EASY PREY

Child Soldiers in Liberia

Human Rights Watch/Africa
Human Rights Watch Children's Right Project

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Human Rights Watch/Africa was established in 1988 to monitor and promote the observance of internationally recognized human rights in sub-Saharan Africa. Abdullahi An-Na'im is the director; Janet Fleischman is the Washington representative; Karen Sorensen, Alex Vines, and Berhane Woldegabriel are research associates; Kimberly Mazyck and Urmi Shah are associates; Alison L. DesForges and Bronwen Manby are consultants. William Carmichael is the chair of the advisory committee and Alice Brown is the vice chair.

Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project
The Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project was established in 1994 to monitor and promote the human rights of children around the world. Lois Whitman is the director and Michelle Morris is counsel.

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Acknowledgments

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The Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project was established in April 1994 to defend the rights of children around the world by investigating, reporting on and publicizing abuses against children and working to end them. The project's concerns include such issues as the killing of street children by police, the use of children as soldiers, torture and inhumane treatment of children by police, locking up children without due process, and bonded and forced labor of children.

We are grateful for the help of the many people who work closely with children in Liberia and who gave so freely of their time and assistance, including social workers, counselors and others who work with child soldiers, human rights activists, relief workers, and representatives of the United Nations. Unfortunately we cannot thank them by name for fear of endangering them or their work.

Lastly, we wish to thank the many former child soldiers who spoke to us of their experiences and their hopes.

Frequently used abbreviations

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ECOMOG	Economic Community Cease-fire Monitoring Group of ECOWAS
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IGNU	Interim Government of National Unity
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
LDF	Lofa Defense Force
LNTG	Liberian National Transitional Government
LPC	Liberian Peace Council
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
OAU	Organization of African Unity
ULIMO	United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

1. INTRODUCTION

Children who have been used as soldiers are among the most tragic victims of the war in Liberia.[1] Although international law forbids the use of children under the age of fifteen as soldiers, many thousands of children have been involved in the fighting.[2] The main rebel forces, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO),[3] have consistently used children under the age of eighteen, including thousands of children under fifteen. Children under fifteen are reportedly used by the other warring factions that have recently emerged. By all accounts, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), the troops loyal to the former government of Samuel K. Doe, have not used people younger than eighteen as soldiers during the five-year civil

[1]The word "children" is used in this report to mean anyone under the age of eighteen. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (Article 1). The African Charter for the Rights of the Child, which is not yet in force, also defines a child as a human being under the age of eighteen (Article 2).

[2]The laws of war (specifically, the norms of humanitarian law found in the 1977 Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions of 1949) forbid the use of children under the age of fifteen as soldiers and urge states to give priority to the oldest children when recruiting children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child contains similar language. See section on Requirements of International Law, below.

[3]In March 1994, ULIMO split into two along ethnic lines; the Krahn faction is headed by Gen. Roosevelt Johnson, and the Mandingo faction is headed by Alhadji Kromah. The inter-ULIMO fighting in the western counties of Bomi and Cape Mount has reportedly claimed hundreds of civilian lives since it flared up in March.

war; however, the AFL has committed egregious offenses against children during the war.

The widespread use of child soldiers has ensured that many thousands of children in Liberia have suffered exceptional cruelties during the war; many child soldiers have been killed or wounded, or have witnessed terrible atrocities in a period in which thousands of other children, too,have died. Moreover, many children have themselves taken part in the killing, maiming or rape of civilians, including other children, or the looting of civilian homes. Many have staffed military checkpoints throughout the country where they have harassed and sometimes killed civilians. Some were only ten years old when they joined in the fighting; sometimes the weapons they carry are as tall as the children. As one Liberian working with former combatants put it: "It's the climax of the abuse of children's rights."

The use of children as soldiers presents grave human rights problems. Many of these children have been killed during the conflict —denied the most basic right, the right to life. Others have been deprived of their liberty— forcibly conscripted by warring factions, separated from their families against their wills. Many have been tortured and otherwise treated inhumanely by the warring factions with which they have served. Some have been forced to kill or torture others with consequent severe psychological effects to these children. All have been denied a normal childhood.

No one knows the exact number of children who have been used in the civil war in Liberia; even the total number of fighters used by all factions is unknown. It is estimated that 40,000 to 60,000 fighters are involved in the conflict.[4] UNICEF

[4]The UN Consolidated Interagency Appeal of November 1993 puts the figure at 60,000. Other observers believe the figure to be considerably lower.

estimates that 6,000 of the fighters, or 10 percent, are children under fifteen. In general, most observers agree that all the factions are made up largely of very young people; some estimate that another 20 percent of the fighters are between the ages of fifteen and seventeen.

People who work closely with child soldiers believe that the factions use children because they are obedient and do not question orders, because they are easier to manipulate. As one Liberian working with former combatants put it: "Adults need a good reason to take up arms. It is easier to convince kids to fight for almost nothing, with small promises of money and loot....They are easy prey for the factions."

Some observers told Human Rights Watch that children are used because they do not know what they are doing and do not realize that they are actually killing people. Counselors who work with former child solders do not believe this is true. Several told Human Rights Watch that once children have built up a relationship of trust with a counselor, they often reveal the guilt, horror and nightmares they suffer because of the appalling atrocities they have committed.

All the warring factions have forcibly recruited some children, but most children have joined voluntarily, usually because they saw no other way to survive. Children say they joined for various reasons: to avenge the killings of parents, other family or friends; to protect their families from the warring factions; or to get food for themselves and their families. In some cases, the children's families had been killed; no one was left to take care of them, and they took the only option that they thought they had —to join a fighting force.

Children have played many roles in the conflict, ranging from carrying ammunition and cooking to serving at the front in major battles. Some have been used as spies, some as executioners, some as cannon fodder to draw the fire of

adversaries. Many young boys —as young as nine or ten— staff checkpoints, where they have killed or terrorized civilians for no apparent reason. Almost all of the child soldiers are boys, although observers have reported girls among the child soldiers.

The educational level of the boys interviewed by Human Rights Watch ranged from no education (one boy could not read or write his own name) to fifth grade. Most of the children reported having gone only as far as first grade. A UNICEF official reported that before the war only 34 percent of Liberian children completed first grade.

Child soldiers reported training that lasted from one week to several months. Several described being taught how to shoot, how to put together and take apart weapons, how to "walk a far distance with a heavy load," how to take cover, how to carry out an ambush, how to "dodge bullets," how to crawl, squat, jog.

All of the child soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch had been armed. Most told us that they had carried AK-47's, fully automatic Kalashnikov assault rifles designed and manufactured in the former Soviet Union and the former eastern bloc. One boy said that he had carried and used a G-3 (a German-designed assault rifle used by NATO troops). With either of these weapons, one pull on the trigger can release as many as twenty (the G-3) or thirty (the AK-47) bullets.

Child soldiers report being treated cruelly by the factions to which they belonged; they have been beaten, flogged, and subjected to a form a torture called *tabay* —in which a person's elbows are tied together behind his back, causing severe pain and often leading to nerve damage in the arms. Many children report being drugged with a mixture of cane juice and gunpowder, or with "bubbles," an amphetamine, to make them "strong and brave" for fighting at the front. Many child

soldiers also report having been subjected to a cruel initiation rite on joining a warring faction in which a child is forced to kill or to commit some other atrocity to demonstrate that he would be a reliable fighter— and to mark a turning point from which there would be no going back.

Many former child soldiers suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, bedwetting, anxiety, depression.

Reintegrating these children into their communities is an immense task. Some children's parents have been killed. In some cases children's families have fled, and no relatives can be found. In others, families have refused to take children back because of the abuses they have committed.

Efforts are currently underway to rehabilitate and reintegrate those children who have been captured or demobilized —examining and counseling them and attempting to reunify them with their families. These efforts have been spearheaded by UNICEF and by a Liberian organization, the Children's Assistance Program (CAP).

Human Rights Watch believes that children under eighteen should not take part in armed conflict, killing and being killed. Human Rights Watch supports international efforts to raise the minimum permissible age for participation in armed conflict from fifteen to eighteen years of age. We urge all warring factions to disarm and demobilize immediately all fighters under the age of eighteen and to refrain from any further such exploitation of children. We also urge the current government, the Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG), to do all in its power to keep warring factions from using children as soldiers. We urge the government to take all possible steps to ease the former child soldier's transition from war to a peaceful and productive life. Programs for this transition should start immediately, with long-term planning for the period after the war.

2. BACKGROUND

Since December 1989, Liberia has been devastated by a civil war that has killed tens of thousands of Liberians and caused an estimated one-third of its population to flee the country as refugees.[5] The war has been marked by mass killings along ethnic lines and horrifying atrocities. Indeed, a characteristic of the Liberian civil war has been that civilians suffer the most, that they have been deliberately targeted by all the warring factions ¾often because of their ethnicity¾ and that as a consequence far more civilians than combatants have been killed. The lack of protection and respect for the lives of civilians by all sides and the profound distrust among the warring factions remain obstacles to lasting peace.

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[5]Estimates of the number of Liberians killed during the war range from 50,000 to 150,000.

The population of Liberia in 1991 was estimated to be 2,637,000 (World Book, 1992). As of April 1994, an estimated 711,000 Liberians remained as refugees in the neighboring countries: 415,000 in Guinea; 250,000 in the Ivory Coast; 25,000 in Ghana; 17,000 in Sierra Leone; and 4,000 in Nigeria. (The war also displaced some 400,000 Sierra Leoneans, 170,000 of whom went to Guinea and 100,000 to Liberia.) The issue of repatriation of the refugees remained subject to progress on the political front and the resolution of certain security concerns, and as of April 1994 no significant repatriation had occurred.

For background information on the Liberian war, see Africa Watch (the former name of Human Rights Watch/Africa) publications:

Liberia: Human Rights Abuses by the Liberian Peace Council and the Need for International Oversight, May 1994.

Liberia: Waging War to Keep the Peace: the ECOMOG Intervention and Human Rights, June 1993.

Liberia: The Cycle of Abuse: Human Rights Violations since the November Cease-fire, October 1991.

Liberia: A Human Rights Disaster, October 1990.

Liberia: Flight from Terror. Testimony of Abuses in Nimba County, May 1990.

The roots of Liberia's civil war go far back in Liberian history.[6] However, the immediate precursor dates from 1985: after President Samuel Doe, an ethnic Krahn who came to power in a 1980 coup, stole the presidential elections, he brutally suppressed a coup attempt led by Thomas Qwiwonkpa, an ethnic Gio. Doe's soldiers, the Krahn-dominated AFL, engaged in bloody reprisals against real and suspected opponents —and their home communities as well— targeting mostly Gios and Manos; hundreds were killed and hundreds more were detained without charge or trial. This violence and the subsequent repression set the stage for the country's ethnic conflict and civil war.

On December 24, 1989, Charles Taylor and his NPFL launched an incursion from the Ivory Coast into Nimba County. The AFL responded with a ruthless counterinsurgency campaign, indiscriminately killing civilians, burning villages, raping women and looting. The brutality served to swell the ranks of NPFL recruits, many of whom were Gio and Mano boys orphaned by the fighting and the random and reprisal killings that accompanied it, or enraged by the AFL's conduct.

The AFL went on the rampage outside Nimba as well. In one of the most egregious abuses of the war, on the night of July 29-30, 1990, AFL soldiers massacred some 600 people —mostly Gios and Manos, many of them women with children— who had taken refuge at St. Peter's Church in

[6]Liberia was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. The new republic was controlled by the settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, who effectively held power for 133 years. The settlers ruled the country like a colony, in the name of a "Christianizing" and "civilizing" mission, while establishing a feudal structure with all social, economic and political power in their hands, and subjecting the indigenous population to a range of abuses. For these reasons, the 1980 coup that brought Samuel Doe to power was welcomed by many Liberians, who saw it as the overthrow of the ruling elite.

Monrovia.

Civilians also suffered at the hands of the NPFL. The NPFL targeted suspected supporters of the Doe regime, particularly members of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups. Throughout NPFL territory, civilians suffered the capricious actions of an occupying army —arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, confiscation and destruction of property and restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of expression.

In August 1990, without any prospect for intervention by the the United Nations or the United States, a peacekeeping force under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) arrived in Monrovia to separate the warring factions and to stop the bloodshed. The role assigned to the force, known as the Economic Community Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), was to impose a cease-fire and to help form an interim government that would hold elections within twelve months. With NPFL attacks continuing, there was no peace to keep, and ECOMOG itself engaged in combat to push the NPFL out of Monrovia.

This situation was aggravated in October 1992, when the NPFL attacked Monrovia. ECOMOG then accepted the assistance of other Liberian factions in fighting the NPFL, and in so doing dropped much of its appearance of neutrality. The human rights records of these factions —ULIMO and the AFL— ranged from suspect to abysmal. The AFL was thoroughly discredited by its horrific abuses during the 1980s and especially during the war in 1990, when it massacred civilians and devastated Monrovia. ULIMO is an offshoot of the AFL, and its conduct in the areas it captured in 1992 included extensive human rights abuses. Because of its conduct in the conflict, questions have been raised about ECOMOG's commitment to human rights and its ability to act as a neutral

arbiter of the conflict.[7]

The chief warring factions currently involved in the conflict are Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), which controls about 60 percent of the country; and the United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), made up primarily of soldiers from former President Samuel K. Doe's army, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), which controls at least two western counties. In recent months, ULIMO has split along ethnic lines, pitting Krahns against Mandingos, causing serious casualties. Since late 1993, the NPFL has also been challenged by the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), a new armed faction made up largely of former AFL soldiers, most of whom are members of the Krahn ethnic group. The LPC claims to control significant territory in the southeast. The remaining troops of the Armed Forces of Liberia do not control territory per se, but are armed and deployed around Monrovia. In addition, the Lofa Defense Force (LDF) is fighting ULIMO in Lofa County.[8]

In June 1993, in one of the worst atrocities to be documented during the war, 547 civilians, mostly women and children, were massacred in a displaced persons camp outside of Harbel. The victims were shot, beaten or hacked to death. A United Nations investigation concluded that the massacre had been carried out by the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

U.N. Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali condemned the Harbel massacre, and a new round of peace talks was initiated. The U.N. joined with ECOWAS and the Organization

[7]See Africa Watch: *Liberia--Waging War to Keep the Peace: The Ecomog Intervention and Human Rights*, June 1993.

