitator for the UN process before the Council.. Since the resolution was passed in 2005 over twenty country reports have been submitted and the Council has come up with recommendations and conclusions.

The threat of Security Council sanction has moved many groups to enter into action plans with the UN system to release children. Over the last year five groups in Cote D'Ivoire, two groups in the Central African Republic, one in Nepal, one in Sri Lanka and one in the Philippines have agreed to enter into such action plans. Many are ignorant of Security Council processes and when you meet them, even deep in the African bush, to explain their implications, they agree to co-operate with the United Nations to release the children. They have aspirations of becoming national leaders and do not wish to be tarred with sanctions. Others, unfortunately remain intransigent, seeing children as an important resource in their armed struggle and are therefore prepared to risk the possibility of sanctions.

The fight against impunity at the international level is at its nascent stage and serves as a signal that this crime will no longer be tolerated. To be truly effective, there must be action at the national level. National legislation, national prosecutions and national systems to prevent recruitment must be set up if the struggle against the recruitment and use of child soldiers is to be sustainable. Building national capacity to do that is one of the most important challenges of the next few years.

Besides fighting the impunity of recruiters, it becomes important to ensure prevention at the community level. For this reason identifying the root causes, including the cultural factors is the first step. In this context our office is calling for the development agencies of the United Nations to be brought together for a discussion on how we could deal with some of the structural issues relating to recruitment of children, in particular the problem of poverty. Targeting youth in a systematic way as a beneficiary for development programmes may be one way of dealing with this problem, especially in countries where there is a youth bulge in the population. Making youth development a high priority in development assistance, especially in countries prone to conflict, is a core advocacy point for the OSRSG/CAAC and UNICEF.

Development agencies as well as humanitarian agencies must also work together to ensure the successful reintegration of children, once they have been released into their communities, UNICEF, and UNDP take the lead in this regard. For example in Nepal they stand ready with 60 reintegration package options for the children so that they can find a package that would be best suited for the individual child. The packages provide technical and vocational training as well as other support for the children. In addition, the agencies will work with the families and the communities to reintegrate the children. They will do so by providing similar opportunities to children who did not become child soldiers so as not to stigmatize returning children and they will also try to provide psycho social support to families to assist in the reintegration. Successful reintegration is not only healthy for the child but will also prevent re-recruitment or the criminalization of children as part of youth gangs. The UN system has come together and formulated the Paris Principles for the reintegration of children associated with armed groups. Through a consultative process- these Principles will guide child protection practitioners in delivering the most effective programme for reintegration and recovery.

Reintegration has not always proved to be an easy process. Though the Paris Principles calls for an inclusive community oriented programme that does not

stigmatise children, as can be seen from the Maoist example, many children do not want to go home or may have special needs. Research has shown that children who are victims of sexual violence or children who are forced to commit terrible acts of violence require special care. The real success of such programmes is when they tailor make their solutions to the needs of the individual child, taking into consideration the society he lives in, and capitalize on the skills and qualities he has cultivated during his period with an armed group.

Since IDP camps are often a site for recruitment, the management of these camps is to be reviewed with the view of stopping children from being taken from the camp. Camp security could be advised and trained and the internal management of the camp could be trained to be vigilant. This should be coupled with programmes in the camp to allow children to continue with their education and to receive training in skills that are relevant to their age and to their geographical area. UNHCR and the office of the Special Representative on the Internally Displaced have taken a lead on this and it is our expectation that as far as possible, given the limitations, security will be strengthened in light of these research findings.

The cultural factors outlined by many researchers are extremely important and it outlines the need for the United Nations to ensure that the universal norms it advocates has cultural resonance in the different societies. This requires an in-depth cultural understanding of the societies we are dealing with and the development of programmes based on that cultural understanding. In addition to the normal assessments before the formulation of any programme of assistance, a cultural or social assessment should also be conducted to guide policymakers whether they are in the development field, the humanitarian field or the human rights field.

Since it is the cult of the military and the militarization of children that is the main issue we face, UN actors on the ground and NGOs could continue to promote peace education in conflict countries to give children examples of non violent means of resolving conflict. In recent times UNICEF and our NGO partners on the ground have begun a campaign to ensure education in emergencies. This campaign is aimed at ensuring that education is central to humanitarian emergencies and that in planning to deal with these emergencies, agencies must ensure that providing schools for children is an integral part of the process. Schools would not only be centers of learning, but also designated as zones of peace where children can learn and play away from the conflict. In this context, the introduction of peace education in emergencies is an option that must be fully explored though it must be

tailored to the particular culture and history of the country concerned. It will be an essential first step to teaching children that there are many ways to deal with conflict and that armed struggle or armed activity is not necessarily the only way forward.

CONCLUSION

There are many who argue that child soldiers have existed from the beginning of time and that as usual humanitarian actors are trying to create universal norms and realities that have never really existed. Even western country armies in the last century were replete with drummer boys, child soldiers and spies. National liberation movements in the third world have also had their share of child soldiers. Yet during those years, we also had slavery, women were treated as chattel and could not vote, and physical abuse was rampant as a form of punishment. The world has come together against all those practices. The fact that they once existed, or continue to exist cannot be the answer. If the march of civilization is about protecting the dignity of people and respecting their rights, then allowing children the space to enjoy their childhood and protecting them from abuse must surely be the ultimate marker of such progress.

As I said earlier- children is one issue around which all parties at the United Nations unite. They do so, not because their societies are perfect, but because at a primordial level they think of their children and want only the best for them. It is this positive sentiment that has given the international community the impetus to move quite far in setting international norms and standards with regard to children. These norms are an international consensus, agreed to by large pluralities in a unique coming together of diverse people and nations.

With norms in place, we have now entered the era of application. The implementation of norms, holding people accountable, supporting victims- this has become our primary concern. As warfare changes around the world in this terrible confrontation between terrorism and counter- terrorism, children and civilians are increasingly affected. Implementing these norms in the face of devastating violence is becoming even more difficult. Humanitarian actors begin to look weak and unfocused in a world where military action is valued as the supreme arbiter. It is only when we see the faces children that we realize the futility of such violence. Their faces, staring at the media cameras, perplexed and vulnerable, remind us at a profound level of that nearly forgotten march of civilization- a march that the United Nations, embattled as it is, must encourage and lead.

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- [2](#) Vygotsky, "Mind in Society" quoted in Hart, Displaced Children, 281
- [3](#) Rosen, David., (2007) "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law and the Globalization of Childhood", American Anthropologist, 109,2,296
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- [5](#) Shepler, Susan (2004) "The Social and Cultural Context of Child Soldiering in Sierra Leone", paper presented at PRIO workshop on Techniques of Violence in Civil War, Oslo, 2004
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- [7](#) Rosen, David, Child Soldiers, 299
- [8](#) Hart, Jason, Displaced Children, p, 287
- [9](#) Hart, Jason, Displaced Children, 288
- [10](#) Anderson, Benedict (1998) The Spectre of Comparisons, Nationalism, South east Asia and the World, Verso, London
- [11](#) Research currently being conducted by Professor Simon Reich at the University of Pittsburg shared with the OSRSG/CAAC in 2007
- [12](#) Hart, Jason, Displaced children, 282-285