



## Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence

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## Introduction

Thousands of children under the age of 18 currently participate in armed conflicts in at least 18 countries worldwide, as part of government armies, paramilitaries, and armed opposition groups. Since 1994, Human Rights Watch has reported on the use and recruitment of child soldiers in 15 countries. Both girls and boys are used as child soldiers. They serve as porters or cooks, guards, messengers or spies. Many are pressed into combat, where they may be forced to the front lines or sent into minefields ahead of older troops. Children have also been used for suicide missions. In some conflicts, girls are raped, or given to military commanders as “wives.”

Because children are often physically vulnerable, easily intimidated, and susceptible to psychological manipulation, they typically make obedient soldiers. As part of their training for violence, child recruits are often subject to grueling physical tasks as well as ideological indoctrination. Children accused of the slightest infractions may be subject to extreme physical punishments including beating, whipping, caning, and being chained or tied up with rope for days at a time. In some conflicts, commanders supply child soldiers with marijuana and opiates to make them “brave” and lessen their fear of combat. Furthermore, commanders may initiate child recruits by forcing them to witness or commit abuses and killings in order to desensitize them to violence. Some children are forced to take part in atrocities against their own families and neighbors to stigmatize them and ensure that they are unable to return to their communities.

Many child soldiers are compelled to follow these orders under threat of severe punishment or death. To coerce children to participate in combat and commit atrocities against civilians, commanders not only use threats of violence against child recruits but also against their families as well as the possibility of torture and death at the hands of the enemy. Human Rights Watch investigations have also found that child recruits are often forced to physically punish and kill other soldiers, including children, accused of desertion and other crimes. Child soldiers who refuse to comply with orders may be severely beaten or threatened with execution. These practices instill fear and guilt in the children and forewarn them of their fate should they attempt to escape or fail to heed orders.

The use or threat of violence to compel child recruits to kill and torture other fighters and to commit human rights violations against civilians is geographically widespread and common to government armies, paramilitaries, and armed opposition groups. Human Rights Watch has collected testimony to this effect in its investigations in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

The following examples are drawn from reports on child soldiers produced by Human Rights Watch. Full reports are available at:

<http://www.hrw.org/en/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers>.

## **Angola**

Children recruited by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) faced harsh discipline for infractions and especially severe penalties for attempting to escape. To deter desertion, commanders forced child recruits to watch and participate in the execution of captured escapees. Children demobilized from UNITA forces in 1996 explained that when one child who had escaped was captured, the others would have to assist in his execution even if that person were a family member.

João F. told Human Rights Watch: “If you didn't comply with orders, you would be punished, sometimes killed. Children were punished too. Myself, I was whipped twice for disobeying orders. Other children were beaten with heavy sticks.”

See: *Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola*, April 2003,  
<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/04/29/forgotten-fighters>

## **Burma**

Burma has recruited tens of thousands of boys into its national army, typically by force, coercion or intimidation. Boys are often told that if they refuse to join the army, they will be forced to go to jail. Deliberately cut off from contact with their families,

they are treated brutally by their superiors and often prevented from fraternizing even among themselves. After training they are sent off to distant battalions, where they are further brutalized by their commanders and taught to view the local population as their enemy.

When a recruit is captured attempting to escape there is a standard punishment that seems common to most of Burma's training schools and has not changed in the last 10 years: the trainee is paraded in front of his entire training company, who are then forced to line up and take turns hitting him hard once or twice with a stick while officers or other trainees pin him down and look on.

Sai Seng described his experience of this in 2005, when he was 17:

Only one person was caught. All 249 people had to beat him on the buttocks and the back of his thighs with a green bamboo. I felt pity on my friend so I hit him lightly, and the NCO came and said, "Don't hit like that, hit like this" and hit me, and then made me hit my friend again. Three sections [150 recruits] had already beaten him by then, and he was crying. The NCO was pinning his arms down with his back to me, so I couldn't see his face, he was face down with his legs in the stocks. He was bloody because sometimes the sticks broke when they hit him. After the beating the NCOs carried him to the barracks with his legs still in the stocks, and laid him on the cement floor without a mat. He died that night. His name was Thet Naing Soe, he was 18. After that the NCOs said, "If you run away we'll do the same to you."

Sai Seng, a 16-year-old Shan farmer who was taken as a porter in mid-2001 and then forced into the army, told Human Rights Watch in 2002,

After a while the soldiers couldn't bear it anymore and they ran away. When people ran away, if they recaptured them we students had to beat them. There were 200 people in our group, and every one of us was ordered to hit him one time with a cane stick. If we said anything they hit us. The reason is for us to know that if we run away later we

will get beaten like that too. After the beating, if he couldn't stand up anymore he was just left laying on the concrete like that. Sometimes they were unconscious.

