

# CHILD SOLDIERS

Forced to be cruel

Children have been used as weapons of war for thousands of years, this is no new phenomenon. History remembers the thousands of children who marched in the Children's Crusade of the thirteenth century. They were barely twelve years old as they left behind the innocence of childhood.

But the story these images tell is one of modern day warfare, where children are pawns in the hands of war criminals, manipulated and subject to gross and violent abuse.

Photographers who live and work all around the world took these photographs. By capturing a moment in these children's lives, the photographers ask us to consider a world far removed from our own.

The faces of these children illustrate the reality of a childhood lost; their lives now ache with pain and suffering instead of singing with the joy and hope of innocence.

They beg you to see them, not as soldiers at war, but as children merely dressed up in adult clothing, armed with guns, not toys.

The eyes of the nine year old boy from Sierra Leone calls on us to demand a stop to the abductions, the recruitment and their heartache. They ask us simply to allow them to be children.

We had to change the names to protect the identities of the children because, in some countries, they are still at risk for being either killed for their participation in the conflict or ostracized in by their communities.

The countries that are represented in this exhibit represent past and present conflicts.

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The following countries are profiled in this exhibit.

## Nepal

Thousands of children had been recruited by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) during Nepal's 10-year civil war weapons training, and carried out crucial military and logistical support duties for the Maoists. Even after signing a comprehensive peace agreement with the government in November 2006, the Maoists continued to recruit children and refused to release children from their forces.

(Human Rights Watch)

## Liberia

More than 15,000 child soldiers comprise many of the fighting units on all sides of the Liberian civil war. In August 2003, a comprehensive peace agreement ended 14 years of civil war. (Human Rights Watch)

## Burma

Thousands of boys serve in Burma's national army, with children as young as 11 forcibly recruited off the streets and sent into combat operations. Children also serve with some of the armed ethnic opposition groups.

(Human Rights Watch)

## Sri Lanka

The Karuna group had abducted hundreds of children in eastern Sri Lanka for use as child combatants between 1987-2011. The group is led by a former commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and now fights against the LTTE. Government security forces not only fail to stop the abductions, but facilitate them by allowing Karuna cadres to transport kidnapped children through checkpoints on the way to their camps. (Human Rights Watch)

## Uganda

Children have been abducted in record numbers by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and subjected to brutal treatment as soldiers, laborers, and sexual slaves. More than 5,000 children have been abducted since the conflict started in 1988. The LRA now is in South Sudan, DRC and CAR. (Human Rights Watch)

## Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Children serve in the government armed forces as well as in various rebel forces. At the height of DRC's war, the UN estimated that more than 30,000 boys and girls were fighting with various parties in the conflict. Most have now been released or demobilized, but active recruitment continues in the east of the country.

## Sierra Leone

Between February and June 1998, the government's Civilian Defense Forces and the ousted Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), as well as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), used children on a large scale in Sierra Leone. (Human Rights Watch)

## Colombia

Thousands of children—both boys and girls—serve in Colombia's irregular armed groups. The majority serve in the FARC guerrillas, with smaller numbers in the UC-ELN guerrillas. Children are also recruited into successor groups to paramilitaries. (Human Rights Watch)

## Afghanistan

Insurgent groups, including the Taliban and other armed groups, use children as fighters, including in suicide attacks<sup>[2]</sup>. The UN also reports recruitment of children by the Afghan National Police.

## Sudan

In Darfur, over a dozen armed forces and groups use child soldiers, including the Sudanese Armed Forces, pro-government militias, and factions of the rebel Sudan Liberation Army (Human Rights Watch).

## Iraq

Al-Qaeda recruits children to spy, scout, transport military supplies, plant explosive devices, and actively participate in attacks against security forces and civilians, including suicide attacks.

# 57-13

The international standard set by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict establishes the minimum age for recruitment in conflict at 18.

Each year, the UN receives reports of children, in some cases as young as 8 or 9 years old, associated with armed groups.

There are currently 57 parties in conflict identified and listed by the Secretary-General as a result of the UN's documentation of patterns of recruitment and use of child soldiers. These parties in conflict are active in 13 countries:

- Afghanistan
- Central African Republic
- Colombia
- DRC
- Iraq
- India
- Mali
- Myanmar
- Philippines
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Syrian Arab Republic
- Yemen
- Lord's Resistance Army  
active in the Central African  
region (CAR, DRC, South Sudan)

# SRI LANKA

“I’m a 14-year old girl fighting with rebel troops in Sri Lanka, who kidnapped me when I was only eight. I didn’t know why I had to fight government soldiers. A rebel leader just told me that I had to kill as many soldiers as possible for independence. At marching drills, in the hot sun, I was frequently punished. I just want to be a good girl and have a normal life.”

(UN Cyber)

# COLOMBIA

"I had a friend, Juanita, who got in trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, "You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry."

Joined the FARC-EP in Colombia at age twelve (HRW).

# UGANDA

“I would like to give you a message.  
Please do your best to tell the world what  
is happening to us, so that other children  
don't have to pass through this violence.”

A 15 year-old girl who escaped from the  
Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda.