

Africa

Regional overview

Long-running wars came to an end releasing thousands of child soldiers but up to 100,000 children were estimated to remain involved in hostilities. Governments recruited children directly to their official armed forces as well as backing proxy forces which used child soldiers. Armed groups involved in peace processes recruited children as bargaining counters. Child soldiering continued in countries which had made commitments to end the practice.

Old, new and forgotten conflicts

An estimated 100,000 children were used in large-scale conflicts, including in **Burundi**, **Côte d'Ivoire**, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC), **Somalia**, **Sudan**¹ and **Uganda**. Child recruitment, often forcible, escalated as peace processes in the DRC and Sudan were in their final stages. In Burundi, new recruitment took place as former armed groups and new signatories to peace agreements sought to enhance their negotiating positions by building up their fighting strength. Responsibility for the regionalized nature of the conflicts in central and West Africa lay not only with governments but also with neighbouring states, western governments, arms manufacturers and businesses benefiting from the exploitation of natural resources central to so many conflicts.

In the Great Lakes region, the governments of **Rwanda** and **Uganda** recruited and used children in the conflict

in eastern **DRC** until 2002 and 2003 respectively, as well as backing armed political groups which recruited and abducted children. Burundian children fought with Burundian armed political groups in **Burundi** and the DRC, as well as with Congolese armed political groups in the DRC, and were still being recruited in refugee camps in the DRC and **Tanzania** in 2004.

The Global Report documents the alarming situation of child soldiers in **Sudan**. In March 2004, there were an estimated 17,000 children in government forces, allied militias and opposition armed groups in the north, east and south. Between 2,500 and 5,000 children served in the armed opposition group, the Sudan's People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in the south. Despite a widely publicized child demobilization program, in which it claimed to have demobilized over 16,000 children between 2001 and 2004, the SPLA continued to recruit and re-recruit child soldiers.

As a humanitarian and human rights crisis unfolded in the western Darfur region of **Sudan** from early 2003, there were reports that young children were abducted and served with government armed forces as well as in government-backed *Janjaweed* militias. Armed opposition groups in Darfur also reportedly used child soldiers.

Abductions, recruitment and sexual violence against children in northern **Uganda** escalated dramatically between

¹ The country entries for Djibouti and Sudan are included in the Middle East and North Africa section of this report.

2002 and 2004. Of an estimated 20,000 children abducted by the rebel group Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), nearly 10,000 were taken from mid-2002. Thousands of children known as "night commuters" fled to towns at night to avoid abduction. The government launched a major military operation against the LRA in March 2002, following which LRA attacks escalated and the humanitarian situation rapidly deteriorated. The Ugandan government recruited children into its armed forces as well as into armed local defence units.

In March 2004, some 6,000 Ugandan and Sudanese children were held captive in southern Sudan by the LRA. In November 2002, the Ugandan government accused the Sudanese government of resuming its long-time support of the LRA. The SPLA reportedly used children in areas under its control in the DRC until September 2003. The SPLA allegedly received support from the Ugandan Government.

In West Africa, armed groups in **Sierra Leone** and **Liberia** were still recruiting children until 2002 and 2003 respectively, often among child refugees in neighbouring countries including **Burkina Faso**, **Côte d'Ivoire** and **Guinea**. The conflict that has devastated Sierra Leone and Liberia over the last decade spread to Côte d'Ivoire, where civil war erupted in September 2002. Children were recruited, often forcibly, by both sides.

At least 600 children were still serving in government and opposition forces in **Chad**, and both government and opposition forces reportedly deployed child soldiers in the **Central African Republic** from 2001 to 2003.

Somalia illustrated more than any other country the extent to which the increased flow of light weapons into Africa boosted the number of child soldiers. An estimated 200,000 children have carried a gun or been involved with a militia in Somalia since the 1991 collapse of central

government. Young children were used as soldiers in continued fighting between factional groups.

Unprotected by law

Former child soldiers were detained and prosecuted. Children in **Burundi** suspected of links with armed political groups were tortured and detained for long periods. Government child soldiers faced legal proceedings before military courts which fell far short of international standards for fair trial.