[8]The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), that broke away from the NPFL in 1990 and was led by Prince Johnson, effectively disbanded in October 1992. The INPFL also used child soldiers.

of African Unity (OAU) to sponsor peace negotiations in Geneva that included representatives of all factions.

On July 25, 1993, a peace agreement was signed in Cotonou, Benin, by the NPFL, ULIMO, and the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU). The peace accord stipulated that concomitant with disarmament, a five-person Council of State elected by all the factions would take power from the interim government until elections were held. A thirty-five-member transitional parliament would include thirteen members from the NPFL and the interim government, and nine from ULIMO. Between August 1993 and February 1994, political wrangling prevented the LNTG from being seated.[9] In February 1994, it was agreed that David Kpomakpor, a lawyer representing IGNU, would chair the LNTG; with Dexter Tahyor of ULIMO[10] and Issac Mussah of the NPFL as vice chairs. Finally, in mid-May, Dorothy Musuleng Cooper was named Foreign Minister.

An important element of the plan involved the creation of a U.N. Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to help supervise and monitor the agreement, in conjunction with ECOMOG. The plan also provided for an expanded ECOMOG force, under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), to be

[9]On August 16, the Liberian factions elected Bismark Kuyon, representing the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), as chairman of the interim council, and Dorothy Musuleng Cooper of the NPFL as vice-chairman. On October 20, the NPFL abruptly replaced Musuleng Cooper with Isaac Mussah, a notorious NPFL commander. On November 15, IGNU replaced Kuyon with Philip Banks, who had been serving as Minister of Justice.

[10]Thomas Ziah, a Krahn, refused to support his fellow ULIMO candidate, Mohamed Sheriff, as chairman, and this led to the split within ULIMO. Kromah sacked Ziah on March 3, and ordered Krahn fighters in ULIMO to be disarmed. General Roosevelt Johnson, a Krahn, announced on March 6 that he had replaced Kromah as head of ULIMO. Ziah was then replaced by Dexter Tahyor, a compromise candidate.

composed of African troops from outside the West African region. By early 1994, some 800 Tanzanians were deployed in Kakata, and 900 Ugandans were in Buchanan.

In March 1994, demobilization and disarmament formally began; although some progress was reported, the process lasted only a few days before the conflict erupted again. According to the U.S. Department of State, by late June, 1994, 3,400 fighters had been demobilized. A United Nations official estimated in April that between 175 and 200 children had been among the troops demobilized.

3. CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE WAR

Life for children caught up in the civil war in Liberia is filled with random violence and acts of sickening cruelty. The war has spared no one. The World Health Organization reported in February 1994 that nearly two-thirds of high school students in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, had seen someone killed, tortured or raped during the civil war:

> The survey, of 334 pupils in grades nine to twelve, showed the war had caused serious psychological damage to young people in the capital.... It showed that 61 percent of students had seen someone being killed, tortured or raped, six percent had said they had taken part in violence themselves, and 77 percent had lost a close friend or relative killed in the war.... Some of the students said their experiences were constantly on their minds. Half said they had nightmares, trouble sleeping and were more easily frightened. Sixteen percent were using the tranquilizer Valium without medical supervision.[11]

The children caught up in the war within the very ranks of the opposing forces experience additional horrors beyond those faced by the rest of the nation's children. People who work closely with former child soldiers told Human Rights Watch many stories of the appalling experiences through which these children have lived.[12]

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[11]Reuters Information Services Inc., February 2, 1994.

[12]Unless otherwise indicated, the interviews cited with counselors, social workers, child care workers, relief workers, supervisors and others whose names cannot be used took place

- FW,[13] fifteen, came from a small village in the interior of Liberia. His father was a diamond digger and his mother sold small items in a local market. FW's parents divorced, and FW lived with his father and stepmother. He attended a mission school through first grade.

  When the conflict reached FW's area in 1990, his father left to find accommodations for the family in Guinea, but was not able to return for his family. FW was afraid, and left his stepmother to look for his mother. On his search, he came into contact with INPFL [Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia —the rebel group headed by Prince Johnson] fighters at a checkpoint; they "arrested" him and asked him to join the INPFL, but he refused. He was then told to kill a captured AFL soldier who was being beaten. He refused. The INPFL fighters told him that he would be killed if he did not kill the soldier. With regret, he carried out the order.

  After this incident, FW was trained to be a soldier. He fought with the INPFL from 1990 until October 1992. He says that he was given "bubbles" [an amphetamine —see section on treatment of child soldiers, below] to keep him "strong and brave" when he fought. When his commanding officer was killed in an ambush, he was assigned to Prince Johnson's

in Monrovia, Liberia, between April 15 and April 28, 1994.

[13]The initials FW are not this boy's real initials; all names and identifying information in this report have been changed for the children's protection.

camp. During the 1992 October crisis [Operation Octopus —the NPFL attack on Monrovia] he was seized by ECOMOG soldiers and taken to their base.

FW was sent to a transitional home for war-affected children and was seen regularly by a counselor. His counselor reported that the most significant part of his treatment was the opportunity to retell his killing of the AFL soldier. FW was filled with guilt, shame and continuous memories of the event. He vividly described how he was forced at knife point to kill another man. He continually explained how he had begged the INPFL soldier to let him go, so that he would not have to kill another person.

Forgiveness was essential for FW. He longed for forgiveness from his mother, and spoke repeatedly of his wish to see her and the rest of his family, all of whom remain behind the lines of the conflict.

- BH grew up in the Buchanan area and attended school through first grade there. Later he moved to Monrovia to live with an aunt. In August of 1990, when he was fourteen years old, he left his home in Monrovia to search for food. When he returned his aunt had left, so he lived with friends for a time. He and his friends stole things from the port area. One day he was captured by the INPFL, Prince Johnson's armed opposition group. BH said:

  The people tied me until all the bones in my chest were showing [the practice of tabay, described earlier], and they laid me down and told me to look at the sun. I stayed there the whole day. I was begging

them to loosen me. They said the only way they could loosen me was if I agreed to join them. So I agreed because I did not want to die.

He was trained for three weeks, and was then sent to the front to fight. He fought for some time and said that he felt scared when he saw others die from their wounds and hunger. He said that he felt pained and frightened when he learned that his only sister also died of hunger.

- In 1990, when TL was thirteen years old, fighters from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL —the group headed by Charles Taylor) came to his town, called his father a Mandingo [an ethnic group considered to have collaborated with the Doe regime] and beheaded him in front of TL's two brothers. When TL and his mother returned from looking for wood, they were told what had happened. TL's mother refused to believe it and told TL to go and see if it was true. TL went to the edge of the town where the incident had taken place and found his father's body, which he recognized by his clothes, but not his father's head. TL says that he looked and looked for his father's head, crying all the while.

  He returned home and told his mother, who was pregnant with her seventh child; his mother fainted. When she came to, she did not know her own name or her children; she stayed that way for two weeks, during which time she lost the baby she was carrying.

