

Recruiting child soldiers

The link between displacement and recruitment

by Rachel Brett

Around the world from Sierra Leone to Sri Lanka images of gun-toting girls and boys are commonplace. At the same time, the flows of populations from armed conflict are all too well known. But what is the relationship between displacement and child recruitment?

One of the findings of the 1996 U.N. study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children was that youngsters separated from their families, especially during displacement, were one of the categories most 'at risk' of becoming child soldiers. Recognition of this vulnerability led to support for the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation in war of under-18s by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.

On a practical level, a part of a training project entitled Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) deals with child soldiers (there are an estimated 300,000 under 18 currently participating in wars) and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement prohibit military recruitment of uprooted children.

Other major 'at risk' groups identified by the U.N. report include children with little or no education, those from the poorest sectors of society or from disrupted family backgrounds and those from war zones. This applies whether or not children are compelled or 'volunteer' to join and whatever types of units are involved, from regular government units to militias or rebels.

LINKAGES

The links between recruitment and displacement have other facets according to the U.N. or so-called Machel report. Well-off families try to shield their children by sending them to schools, other parts of the country or abroad or relocating the entire family. This is not a new phenomenon. It happened extensively during the war in Lebanon, for instance. Young males also left South Africa in large

numbers to avoid joining the army in the 1970s-80s.

Any movement of the 'rich' can have an unfortunate knock-on effect against less well-to-do children, making them more susceptible to recruitment because of a suddenly smaller pool of potential recruits.

The individual movement of children or families may not appear on displacement statistics, particularly in the cases of people who can afford to relocate themselves. But the increase in the number of unac-

placement is fueled by many factors including efforts to avoid child recruitment by either side and by children escaping from these groups and seeking to avoid recruitment.

This situation highlights a major challenge facing demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers. Traditionally this process occurs after the shooting has stopped, but in the case of Colombia, efforts to separate children from the gunmen is happening during a period of continuing instability.

How can these children then be adequately protected? How can they be successfully reunited with families which may themselves have been displaced? What about the 'normal' problems associated with social and economic reintegration?

Even peacetime recruitment can lead to displacement. The United Kingdom routinely recruits 16 and

17-year-olds, but according to the organization At Ease, there are regularly around 500 of these under 18 absent without leave, many of them seeking shelter in hostels for the homeless.

Given the linkage between displacement and recruitment, refugee and internally displaced children must receive increased protection. Measures should include: comprehensive global birth registration, the prevention of family separation and where that is not possible, promotion of family reunification; and education for all (including girls and adolescents) even during conflicts and an explanation to children of their basic human rights.

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Child soldiers in Somalia in 1996.

accompanied minors seeking asylum and some of the more general flows of asylum seekers from war zones may be specifically linked to the risk of child recruitment.

Even if children escape from an immediate war zone, they may not escape recruitment. Some refugee camps have been militarized. Cross-border recruitment is a problem. And the Turkish insurgent group, the PKK has recruited Kurdish children from communities as far away as Sweden, Germany and France.

Obviously, the need to protect children from recruitment must be part of an overall protection strategy and why a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires all states, not only those directly involved in conflict, to prevent armed groups recruiting anyone under the age of 18.

Colombia's extensive internal dis-