

Child Soldier Presentation for Amnesty International, Newburyport MVAI #708

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Good evening.

The world of the child soldier is the world of poverty. The child soldiers come from the areas in the world where childhood takes a back seat to basic needs. The minds of these children are not thinking of homework, play dates, Nintendos, or soccer practice. They are thinking about finding food, water, shelter, fuel and surviving another day while avoiding the obstacles that could get them killed.

The first question that we should ask ourselves is what kind of world do we live in that would have children who are being taught to kill? Taught to slaughter? Taught to hate? And why and where in the world would anyone want to give an 8 year old an AK-47?

Clearly, there are far too many places in the world with child soldiers. While not in declared wars but meeting the definition of child soldier, in the United States and other Western nations, street gang members are getting younger and younger and more and more violent. The United States Dept. of Justice estimates that there are about 30,000 gangs with close to 800,000 gang members in 2,500 communities in the US.

A gang member writes:

"I've been a 5 year gangster startign at the age of 13 and let me tell you i hate it. i hate it with a passion Respect and pride was what i wanted, fear and violence was how i got it, Back then that was all i wanted, back then that was all i needed, I followed this lifestyle without a care in the world, not knowing if I would live the next day to see my girl, I fought other gangs for territory, not realizing i was only fighting my brother"

What is a Child Soldier?

The 1997 Capetown Principles is the standard for defining a child soldier. It states: "a child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls or boys recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms."

There is a practice in Afghanistan called "Bacha Bazi" - translated means "boy play" - and it is seeing a resurgence. Wealthy men, often military commanders, purchase young boys to be sex slaves. The young boys are made to dance, dressed up and made up as women. The Bacha Bazi are often given as "gifted use" for reward or to curry favor. The young sex slaves keep quiet as rape victims are persecuted and punished for being the "tempter" and looking homosexual is a potential death sentence in the male dominated world of Afghanistan. The Bacha Bazi are an example of unarmed child soldiers - abused children sentenced to a life of hell.

The children of Afghanistan have never known peace... never known stability.... Few have been to school. For more than 30 years, there has been war of one sort or another in Afghanistan. A 30 year old father, has never known a time without war. When you are a child, and your entire family has been killed, where do you turn? Where do you go? What do you do? Sometimes your best option for survival is to go with the rebel forces - whoever they may be at the time. By picking up a gun, you have a replacement family. You have food in your stomach, clothes on your back and receive training for your vengeance and a direction for your anger. You have a shared purpose with others that forms a common bond. And for the leader of your replacement family, the younger you are, the more he can steep you in religious fanaticism and hatred.

Abdul explains in a small voice: "When I was in the third grade at school, my father told me that I should bring money to my family. I had no other choice but join the army. It's my obligation to help my family." The army gave him \$16 a month, a uniform, a pair of shoes and some food.

There are estimated to be over 300 thousand child soldiers, some children are as young as 8 who are stolen during the night; abducted during military raids; brutalized themselves; forced to commit atrocities so that they, themselves, won't be slaughtered, and then they are fed drugs to make them more compliant and to numb them from what they will be forced to do. They are handed machetes, AK-47s, bombs strapped to their tiny bodies and sent off to battle; And if they are lucky, these young child soldiers will only be brutalized and forced to be messengers, porters, cooks or spies. Most aren't so lucky.

A 16 year old from Burma says:

"When I was sixteen my job was to run into the killing fields and grab weapons from the dead soldiers and bring it back to the bunker. This was a difficult job because the enemy could usually pick you off as you ran back and forth"

In war savaged areas, to give you an idea of what a child can expect: Half the number of casualties in conflicts are children. More than 2 million children have died in the last 10 years as a direct result of armed conflicts. More than 6 million have been permanently disabled or seriously injured due to wars in the past 10 years. Another 1 million orphaned. Between 8,000 and 10,000 children injured from land mines Another estimated 20 million children have been forced to flee their homes.

And if that's not bad enough, rape is frequently used as a weapon of war. Reports after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda concluded that nearly every female over the age of 12 who survived the genocide was raped and in the DR Congo, there are so many rapes of girls and women going on today that it is called femicide - the deliberate killing of women through rape - a form of sexual terrorism. When the name for prostitutes in the Congo is "Liberated Women", it says a great deal about how these young women are perceived and treated.