  At the end of two weeks, the NPFL came through again and everyone in the town ran away. TL and his

older brother became separated from their mother and brothers and sisters, but managed to find some distant relatives and stayed with them in another village. To this day, TL has no idea where his mother and his other brothers and sisters are.

TL's older brother left the relatives to join ULIMO. TL's relatives did not allow him to join; he bitterly resented this, and looks forward to the day when he can join ULIMO too, which he believes is the "manly" thing to do. Now he lives in a displaced persons camp with cousins. He sells cigarettes to make some money, but is eager to go back to school. He says he has a deep hatred for Gios and Manos [ethnic groups that were predominant among the early supporters of the NPFL] and says "They killed my pa."

TL says that he daydreams a lot, and that the daydreams are always the same: he joins ULIMO and carries out great military exploits. He wants desperately to find his mother and brothers and sisters. He suffers from recurring nightmares in which men are running after him to kill him and there is no one to help him and nowhere to hide. He wakes up just as he is caught and finds himself sweating and crying.[14]

- UE is fifteen years old and reports:

  In July 1990, five Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldiers came to my house and knocked on the door

[14]This account was related by a counselor who works with TL in Monrovia.

> at about 11:00 p.m. My dad went to the door and asked who it was. They said, "We are friends and want to tell you about something." My dad said, "Let it be in the morning." Then the soldiers broke the door down and came in. My mother came running. My sister was sound asleep and I was hiding behind a cushion.
>
> The soldiers tied up my mother and father, and said "Do you have any money here?" They said no, and the soldiers said "You are lying. You Mano and Gio people are dogs, but we will get rid of you one by one." My parents were screaming. The soldiers took out their knives and beheaded them. Then they ran away.
>
> I woke my sister up and we ran to our neighbor's house. We never saw our parents again until they were put into the ground. My uncle heard the news and came for us and took us to his house.[15]

Child soldiers have themselves committed serious atrocities, sometimes against total strangers but often targeting people they knew.[16] As one social worker

[15]UE gave this account to a counselor in Monrovia who reported it to Human Rights Watch.

[16]Children were also involved in some of the most notorious abuses of the war. For example, a child soldier took part in the killing of five American nuns in late October 1992. The nuns, based in Gardnersville, were killed by the NPFL. The nuns were: Sister Barbara Ann Muttra, 69; Sister Joelle Kolmer, 58; Sister Shirley Kolmer, 61; Sister Kathleen McGuire, 54; and Sister Agnes Mueller, 62. Three were killed in the convent house and two were shot on a nearby road. Although the nuns represented a tiny fraction of those killed, their death attracted international attention to the resurging war.

commented: "It is a fratricidal war. A poor or low status villager joins, say, ULIMO. Then he kills the teacher who flunked him, the man who beat him. Often women were raped by friends of their sons."

One international relief worker told Human Rights Watch:

> Some of the boys were forced to kill. Others did horrifying things and you just don't understand why. One boy, about seventeen, described to me what he did to women at checkpoints —how he raped them— and exhibited no remorse. But he's the exception, not the rule. Other kids followed orders, or followed what the adults did.

4. WARRING FACTIONS' RATIONALES FOR USING CHILDREN

Officials of both the NPFL and ULIMO acknowledge using children under fifteen as soldiers.

John T. Richardson, a spokesperson for the NPFL, told Human Rights Watch that the NPFL used children as fighters for their own protection:

> We never conscripted children by force. The kids in the NPFL insisted they wanted to fight and would get into it no matter what. The NPFL has been accused of creating a Small Boys Unit [known as the SBU]. But it is not a Small Boys Unit, it is a Special Bodyguard Unit. The boys in it are assigned to protect NPFL ministers. Five or six boys were assigned to me.
>
> We did it also to protect the kids —to make sure they eat, wash, and read. These kids wouldn't go to church or wash if they were left alone. We've fed and clothed them.
>
> Kids are assigned way away from combat. Only some are armed. We have tried to take them away from the field to protect them. Of course, responsible people in the field recognize that mistakes have been made. Everybody has fought —planes haven't discriminated where they bombed.
>
> We made an effort to get the kids into the SBU; it's under the control of Reverend Lillian Neufville. We've tried to introduce programs for the kids to

> distract them. There are no schools. Church services are held under trees.
>
> At one time I found ten kids and put them in my vehicle and said, "You'll be my SBU." I've given a kid a ride to try to find his parents, but the kid really wants to go to the front. They volunteer to carry ammunition or to cook. Sometimes you have to go to the front to get the kid out. Lots of kids and women and older people have been killed in this war.[17]

Arthur Saye, another representative of the NPFL, told Human Rights Watch:

> Almost all the kids in the Special Bodyguard Unit witnessed the brutal killing of people, saw their parents, brothers and sisters and other relatives brutally murdered by the AFL, the government troops. Many felt they had to gather to fight for survival. Charles Taylor did not go around recruiting. The boys made their own decisions —to bring honor to their families, to their parents who had been killed.[18]

In an interview with Human Rights Watch, a ULIMO official, Lasanah Kromah, the brother of ULIMO head Alihaji Kromah, claimed that ULIMO used very few child soldiers, and none at the front:

> There is no place for little children in a war. A child

[17]Interview in Monrovia, April 18, 1994.

[18]Interview in Monrovia, April 20, 1994.

> soldier is a mechanical robot, trained to pull the trigger and shoot. We've never used them at the front. Only one or two percent of our fighters are under fifteen. I don't know how many are between fifteen and eighteen.
>
> Our small boys serve with older ones, with commanders. We have no small boys unit; they are an integral part of our fighting force. Our commanders bring along their own little brothers, for control and guidance, and not really to be fighters. But of course they fight back if attacked. We feed and clothe them as well as we can. And we have medicine and nurses and some doctors at the front lines.
>
> Some of our children have witnessed the brutal murders of their parents by the NPFL. A large number of them are orphans.[19]

People who work closely with former child soldiers told Human Rights Watch that they did not believe that the warring factions use children as fighters in order to protect the children. In discussing the advantages to warring factions of using children, one counselor said: "Children are very obedient; it's a strong cultural trait in Liberia. The children don't question their orders; they act out of blind obedience." Another counselor said: "Children are some of the best soldiers; they have nothing to lose."

These findings were echoed by a relief worker, who reported:

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[19]Interview in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

> I think they use kids because the kids don't understand the risks. And children are easier to control and manipulate. If the commanding officer tells a child to do something, he does it. In this society, children are raised to follow instructions.

During the Octopus operation in 1992[20] children were used by NPFL as cannon fodder. They were in the first wave of troops, and the older fighters were behind them. At first the ECOMOG troops didn't want to shoot at the kids; some told us they were shocked to see such small kids fighting. But when the kids began shooting at them they had no alternative, so they began shooting and killing kids.

A Liberian child care worker noted the differences between children and adults, explaining why children were easily recruited:

> Children have no responsibilities at home; adults worry about their families while at the battlefront —children don't. They are easily programmed to think of war and only war. So it's easy for the factions to involve them. They are easy prey.

Another Liberian child-care worker reported: "Children are easy to command and they have excessive energy that can be used. And they can stand conditions that adults can't."

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[20]The so-called Operation Octopus took place in October 1992 when Charles Taylor's NPFL forces launched a major offensive against Monrovia. See Background section, above.

5. RECRUITMENT

Some child soldiers have been forcibly recruited. A child-care worker described how some of the children were threatened and forced to join a faction: "Some boys were told,'You join us or we'll kill your family.'" Other examples reported to Human Rights Watch include the following:

- One boy, age fifteen, who joined the NPFL in October 1990, said the fighters came to his home, beat his family and forced them to lie down and stare at the sun until one of the boys would join the NPFL. Finally he went with them and became part of the SBU.

- NK, thirteen, told Human Rights Watch that he joined NPFL in 1993, when he was twelve, because "if you didn't join, they beat you with a cartridge belt."

- OL, fifteen, reported he joined the NPFL at thirteen in Grand Bassa County because "they said they would kill me if I didn't go."

However, people who work with former child soldiers told Human Rights Watch that only a small percentage of children report having been forced by a warring faction to join.

Most children, when asked why they had joined one or another faction (Human Rights Watch interviewed children from both the NPFL and ULIMO factions) at first said it was because of "the advantage." When asked what this meant, children explained that they joined to avenge the killings of parents, brothers or sisters, to protect their families, or to get

food for themselves and their families (extreme food shortages —sometimes leading to starvation— have existed in many counties during the fighting). In some cases, the children's families were killed, and with no one left to take care of them, the children took the only option that they thought they had —to join a fighting force.

Among the cases reported to Human Rights Watch are the following:

- Child soldier AB, fifteen years old, said that he had joined ULIMO in 1992, when he was thirteen, in Grand Gedeh County, "to protect myself against NPFL."

- KK, fifteen years old, who had been with ULIMO for one year, said that his father had died and he didn't know where his mother or brothers and sisters were. "I went with ULIMO so I could look for my mother."

- WA, fifteen years old, said he had joined ULIMO "to fight for my country. The NPFL were killing my people."

- KC, sixteen years old, joined ULIMO when he was thirteen "for revenge, because my papa was killed."

- BL, fifteen, who had been with ULIMO since he was thirteen, joined "to liberate our people, because innocent people were being killed."

- CD, fourteen, joined ULIMO because "I saw NPFL kill my mother in Upper Lofa County."

- WC, fourteen, joined the NPFL when he was twelve because "NPFL treated my family badly, and I thought

that if I went with them I could protect my family. And I wanted to fight for my country."

- CA, seventeen, joined NPFL in Nimba County when he was thirteen because "AFL killed my brother."

- KT, fifteen, joined NPFL in Bong County when he was eleven because "the AFL took my mother's property."

- TC, sixteen, joined NPFL at fourteen in Bong County "to fight the ECOMOG foreigners in my country."

- FE, a very small boy of fourteen, joined the NPFL Small Boys Unit in Bassa County when he was ten years old, "to fight ULIMO, because they beat my mother and father. Besides, there wasn't any food, and if I joined I could get food for my family, at least a bag of rice. My mother and father didn't want me to go."

- UT, fourteen, joined NPFL in October 1990, when he was ten "because I wanted to get food for my family, but they never gave it to me. And I wanted to protect my family."

Social workers, counselors and others who work directly with child soldiers described to Human Rights Watch a variety of factors that had impelled the children with whom they worked to join warring factions voluntarily. A U.N. official told Human Rights Watch: "Children joined for survival and protection."[21] Another United Nations official

[21] Interviewed in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, April 15, 1994.

said, "Children went to fight because their economic situation was so bad."

This point was summarized by Liberians working with the child soldiers. As one observer said:

> Some children saw their parents killed and had no options. Some were forced to join. Some joined because of starvation —they could get food with a warring faction. Some joined because the rebels made promises to them, like "We'll take you to a football game."

The inducements to join armed groups often included promises of more than just the basic needs for a child's survival —food, clothing and protection in a dangerous world. The groups depended upon foraging and looting, and the children, too, were promised a part of the spoils. Children were promised money and whatever they could loot —including houses, cars, clothes, and food. This, in turn, encouraged children to abuse civilians in order to take their belongings. One counselor working with former child soldiers discussed how this increased the human rights abuses:

> False promises were given —that they would be paid in U.S. dollars, that they would get a house in Monrovia, or cars. This was a major thing that caused random killings; you get the property, if you get rid of the owner.

A child care worker noted some of the pressures put on the children to join:

> Food was very scarce; some joined to get food for

> themselves and their families. Some joined from peer pressure; they saw their friends join. Some joined for adventure. Most of them joined voluntarily. Sometimes they were promised money or told they would learn to drive.

A Liberian child care supervisor added that the militarization of Liberian society before the war was also an element pushing kids to join:

> You have to understand that for ten years before the war, everything was the military. It was an honor to be in the army, it was the most prestigious group. Children looked to the military as a model. So a lot of boys wanted to fight because of that.

UNOMIL commander General Daniel Opande, told Human Rights Watch:

> Some kids joined the fighting factions because they had become separated from their parents and there were only fighters around them, so they became part and parcel of the conflict. Sometimes their parents were killed and there was no one to care for them. Some were coerced; some were forcibly recruited from schools.[22]

This view was shared by a civilian U.N. official, who said:

> Some were forcibly recruited, some were street children, some joined because they didn't know what

[22] Interviewed in Monrovia, April 20, 1994.

> to do and had no one to take care of them. Many joined for survival and because of the promises of the warring factions.

Human Rights Watch was told that it is not uncommon for children —or for adults, for that matter— to switch sides and fight with a different faction. If a child becomes disillusioned with one faction, either because of the way he has been treated or because of unkept promises, he may run away and join another warring faction. These children are motivated by self-preservation rather than by allegiance to any particular faction.

In some cases, boys recruit even smaller boys to act as their aides de camp (ADC). These ADCs are not always armed but are under the command of these young leaders.[23]

[23]It should be noted that many of the boy soldiers have the rank of squad commander, lieutenant -- even general. The rank or responsibility is handed over to a certain boy as a reward for having done something special. "Of course," Col. Winkler of UNOMIL told Human Rights Watch, "that usually involves some kind of atrocity. It's the only competition they have."

6. ROLES AND DUTIES

Human Rights Watch learned that children play many roles in the conflict, ranging from carrying ammunition and cooking to serving at the front in major battles. Among the duties performed by children included:

Running errands, like bringing food;
Carrying ammunition or food;
Acting as bodyguards;
Acting as spies, carrying out reconnaissance;
Acting as informants;
Manning checkpoints, checking documents and packages;
Carrying out ambushes;
Fighting on the front lines;
Serving as executioners of suspected enemies.

One child-care worker reported:

> Some children were the most vicious, brutal fighters of all. I once saw a nine-year-old kill someone at a check-point. Children learn by imitation; they saw killings and then when their commanding officers ordered them to kill, they did. Some of the kids killed out of fear; they were told they would be killed if they didn't carry out orders to kill.