Child recruits sent to their first combat operation were often so afraid that they were unable to use their weapon or attempted to retreat. Fear of beatings or death at the hands of their commanders prevented them from escaping.

Khin Maung Than was 12 years old when he was first deployed into combat:

I was afraid that first time. The section leader ordered us to take cover and open fire. There were seven of us, and seven or ten of the enemy. I was too afraid to look, so I put my face in the ground and shot my gun up at the sky. I was afraid their bullets would hit my head. I fired two magazines, about forty rounds. I was afraid that if I didn't fire the section leader would punish me.

Aung Zaw's commander threatened to kill him if he attempted to retreat during his first combat exposure:

I can't remember how old I was the first time in fighting. About 13. That time we walked into a Karenni ambush, and four of our soldiers died. I was afraid because I was very young so I tried to run back, but [the captain] shouted, "Don't run back! If you run back I'll shoot you myself!"

Child recruits interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported being forced to participate in human rights violations against civilians, including forced labor, beatings and summary executions. Forced to carry heavy loads of ammunition and other supplies, the civilians often have trouble keeping up with the army column. The rank and file soldiers in charge of them, afraid of the beatings and other punishments they face if they fall behind, become desperate and try to do whatever is necessary to keep the porters moving. Their Oo often saw villagers beaten by his

commanders during forced labor; “I didn't like it but I was afraid of my commander. If I protested I'd be beaten by my commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Kyaw Myint Thein.”

Child soldiers are also compelled to take part in the destruction of villages in areas where the army is pursuing a scorched earth policy. From the time of his recruitment at age thirteen in 1995 until he fled the army in late 2001, Moe Shwe says, “I saw it twelve times. There were some Karen soldiers in the village, or if there's a battle near a village we burned the village.” When asked if he actually torched houses himself, he answered, “Yes, three times. About two or three houses each time. We had to do it. We were ordered. If not they'd punch me. I felt very sorry and unhappy, because I thought that if my house were burned like this there would be a lot of problems for my family and me.”

See: “*My Gun Was as Tall as Me*”: *Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2002, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2002/10/16/my-gun-was-tall-me> and *Sold to Be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma*, October 2007, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2007/10/31/sold-be-soldiers>

## Colombia

As part of their training, children recruited by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and paramilitary forces in Colombia have been asked to kill captured enemy soldiers as well as other child recruits, including friends, to prove their loyalty. Bernardo, who joined paramilitaries as a seven-year-old street child, told Human Rights Watch,

They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don't kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed.

Seventeen-year-old Adolfo, also recruited by paramilitaries, described his initiation:

I was really scared at first. The first test they give you is to kill a man, a guerrilla. Bring me so and so, they say, so that he can learn. And they bring you and tell you to kill the man. If you don't kill him, they will kill you. They used to bring guerrillas captured in Caquetá to the camp, and tie them up by the hands and legs and a man would come up with a chainsaw, and slice them piece by piece. Everybody could watch. I must have seen it ten times. It's part of the training.

Fellow combatants who desert or are accused of infractions are treated harshly. Child recruits are expected to watch and often to participate in such punishments. Mauricio had been in the FARC-EP for four years and had won a command without killing anybody. Then he was sent to find and bring back a deserter who had been spotted in town by the militia:

We went to his house and picked up him, then brought him back to the camp. There, they held a war council. He had a defender, but everyone knew what the verdict was going to be. It was automatic. There was no real possibility that he would escape shooting. His crimes were “theft from the movement and desertion,” the most serious crimes of all. In the war council, no one voted to save him. After the council, we went and dug his grave. Then we brought him to the side of the grave. He closed his eyes, and I shot him in the head. I had never executed anyone before, but this time I had to do it. If you don't do it, they'll kill you.

Children recruited by paramilitary and guerilla groups are trained to treat their enemy's fighters and sympathizers without mercy. As a result children witness and participate in grave violations of human rights including torture and killings. Commanders often use these instances to initiate and implicate children in violence. Many child soldiers expressed fear of being executed if they did not comply with orders.

At 13, Laidy, recruited by paramilitary forces, shot a policeman in the head. “I felt happy afterwards. I wanted to please the commanders. Because if you say no, they'll kill you.”

Separated from their families and believing they will never be released or escape, many child recruits believe they have no choice but to prove their loyalty to their commanders and fellow combatants by participating in killings and other grave abuses.

See: *“You’ll Learn Not To Cry”: Child Combatants in Colombia*, September 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/09/18/you-ll-learn-not-cry>

## **Liberia**

Many children were recruited into armed groups and government forces during the conflict in Liberia. Some children saw their parents killed and believed they had no options but to join armed groups for safety or survival. Some were forcibly recruited. Some joined because of starvation so they would be fed by a warring faction. Human Rights Watch received testimony that both rebel and government affiliated forces including the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), United Liberian Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), and Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) threatened, beat, and tortured children to force them to witness and participate in atrocities against combatants and civilians.