A 15 year old from Sudan reports:

"In Sudan we were distributed to men and I was given to a man who had just killed his woman. I was not given a gun but I helped in the abductions and grabbing of food from the villages. Girls who refused to become prostitutes were killed in front of us. "

Have the number of child soldiers been reduced? Sadly the answer is no. The Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank states: "What is new is the extent to which children can be found on the modern battlefield. Several factors have led to this rise. First, children in modern conflict zones are more easily recruited as the social structures around them deteriorate. The majority of child soldiers volunteer, though they often do so because it is their best option for survival. Others enlist to exact revenge after their families are abused or murdered. Second, weapons have become smaller, lighter, easier to use, and more lethal. A ten-year-old can learn to effectively fire an AK-47 in half an hour. Third, ... warlords regularly use children as effective, cheap, and expendable fighters."

One question to ask is who is responsible?

Are the children themselves responsible? Are children soldiers who have been brainwashed, drugged and forced to kill or be killed, responsible for their actions? Why are the children who fight for the Taliban or Al-Quaida considered to be less a victim of adult manipulation than the child soldiers of central Africa? Should they, as children, be held accountable for war crimes? At what age should they be held accountable?

Kalami, a 15 year old whose been a member of one of the armed groups in the Congo since he was 9 states:

"We were told to kill people by forcing them to stay in their homes while we burned them down. We even had to bury some alive. One day, my friends and I were forced by our commanders to kill a family, to cut up their bodies and to eat them ... My life is lost. I have nothing to live for. At night, I can no longer sleep. I keep thinking of those horrible things I have seen and done when I was a soldier."

When children are forced to commit atrocities against their own family or neighbors it makes it difficult for them to return to his or her home community after the war.

What about the Recruiters?: Are the "recruiters" of child soldiers who kidnapped, brainwashed, educated them to kill, drugged them, exposed them to violence responsible for the war crimes committed by these children?

A former child soldier from Sierra Leone states "You capture someone and split their belly open. You remove the heart and liver. You put salt and pepper on it and cook it for the boss man".

Imposing sanctions does not work with militias and opposition forces. They don't generally respond to compassionate logic nor advocacy on behalf of the children. A new approach is prosecuting the recruiters. The International Criminal Court has tried some of the leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. The Special Court for Sierra Leone ruled that recruiting child soldiers is a war crime.

What about the Governments: Are the governments of the countries responsible for allowing their armies, rebel forces to use children to wage war? Are they responsible for not providing an education; not providing an economy where a family can earn a living wage; an atmosphere where children are not honored but seen as cheap labor?

In some countries, efforts to protect the child soldier is met with anger. In the Sudan, Unicef has tried to sign deals with the Justice and Equality Movement to protect children. The Sudanese government has said that it is illegal and "tantamount to giving the rebel group... undue legitimacy".

What about the West: Is the US government responsible for not ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Are the other signing nations responsible for not adhering to the Convention and not enforcing it? Is the US and other western governments responsible for not spending foreign aide money on education rather than war? For allowing corporate greed to over rule common humanity and common decency and the continued exploitation of the third world assets. For the bad governmental judgment of repeatedly backing the wrong leaders and interfering in foreign governments? For being the arms supplier?

An odd thing happened on the way to apprehending Bin Laden: The United States has set the Iraq and Afghanistan wars apart and different from other wars by not recognizing the difference between child and adult soldiers; by not giving detainees rights and protections guaranteed under the Geneva Convention and other international laws. We may have the might as a superpower to disregard international laws and we may have the power to stand alone in the world, but is that really where we want to be? Freedom, true freedom, can not be had without honoring basic human rights and power, true power, can not be had without respect.

The Director of the ACLU Human Rights Program states: "The United States is failing to protect its own youth from abusive military recruitment, and is simultaneously failing to protect the youth of other countries who have already been forcibly involved in armed conflict,"

What about the UN: Is the United Nations to blame for not standing up to superpowers? For allowing Western nations to recruit under 18 year olds in their armies? For not enforcing the Declaration of Human Rights? For not having the power and ability to control member nations?