UNOMIL's Chief Operations Officer, Colonel Winkler, told Human Rights Watch:

> Lots of children are used at checkpoints. Manning a checkpoint gives a kid power and influence, even if

he's twelve years old. Often a twelve- or fifteen-year-old boy will stop a U.N. car at a checkpoint and make the officer in charge explain who he is and what he is doing. The military aspect is ridiculous—a small rope stretched across the road. We teach our U.N. officers to be quiet, and to try to explain. But a twelve-year-old doesn't understand. All he understands is that he is in power and has someone to command and can kill someone. Sometimes there are fifteen or twenty people at a checkpoint and the commander is only about ten years old. Boys at checkpoints have killed people for no reason at all. Their leaders don't take care of them; kids are available and it's easy to give them a clear understanding of who is the enemy, that's all the leaders care.

It's a children's war. Kids get promoted in rank for committing an atrocity; they can cut off someone's head without thinking. The troops move into a village; they take everything and kill and rape. They stay there a couple of weeks and then move on. The children are all part of this. There's almost never a real attack against the other side. It's civilians who are attacked; it's not soldiers against soldiers. Relatively few soldiers have been killed. But thousands of people have been displaced and turned into refugees.

This civil war is completely different from the usual war; there are no rules, no structure, no chain of command. There is no supply system; the factions don't need it. Normally you need six or seven soldiers to support three fighting soldiers. Logistics is the most important factor. But here it is the reverse.

> The factions take what they need from the area they are in. They kill people, take their houses and their food. And the children take part in all of this.[24]

All of the boys interviewed by Human Rights Watch had seen action at various fronts during the war. All said that they had fired their rifles during battle; most said they did not know whether their shots had killed anyone. Most reported seeing friends and sometimes brothers shot and killed at the front.

Representatives of warring factions, on the other hand, claim that children are not used for fighting except in rare instances. NPFL official Arthur Saye told us:

> Boys are used to take care of the home; they live with the commander and do errands around the house. They clean, cook, get water, clean shoes, wash clothes. Very few kids —those who were smart enough— went to the front with their commanders. Recently some have manned checkpoints. They lift the gates up and are sent on errands.[25]

ULIMO official Lasanah Kromah stated:

> We've never used young boys at the front. We use them mainly to work in areas captured from the NPFL. We use them for security. For the most part, they are not active combatants.[26]

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[24]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

[25]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 20, 1994.

[26]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

7. TREATMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS BY WARRING FACTIONS

Child soldiers and their counselors told Human Rights Watch that children have frequently been severely mistreated by the warring factions. KN, thirteen years old, who had been with the NPFL since 1993, told Human Rights Watch:

> They treated me very bad. They didn't take care of me. They beat me with a cartridge belt if I put my gun down.

The treatment of child soldiers was described by a social worker as follows:

> The kids got very harsh treatment. First of all, boys from both factions have told us that there were initiation procedures when they joined in which they were forced to kill or rape someone or perform some other atrocity, like throwing someone down a well, or into a river. This was supposed to demonstrate that they were brave enough to be soldiers. Anyway, they were told that they would be shot if they didn't do it.
>
> Then many of them have told us that they were beaten if they spoke up and were threatened with torture as punishment for doing something they weren't supposed to do. It was not just NPFL and ULIMO that beat the kids; ECOMOG and the AFL beat kids severely, too, sometimes causing head or other injuries.

A counselor working with child soldiers discussed their treatment:

> The factions use a kind of torture called "tabay," in which a person's elbows are tied together behind his back, and the rope is pulled tighter and tighter until his rib cage separates. This was a form of punishment that was used with child soldiers, too.
>
> Kids have told us that they were actually forced to witness the execution of members of their family or their friends. If they screamed or cried, they were killed. Boys have told us of being lined up to watch executions and being forced to applaud. If you didn't applaud, you could be next.
>
> A milder form of punishment was to make a boy sit still for a very long time and not give him anything to eat.

Liberian human rights activists also report mistreatment of child soldiers. A representative of the Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Commission stated:

> Kids were treated the same by both ULIMO and NPFL. They were told to fight and kill and to loot for themselves. They were given a gun and told "this is your father and your mother. Do what we tell you to do."

One former child soldier told Human Rights Watch that he had been "chopped with a bayonet" when his commanding officer thought that he was trying to run away.

There were also reports that the children were forced to

have sex with women, especially at checkpoints. This was particularly aimed at higher class women as a way of humiliating them, and of breaking down the respect for elders. In addition, some children were themselves reportedly used sexually by older fighters.

A childcare worker reported:

> Kids were flogged for minor offenses, or locked up. Sometimes they were tabayed, which temporarily paralyzes your arms, because the blood doesn't circulate. Sometimes they were made to tabay others.
>
> Some kids have told us that they were forced to have sex with a woman in public, to please their commanding officer and to humiliate the woman. Some took part in gang rapes; some were raped themselves. Some were sodomized by older kids or by adults.
>
> The factions use both alcohol and drugs to control the kids. Children are given a mixture of cane juice (from sugar cane) and gunpowder which makes them high and is supposed to give them the courage to go and fight at the front.

The use of drugs among child soldiers was also reported to be prevalent. One man working with the child soldiers explained:

> Kids are often supplied with drugs; marijuana is the most common drug, but kids are given cocaine too, and cane juice and gunpowder, which can cause brain damage. Also the kids talk about being given "bubbles," a tablet that is apparently an amphetamine,

> an "upper." The theory apparently is that if a kid is intoxicated he'll be braver ¯jump over his friend's body and keep shooting.

Several of the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch told of being given "bubbles" that made them feel high. One spoke of having some drug put into his eyeball "so that you wouldn't see the people you killed, and you wouldn't think about it."

AS, thirteen, said:

> They gave me pills that made me crazy. When the craziness got in my head, I beat people on their heads and hurt them until they bled. When the craziness got out of my head I felt guilty. If I remembered the person I went to them and apologized. If they did not accept my apology, I felt bad.

Social workers who work closely with the children reported that although they heard many stories from children about "bubbles" or cane juice and gunpowder, they had not seen any children whom they believed to be addicted, although some children told of having "a burning desire" to go out and get drugs.

As indicated earlier, spokespersons for the factions told the mission that they did not mistreat children, but in fact protected and cared for them, feeding and clothing them, and keeping them away from the battlefronts.

8. REINTEGRATING FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS INTO THEIR COMMUNITIES

Reintegrating former child soldiers into their communities presents problems of enormous difficulty. Most of these children have suffered terrible experiences. Many have seen their parents killed —sometimes beheaded or disemboweled— in front of their eyes. In some cases entire villages ran into the bush when a warring faction attacked, and children became separated from their families and have never seen them again. Most have been badly treated by the factions for whom they were fighting. Most have been forced, or have chosen, to kill, to loot, to rape, and to take part in dreadful atrocities.

Children's health has been at risk. Human Rights Watch was told by a relief worker that during Operation Octopus in 1992, for example, many children lived for weeks in swamps; many developed serious diseases and skin rashes. They have had no normal life, no chance to go to school or to play as ordinary children —they have been robbed of their childhood. These children have been programmed to kill. Their daily lives have consisted of taking what they want at the point of a gun.