Although international law prohibits the use of the death penalty against child offenders, former child soldiers were sentenced to death in **Sudan** for crimes committed while they were soldiers. In the **DRC**, some child soldiers were executed by armed groups.

Political violence

Children were manipulated into committing acts of political violence. In **Nigeria**, politically-motivated armed groups used children and youths to instigate violence in the run-up to elections. The youth militia of the ruling United Democratic Front party in **Malawi** harassed the opposition, and young gang members were involved in political and criminal violence in **Kenya** and **South Africa**.

Thousands of children were exposed to military training and political indoctrination under a compulsory national youth service training program in **Zimbabwe**. Young recruits, reportedly trained in torture and killing techniques, were allegedly employed in the violent repression of opposition parties.

An uncertain future

Decades of civil war in **Angola** ended in April 2002. The conflict in **Sierra Leone** was

declared officially over in January 2002, and a peace agreement was signed in **Liberia** in August 2004. Wherever conflicts ended, child soldiers needed to overcome years of physical and psychological damage and find a place back in their communities.

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs for former child soldiers ended or were in their last stages in several countries. By 2002, the majority of child soldiers involved in the armed conflict in **Guinea-Bissau** were said to have been demobilized. At the closure of the initial reintegration program in **Sierra Leone** in December 2003 around 7,000 children had been demobilized, 6,000 of whom had been reunited with their families. In January 2004, nearly 2,000 child soldiers from the Ninja militia in the **Republic of Congo** (Congo-Brazzaville) had registered for demobilization. In March 2004, however, an estimated 16,000 children still needed to be demobilized in **Angola**, along with a further 2,000 in **Guinea** and 21,000 in **Liberia**.

Most DDR programs were established while conflict was continuing, with a view to the immediate demobilization of children. While the programs provided much-needed mechanisms for protecting children in **Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Uganda** and **Sudan**, the reality of ongoing conflict meant that demobilized child soldiers were at risk of re-recruitment. In January 2004 a program for the demobilization of 2,500 child soldiers began in Burundi. Although the demobilization of child soldiers in the DRC officially began in 2000, the forces involved showed no commitment to the process, and only about 1,900 children were demobilized. There was no formal demobilization process in Uganda, and it was impossible to estimate the number of children who escaped from the LRA and returned to their communities.

DDR programs brought hope to thousands of former child soldiers, but girls were often excluded from them, despite having frequently been recruited and abducted to armed groups for sexual purposes. In several countries, inadequate funding, lack of long-term commitment and poor management undermined DDR programs. Child soldiers were given lower priority in the demobilization program in **Angola**, where the authorities did not classify under-18s in the fighting forces as soldiers, so excluding them from the assistance offered to demobilized adults. In **Liberia**, an official demobilization program started in December 2003, but special facilities for child soldiers were not provided at that time. Many captured or escaped child soldiers in refugee camps in **Guinea** and **Sierra Leone** did not benefit from child protection programs and were at risk of re-recruitment by groups fighting in Liberia or **Côte d'Ivoire**. Peace remained fragile in Liberia and the risk of further violence or the re-recruitment of children remained high.

Impunity and international law

Africa hosted the first ever efforts to bring recruiters of children to justice. By the end of March 2004, the Special Court of **Sierra Leone** had indicted 11 people for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the recruitment of children under 15. In 2004 the International Criminal Court announced investigations into child recruitment in **Uganda** and the **DRC**.

By March 2004, only 11 out of 46 countries in Africa had ratified the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.¹ Ratification and signature of the Optional Protocol did not bring an end to child recruitment in the **DRC** and **Uganda**, which ratified in 2001 and 2002 respectively, or in **Burundi**, which signed in 2001.

Optional Protocol: ratifications and signatures

Acceded/ratified: Chad, Cape Verde, Congo (Democratic Republic), Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Uganda. **Signed:** Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Seychelles, South Africa, Togo; **Not signed:** Angola, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo (Republic of), Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.