Child soldiers and their counselors told Human Rights Watch that children were frequently severely mistreated by the warring factions. KN, a 13 year old recruited by the NPFL in 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 also discussed their treatment by commanders:

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.

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.

In 1990, 15-year-old FW was "arrested" by INPFL soldiers at a checkpoint and asked to join the group, but he refused. He said 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. At knifepoint, he carried out the order.

See: *Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia*, September 1994,  
<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/1994/09/01/easy-prey>

## **Nepal**

To discourage child recruits from surrendering, Maoist commanders informed children that they will be tortured if captured by the army. Child soldiers also fear violence to themselves or their families if they attempt to surrender.

Eighteen-year-old Padma told Human Rights Watch that her superiors tried to discourage her from ever surrendering, warning her about the treatment she would receive from the Nepali army:

The commanders told us never to surrender. They told us to throw the grenade that we had into the troops and run away. When I said that I wouldn't be able to do that, they said that the army would then arrest me, and if I surrender the army would torture and rape me.

When Padma and several other Maoists, including children, were followed by government forces after the battle of Tensen, the group sought shelter in a house in a village. Harried by government helicopters, their commanders first told them not to surrender and then essentially abandoned them:

We were staying in the house with our commanders; they went out and started firing at the helicopter, and they also told the others to come out. Then, when the second helicopter arrived, the commanders just

threw their weapons in the house and left. The commanders told us to run and not to surrender, but we said we would surrender to the army. The commanders were outside of the house, still trying to convince us to run, saying, 'You are going to surrender, we cannot let this happen—we would rather kill you.' And then they shot at the house once from a submachine gun, and ran away.

See: *Children in the Ranks: The Maoists' Use of Child Soldiers in Nepal*, February 2007, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2007/02/01/children-ranks>

## **Sierra Leone**

During Sierra Leone's civil war, child combatants armed with pistols, rifles, and machetes actively participated in killings and massacres, severed the arms of other children, participated in rapes, and beat and humiliated elderly people. Often under the influence of drugs, they were known and feared for their impetuosity, lack of control, and brutality. Human Rights Watch documented instances in which children recruited to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were compelled to commit abuses under threat of death or as a result of being drugged.

Abubakar, a 17 year old RUF child soldier demobilized in March 2000 was abducted outside the demobilization camp and forced to rejoin the RUF later that same year:

It was not my wish to go fight, it was because they captured me and forced me ... There was no use in arguing with them, because in the RUF if you argue with any commander they will kill you.

Abubakar and others were often forced to commit abuses. In Rogberi Junction, their commander ordered them to burn down the entire town after a counterattack on the RUF by government helicopters. He finally managed to sneak away from the RUF and return to the demobilization camp, which was evacuated to Freetown soon after.

The RUF frequently gave their fighters drugs, marijuana, and alcohol. Many witnesses believe that most of the group's atrocities were committed while fighters were under the influence of these substances.

Lynette, 16, was abducted and held by the rebels for several days during which time she was given drugs in her food, and witnessed other abductees being lined up and injected with drugs. She recounted:

From the first day they drugged us. They showed me some powder and said it was cocaine and was called brown-brown. I saw them put it in the food and after eating I felt dizzy. I felt crazy.

One day I saw a group of rebels bring out about 20 boys all abductees between 15 and 20 years old. They had them lined up under gunpoint and one by one called them forward to be injected in their arms with a needle. The boys begged them not to use needles but the rebels said it would give them power.

About 20 minutes later the boys started screaming like they were crazy and some of them even passed out. Two of the rebels instructed the boys to scream, "I want kill, I want kill" and gave a few of them kerosene to take with them on one of their burn house raids.

See: *Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, Rape: New Testimony from Sierra Leone*, July 1999, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/1999/06/24/getting-away-murder-mutilation-and-rape> and "Sierra Leone Rebels Forcefully Recruit Child Soldiers," May 2000, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2000/05/31/sierra-leone-rebels-forcefully-recruit-child-soldiers>

## **Uganda**

Child abductees in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are forced to beat and sometimes kill civilians in looting operations, participate in the abduction of new children, and steal from and burn houses in their home regions. Children are forced

to witness and to participate in the killings of other children, usually those who attempt to escape and are captured. The practice of using the children to collectively kill fosters guilt and fear among them, and sends a powerful message to the children of their potential fate if they attempt to escape. In addition, the brutal tactics used to control children make their personal rehabilitation and reintegration into their home communities more difficult.