People who work closely with former child soldiers told Human Rights Watch that many of the boys were tired of fighting. A childcare supervisor said: "They want to be children again. They are tired and confused, and they want to go back to school." As one child soldier put it: "It was very bad being a fighter; I was afraid I would be killed." Another said,

> We need peace now. I don't want to fight any more. I

> almost died in Kakata. I couldn't see the enemy but they were shooting at me. I was wounded in the shoulder and my brother was killed right next to me.

Another former child soldier said that he would caution other boys not to fight:

> I would tell a ten-year-old boy not to go with the factions. It's not a good idea, because he is too small. It's a wicked thing to do to kids. Sometimes you have to kill your own friends. War is not good.

Some people who work with children do not believe that the children experienced guilt or emotional upset because of their actions as fighters. A supervisor reported:

> Some of the boys didn't understand what they were doing. Most are not educated or literate. They have no understanding of the future —they thought if they shot someone that person could get up again.

One counselor reported that child soldiers sometimes respond to questions as if they do not realize the consequences of their actions. She related the following interchange between herself and a child soldier:

> Did you kill? No.
> Did you have a gun? Yes.
> Did you aim the gun? Yes.
> Did you fire it? Yes.
> What happened? They just fell down.

However, a psychologist who works with children disputed the view that the children did not know what they

were doing:

> Children go through different stages in therapy. First they say, "I was not really involved." They tell you what terrible things they saw, but don't acknowledge doing these things themselves. Their stories can change, depending on who is asking them questions. Later they tell you how they were victimized themselves, and how badly treated.
>
> Then maybe, if you give them lots of sympathy and help, they start to tell you about the women they raped, the people they tortured, the throats they cut. Most of their victims were civilians. They tell you these things if they think you can help them with what keeps them awake at night.

AW, fifteen years old, fought with NPFL for two years. He says: "I killed, but I ain't killed that much. I feel bad about the killing. I pray to God to forgive me."

Some children suffer from such guilt about their acts during the war that they consider suicide:

> The 12-year-old boy drew a picture of the man he was forced to kill. When he had colored in the last drop of blood dripping from the blade of a serrated knife, he broke down in tears. Then he admitted for the first time that he was a child soldier, one of thousands who took part in four years of civil war in Liberia. He said adults forced him to kill the man. . . .
>
> "You don't know how may children say they don't want to live anymore. You ask them if they want to be a fireman, or a pilot, they say they want to commit

> suicide," [UNICEF officer Esther] Guluma said. "And you'd be amazed how may young girls were raped during the war and still continue to be raped, some just six years old. . . These kids need to be brought back to life."[27]

According to counselors and social workers who work closely with former child soldiers, many suffer from symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Human Rights Watch was told that many have nightmares, wet their beds, cry, cannot sleep, have difficulty in relating to others, display aggressive or hyperactive behavior; some hear voices. Many suffer from anxiety or depression, and have difficulty concentrating.

- KH joined the NPFL when he was fourteen. He fought in the first war [1990], but took little part in the second [1992]. He tried to come to Monrovia in 1991 to see his mother and family, but was arrested by NPFL fighters and accused of being a spy. He watched his friends and others he had traveled with being executed. He was also slated for execution, but was saved by a commanding officer who took him as his bodyguard and housekeeper. He left when ULIMO fighters chased the NPFL out of the area.

  KH has vivid memories of the war. He continues to be bothered by memories of things he witnessed during his time as a soldier: people's throats being cut, people dying of hunger, people killed at the battlefront.

[27]Michelle Faul, Associated Press dispatch from Abidjan, Ivory Coast, June 13, 1994.

- NG, fourteen years old, joined NPFL in 1990, when he was ten. He has bad dreams in which he is shot at and that his sister is killed. He says, "I expect to be punished for what I did."

Elizabeth Mulbah, a Liberian active in reconciliation and healing programs and currently the director of Community Reconstruction and Rehabilitation for UNOMIL, explained the long-term nature of the problem:

> We have to disarm people emotionally and mentally, as well as by taking their weapons. We have a rugged path in front of us; nothing will fall into place overnight. Our country will need preventive services for generations to come —the war affected everyone. Nobody is innocent of atrocities. We must accept each other and work together. We must break the negative cycle; otherwise, everyone will want revenge.[28]

The UNOMIL Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Program has trained one hundred trainers to work with community people, sensitizing them to the problems involved in reintegrating fighters into their communities. Ms. Mulbah said: "We all agree —the children were just used." She told Human Rights Watch that she hopes that this sentiment will aid the communities in accepting the returning children.

At present, two groups are attempting to rehabilitate former child soldiers. One is the Children's Assistance Program (CAP), which runs three residences in which children

[28]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 18, 1994.

receive counseling and some training. CAP's goal is to reunify children with their families; its task is to rehabilitate all of the former child soldiers under the age of fifteen. It has a training component in which older children are taught carpentry, graphic arts and other skills. Counseling is provided for children and, sometimes, for their parents, to try to ease the child's transition back to his or her community. As of April 1994, the program has received 168 former soldiers, only one of whom is a girl.

The second program consists of community-based transit homes —small group homes— with comprehensive services run under the auspices of UNICEF. Eighty-six former child soldiers have been involved in the program, ranging in age from nine years old to eighteen. The goal of the program is to de-traumatize the children and to reunite them with their families. Fifty-seven children have been reunited with their families so far; the transit home follows up the reunification to see how the children and families are managing.

The problems in reintegrating former child soldiers into their communities are immense. One child care worker told Human Rights Watch:

> The reception that children receive when they go back to their families is mixed. Some families have refused to take their children back, fearing them as killers, or afraid of neighbors' reactions to their return. Some think that a boy took the opportunity to leave the village in order to kill. The word "rebel" is often a slur.
>
> Some children have been taken back by their families, but have been taunted and ridiculed on their return, and so have left home again. Others have been integrated relatively easily. In part it depends on the

family's view and in part on how well the child is functioning.

Some children leave again because the family can't support them, can't provide them with food or clothes.

In many cases we haven't been able to get kids back to their families because they come from small rural villages that are behind the lines, and we can't get them there. And of course some families have fled the country or have gone somewhere else in Liberia and we have no way of finding them. And some children are orphans and we have to try to find other family members to take them in.

We're afraid that a lot of these kids are going to end up as street children on the streets of Monrovia.

Lasanah Kromah of UNOMIL told Human Rights Watch:

These children have psychological problems. It's not ordinary to see people killed, or to kill. They are traumatized. Some have seen their relatives killed, and some have been part of a fighting machine that's involved in killing. Little boys will have psychological problems; we need a readjustment program for all of them. A child wants to know, "How do I fit into society? Will they reject me?" We will have to improve our orphanages and get good staffing—social workers and counselors.[29]

[29]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

But reintegration is not easy. Some of the problems were described by a relief worker, who reported:

> After the first cease-fire in 1991 we re-opened an elementary school in Nimba County. A lot of the kids came back, but every day some of them would leave. They were too frustrated in school —they wanted to do what they wanted, and not to be told what to do in school.

General Daniel Opande of UNOMIL recognized the critical need for reintegration and expressed optimism that it will work.

> Reintegration is a problem, but with a concerted effort we can make it work. We have lots of very violent kids to contend with, but they can communicate reasonably and forget the violent part of themselves. They are no different from our own children except that they have gone through a very difficult phase of life.[30]

Most of the former child soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch told us that they wanted to go back to school:

> KK, fifteen, said: "I came so they could help send me to school."
>
> WA, fifteen, said: "I want to go back to school and learn a trade."

[30]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 20, 1994.

> BL, fifteen, said: "I want to go back to school. My uncle has a school, so I won't have to pay tuition. Then I want to have a business buying food and then selling it."
>
> KT, fifteen, said: "I want to go to school and learn how to drive."
>
> TC, sixteen, said: "I want to go to school and become a journalist so I can speak about my country, and how useless this war is. Blacks fighting blacks. It's a waste of time fighting a war. I could have been in school."

A supervisor at a transitional camp for children reported that 64.4 percent of the forty-nine children in the camp wanted to go back to school, 12.5 percent wanted to take vocational courses, 6.3 percent wanted to start a business, and 16.7 percent didn't know what they wanted to do.[31]

No one underestimates the difficulties of reintegrating these children. The president of the former interim government, Amos Sawyer, called it "a problem of enormous proportions." He continued:

> We have lots of kids who, in addition to all kinds of activities in the past, are now comfortable with weapons and killing. It's a very serious problem. How do you undertake rehabilitation, to change their orientation from where the use of weapons equals success, to where going back to school and respecting authority is success. Many kids know the places, and

[31] Interview, April 25, 1994.

knew the people they killed, so there's quite a bit of hostility toward them.[32]

[32]Interview with Amos Sawyer in Monrovia, April 25, 1994.

9. INTERNATIONAL LAW REGARDING THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Current requirements of international law

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child states that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care." The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child states in the preamble that "childhood is entitled to special care and assistance."

International humanitarian law (the laws of war) —the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the two additional protocols of 1977— accord special protection and treatment to children in armed conflict. Protocol II to the Geneva Convention forbids the use of child soldiers under the age of 15 in internal armed conflicts:

> Children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities (Article 4(3)(c)).

Liberia acceded to the Geneva Conventions in March 1954 and to Protocol II in June 1988. Protocol II is binding on armed opposition groups as well as on states parties.

International human rights law has also taken on the question of child soldiers. Article 38 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[33] provides:

[33] See Appendix for full text of Convention on the Rights of the Child.

> 2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.
>
> 3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavor to give priority to those who are oldest.

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child also requires governments to promote the social reintegration of child victims of armed conflicts. Article 39 states:

> States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of ... armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

Liberia signed and ratified this convention on July 4, 1993.

The African Charter on the Rights of the Child states:

> States Parties to the present Charter shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain, in particular, from recruiting any child. (Article 22(2)).

The African Charter defines a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years (Article 2). Liberia signed and

ratified this charter in 1990,[34] but the charter is not yet in force.[35]

Efforts to strengthen international requirements

An international effort is underway to raise the minimum age of recruitment from fifteen years of age to eighteen. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, established by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and charged with monitoring states parties' compliance with the convention, has written a preliminary draft of an Optional Protocol to the Convention that would raise the minimum age of recruitment to eighteen. A 1994 Swedish resolution (1994/91) on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child urged the U.N. Human Rights Commission to ask the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to establish a working group to draft an optional protocol to the Convention to raise the minimum age for participation in armed conflict to eighteen. The resolution has forty-eight co-sponsors from all regional groups.[36] Human Rights Watch supports this effort.

[34]Liberian Mission to the United Nations, telephone conversation, May 4, 1994.

[35]Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva, "Recruitment of Children: the International Standards and How They Could be Improved," February 1994, p. 4.

[36]QUNO Reporter, Quaker United Nations Office Geneva Newsletter, January-March 1994, p. 2.

10. UNITED STATES POLICY

Throughout the 1980s, the United States supported the brutal and corrupt regime of former President Samuel K. Doe; Liberia was the largest recipient of U.S. aid in sub-Saharan Africa. When the war reached its height in 1990, the U.S. largely withdrew from its formerly close engagement with Liberia; the U.S. maintained a policy of neutrality and sought ties with all factions while remaining the leading donor to the victims of the war. Toward the end of 1993, when it became clear that the latest peace plan required substantial U.S. assistance if it was to succeed, the Clinton administration, with congressional support, made Liberia a higher priority.

The main tenets of stated U.S. policy toward Liberia are to support conflict resolution efforts by ECOWAS and the U.N., to withhold recognition of any of the governments that have been created since the war began, and to promote ECOWAS and its peace plan. By the end of 1993, the conflict resolution efforts had gained new momentum: on September 30, the U.S. obligated $19.83 million ($13 million in Economic Support Funds and the rest in Foreign Military Financing) to the U.N. Trust Fund for peacekeeping in Liberia. The money is to be used by ECOMOG and the OAU to help finance the deployment of the expanded ECOMOG troops —not for assistance with lethal weapons, but for transportation, food, and non-lethal equipment for the troops. On December 20, 1993, the U.S. allocated an additional $11 million in support for the U.N.-monitored African peacekeeping operation in Liberia.

United States Ambassador William Twaddell told Human Rights Watch that the United States is playing a supportive role at present, helping the United Nations and ECOWAS peace

efforts, and "trying to help our Liberian friends who want peace."[37] Ambassador Twaddell said that he had raised the issue of child soldiers with representatives of both the NPFL and ULIMO, telling them both that the use of children as fighters was "disgusting and unjustifiable." He said that he had also raised human rights violations with the AFL.

[37]Interviewed in Monrovia, April 19, 1994.

11. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human Rights Watch has concluded that children under the age of eighteen, including many thousands of children under fifteen, have been used, and are still being used, by the warring factions in the civil war in Liberia, although not by the Armed Forces of Liberia. The warring factions are bound by Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, which forbids the use of children under fifteen as soldiers in internal armed conflicts. Protocol II binds all parties to a conflict, not just government forces.

Human Rights Watch believes that international law should be amended so that no one under the age of eighteen can take part in armed conflict, in either government service or as a member of an armed opposition group.

Human Rights Watch urges all warring factions to disarm and demobilize immediately all fighters under the age of eighteen, and to refrain permanently from enlisting children under eighteen in the conflict.

Human Rights Watch urges the Liberian National Transition Government to do all in its power to persuade warring factions to end the use of children as soldiers.

Human Rights Watch concludes that the reintegration of children into society, returning them to normal lives, will be an immensely difficult task. We urge the government of Liberia to take all possible steps to ease the child soldier's transition from a life of killing and looting to a peaceful and productive existence. Human Rights Watch recommends that the programs for this transition start immediately and continue after the conflict.

Human Rights Watch urges the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, the United States and other

governments:

- to press the warring factions to end the practice of using children as soldiers, and
- to press the Liberian government to make prompt and adequate plans for the reintegration of former child soldiers into Liberian society.

Human Rights Watch supports international efforts to press for an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that would raise the minimum age for participation in armed conflict from fifteen to eighteen.

12. APPENDIX