What about all of us being responsible? All of us for not caring what happens to children across the world. For not changing our life style to protect and preserve the world's resources; for the silent lack of protests to policies that harm others; for walking by and not looking at the other side of the world.

As an example of how we are all involved in child soldiers, let's take a quick look at the Congo and a mineral called coltan. Most know about "blood diamonds" but few have heard of coltan or the issue of "blood minerals". How many here have cell phones? Computers? Nintendo or other gaming system at home?

Children as young as 4 are used for the mining of Coltan and various other minerals in the Congo. Coltan is a mineral found in the Congo, Australia and several other nations and is used to manufacture electronic capacitors. Coltan has the same human rights, environmental issues as blood diamonds. The mining children of the Congo are unarmed child soldiers forced to mine the minerals that fund the militias.

These minerals are extremely toxic to the health of the miners and the mining of the minerals cause severe pollution and damage to the environment. The minerals are mined for profit by any number of fighting groups including the Congolese government as well as foreign governments. The minerals are sold off to purchasers in the West and in the case of Coltan, may end up at Cabot Industries, a refiner of Coltan and cited by the UN for irresponsible corporate behavior in regards to Coltan, and they are located right here in Mass. Coltan is in every single cell phone, computer, video gaming system, fighter jet, commercial airplane as well as other items such as pace makers, cameras, x-ray equipment.

To give an idea of how lucrative the mining of Coltan is, Rwanda reports a profit from Coltan of 20 million a MONTH when they don't have any Coltan in their country - it was mined illegally or stolen from the Congo. In fact, should Rwanda continue to pilfer Congo's minerals, its annual mineral export revenues are expected to reach \$200 million by the end of 2010. Rwanda is the main road for illegal minerals to leave the Congo and Rwanda is complicit in fueling and funding the conflicts in the Congo. Coltan funded the Rwandan genocide.

The mining of coltan is a very profitable business if you're willing to overlook the enormous harm to the environment, the potential future for the children who are forced into slavery or soldiering, the cultural and community depletion of resources and the extreme violence that is necessary to hold on to your little piece of the pie that is worth in the trillions of dollars.

Why aren't we hearing more about the genocide in the Congo? Why haven't we heard about the issue of Coltan in our cell phones and computers?

Quite simply - **profit**. We don't want the price of Coltan to increase by paying a fair wage or having worker or environmental protection laws in place in the Congo. We, quite simply, don't want an increase to the costs of our electronics and in 1996 and 1998 the US government backed the invasion of Congo by Rwanda and Uganda.

From the mines to our cell phones and computers to fund the wars and buy the AK47s for the child soldiers, we, as individuals and as citizens, also have some culpability for causing children to dig in the dirt for the Coltan so that we can have affordable cellphones, computers and video games. And when we are done with these electronics, they end up back in the third world being taken apart and the toxic minerals re-harvested again by poor children and resold.

Under the Basel Convention, an international agreement designed to stop the dumping of hazardous waste of wealthy nations into third world countries, none of this dumping should be happening. However, the U.S. is the only industrialized nation not to have ratified the Basel Convention and the U.S. also has no federal laws that prohibit the export of toxic waste.

Why aren't all electronics sold with a warning label, something like this:

This product has a rare mineral from Central Africa, mined by slave and child labor, the proceeds of which fund war and genocide and pay for AK-47s for child soldiers. The mining of this mineral causes untold harm to the miners as well as the environment and threatens the extinction of the endangered Lowland Mountain Gorilla. When you discard this product, it is shipped to the 3rd world for children to

re-harvest exposing them to hazardous and toxic minerals and dangerously polluting their environment. Do you still want to make your purchase?

And according to a NY Times article in June, it seems that the American taxpayer may be funding the wages of child soldiers in Somalia.

The article states: "Officials also revealed that the United States government was helping pay their soldiers, an arrangement American officials confirmed, raising the possibility that the wages for some of these child combatants may have come from American taxpayers." The reporter of this story has since had to flee Somalia under threat of arrest.

A 12 year boy abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda: "I killed another child. I did this three times. I felt bad but I knew what would happen if I disobeyed. Now I see dead people and blood in my dreams and I know the spirits of the children are coming to haunt me."