Many children interviewed by Human Rights Watch were forced to participate in the beating or trampling of fellow abductees. Some of the children, while fearing to refuse the orders of the LRA, nevertheless spoke with difficulty about performing these killings. James K. told Human Rights Watch:

Just a few days before an air assault by UPDF [Uganda People's Defense Force] helicopter gunship, there was a group of children who escaped. Two girls, aged fourteen, were captured. They were given to the group of child abductees and we were told that we must kill them with clubs. Every one of the new recruits was made to participate. We were warned that if we ever tried to escape, we would be killed in the same manner.

Twelve-year-old Susan A. reported being forced with a group of other girls to kill an adult escapee:

I saw many dead bodies in the bush. One day, a man tried to escape. After he was caught, four of us girls were forced to beat him to death. When we started crying, the LRA told us that if we cried, we would also be killed. The man pleaded with us, 'You forgive me, you sympathize with me, please let me live.' But the commander told him, 'If you speak again, we will cut you to pieces with a machete.'

Susan, a 16 year old abducted by the LRA, was threatened with a gun when she refused to participate in the killing of a fellow abductee, a boy from her village:

One boy tried to escape, but he was caught. They made him eat a mouthful of red pepper, and five people were beating him. His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, "Why are you doing this?" I said I had no choice. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms. I felt dizzy. There was another dead body nearby, and I could smell the body. I felt so sick. They said we had to do this so we would not fear death and so we would not try to escape.

I feel so bad about the things that I did ... It disturbs me so much--that I inflicted death on other people ... When I go home I must do some traditional rites because I have killed. I must perform these rites and cleanse myself. I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me and saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying.

In combat operations many child soldiers who expressed fear or reservation were beaten by their commanders into pressing ahead to the front lines. Even children without weapons were sent forward to engage the enemy. Former child recruits witnessed large numbers of children killed in such actions. Timothy, a 14 year old captured by the LRA, recounted his experience in Sudan:

I was good at shooting. I went for several battles in Sudan. The soldiers on the other side would be squatting, but we would stand in a straight line. The commanders were behind us. They would tell us to run straight into gunfire. The commanders would stay behind and would beat those of us who would not run forward. You would just run forward shooting your gun. I don't know if I actually killed any people, because you really can't tell if you're shooting people or not. I might have killed people in the course of the fighting . . . I remember the first time I was in the front line. The other side started firing, and the

commander ordered us to run towards the bullets. I panicked. I saw others falling down dead around me. The commanders were beating us for not running, for trying to crouch down. They said if we fall down, we would be shot and killed by the soldiers.

In Sudan we were fighting the Dinkas, and other Sudanese civilians. I don't know why we were fighting them. We were just ordered to fight.

Charles, a 15 year old abducted by the LRA reported,

After training in Sudan, the rebels sent me back to Uganda. I was to be part of a group that would attack trading centers in Kitgum and abduct new children. I was well-armed, a soldier already. As we were returning, we were attacked by government soldiers. The frontline was somewhere ahead of where I was, and the commander said, "Run, run to the front-line!" It didn't matter whether you had a gun or not. If you did not run they would beat you with sticks. Many children without guns had to run to the front.

You are not allowed to appear to be thinking too much. If you had a gun, you had to be firing all the time or you would be killed. And you were not allowed to take cover. The order from the Holy Spirit was not to take cover. You must have no fear, and stand up as you run into fire. This was because they said you would be protected by the Holy Spirit if you stood tall and had no fear. But if you took cover, the Holy Spirit would be angry and you would be shot dead by all the bullets.

So many, so many were killed.

See: *The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*, September 1997, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/1997/09/18/scars-death> and *Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda*, March 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/03/28/stolen-children>

## **Conclusion**

For many child soldiers, carrying out violent acts against other fighters or civilians is an inescapable part of their experience. Even though some children initially “volunteer” to serve as soldiers, they quickly learn that the penalties for leaving their group are severe, and may include death. They realize that they are at the mercy of their commanders, and do what they believe they must in order to survive. Children who engage in violence often believe they have no choice but to follow orders, particularly if they have witnessed other children killed for disobedience, or have been beaten or threatened themselves.

For children who eventually leave these armed forces and groups, rehabilitation and reintegration into their home communities can be extremely difficult. They may be stigmatized as a former child soldier, be rejected by family and communities members for acts that they have committed as a fighter, and in some instances, be subject to reprisals for their actions or group affiliation. They often have no marketable job skills, may be vulnerable to re-recruitment as a child soldier, or turn to a life of crime. Sustained support is essential to help them successfully reintegrate into their home communities. This includes access to educational and vocational training programs, reuniting the child with family or extended family members where possible, and in some cases, participating in restorative justice processes to help the child acknowledge their actions and gain reacceptance by the community.