Theoretically the children of the world should have the protection they need but the reality is quite different and as you can see from the list of problems these children face after being a child soldier, returning to a "normal" life will not be easy. Many face continued brutality and ostracized from the community and are at risk of returning to the only life they know - the life of the child soldier.

A 14-year-old girl abducted by the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone in 1999 said: "I've seen people get their hands cut off, a ten-year-old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive . . . So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn't dare cry out loud."

After the war is over, will the children be protected from prosecution? The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does limit the punishment that a child can receive including "Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offenses committed by persons below eighteen years of age." [11]

From the New Yorker Magazine

"Then they hog tied him on a stick suspended between a tree and a rock. All afternoon, the rebels brought in more civilian prisoners. He watched as, one after another, six men were beheaded in front of him."

The Paris Principles, a UN document, signed by 84 member states but not signed by the US, is meant to address the issue of children who participated in armed conflict. It states that children

... who are accused of crimes under international law allegedly committed while they were associated with armed forces or armed groups should be considered primarily as victims of offenses against international law; not only as perpetrators. They must be treated in accordance with international law in a framework of restorative justice and social rehabilitation.

Yet, the very reason for tonight's presentation and letter writing campaign poignantly demonstrates how little protection children really have.

One solution is a process called DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration.

A long process to help child soldiers resume life in the community through locating family members or alternative care, providing education and training, locating employment and giving psychological support.

CHILD SOLDIER from Burma reports - "I feel sorry. Why do I feel sorry? Because by the time I could go to school, I am already too old for the beginner's class. I can't dream of going to school any more because it is too late. I will stay in the army until I die. I lost all my dreams, all my hopes for the future, I feel like a dead person."

It is difficult to imagine what these children have witnessed and been forced to do. There is hope for these children in the form of rehabilitation centers but as individuals, as communities, it is hard to imagine having the ability to forgive some of the atrocities that these children soldiers have done - especially if they were committed not by your own child, but to your child. Just think about it. This child

went to your neighbors house and locked everyone in and burned it down killing everyone inside. Then he went to the next neighbors house and raped all the women, killed them, chopped them up and cooked them and ate them for supper. And YOU are supposed to forgive this child? How? Could you? And if you could, would you? Would you really be able to?

As a woman who survived the Rwandan genocide asks “ If he has worked hard the last month raping and slaughtering, what reason can he give to ask for forgiveness?”

Beyond governments and international laws, a soul-searching question that each of us needs to ask ourselves - would we be able to do what the international community is asking them to do: to forgive the child soldier and for the child soldiers to forgive themselves? This is one of the main criticisms of reintegrating child soldiers into communities - will it really work? Will communities really be able to accept these child soldiers back into the community? Would you want these child soldiers to relocate to your community? And who is profiting - is this another new group of Western nonprofits, a new industry to further exploit the third world?

The topic of child soldiers involves a myriad of issues, many of which, I haven't mentioned but what I would like to leave you with tonight is to think about what you can do. What you can do to make a difference whether it's locally or internationally. What you can do to help improve the lives of poor children here in Newburyport; to reduce bullying and violence; to asking before you buy electronics whether it is blood safe and gorilla free; to hosting educational programs about the plight of children around the world. Please help by writing letters on behalf of those who are being wrongly held or to advocating and lobbying for better laws.

We all need to be better consumers so that what we purchase is not generating profit at the expense of the environment or children across the ocean. We need to be better citizens and better advocates to those who are the least among us. We as individuals who are aware and as we become more aware of the problems around the world, are the voices that will bring change, end the wars, and hopefully build a better world for those who have the smallest voice, the children of the world.

References: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/home>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_use_of_children, <http://www.invisiblechildren.com/>, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/children-s-rights/child-soldiers?id=1051047>, <http://www.child-soldier.org/>, <http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=24&ReportId=66280>, http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index_childsoldiers.html, <http://www.endchildsoldiering.org/>, http://www.warchild.org/links_resources/childsoldiers/childsoldiers.html, <http://www.thechildsoldiers.com/>, http://www.vachss.com/help_text/child_soldiers.html, <http://www.hrw.org/topic/children039s-rights/child-soldiers>, <http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx?id=6684>, <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol15no3/153chil2.htm>, <http://www.endchildsoldiering.org/3100.htm>