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SIERRA LEONE

Childhood - a casualty of conflict

Introduction

More than 5,000 children under the age of 18, both boys and girls and some as young as five, have fought as combatants in Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict. Children have been specifically singled out for recruitment by both the armed opposition and forces fighting in support of the government. Most of the children fighting with rebel forces have been abducted from their homes and families and forced to fight. Many were separated from their families at a very young age. Victims themselves, they have also been perpetrators of human rights abuses, sometimes against members of their own families and communities. Many have been forced to kill and mutilate under the influence of drugs, alcohol or simply because of fear. Former child combatants often say that they do not know why Sierra Leoneans are killing Sierra Leoneans.

A further 5,000 children, again both boys and girls, have been associated with rebel forces although not directly deployed in combat; they have been used to carry goods, cook or collect firewood, and girls have been raped and forced into sexual slavery. Some girls are forced to "serve" many male combatants.¹

These are the figures provided by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) but they are estimates; the real figures may be much higher. The Special Representative of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, after a visit to Sierra Leone, said on 9 September 1999 that '*more than 10,000 children have been serving as child soldiers in various fighting groups*'.

On 7 July 1999 in Lomé, Togo, the government of Sierra Leone and the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) signed a peace agreement which was to end Sierra Leone's eight-year conflict. The difficult task of disarming and demobilizing very large numbers of child combatants and helping them to return to a normal life with their families and communities began.

While some progress was being made towards securing the release, disarmament and demobilization of child combatants following the signing of the peace agreement, further efforts have since been curtailed. The political and security situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated in early May 2000 with the capture of some 500 UN peace-keeping troops by rebel forces and a resumption of hostilities. The recruitment and use of children as combatants by both rebel forces and government-allied forces are continuing. This is among the most distressing

¹For further information about the abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence committed against girls and women, see *Sierra Leone: Rape and other forms of sexual violence against girls and women* (AI Index: AFR 51/35/00), published by Amnesty International on 29 June 2000.

features of a conflict which has also been characterized by systematic and widespread deliberate and arbitrary killing, amputation of limbs and mutilation, rape and other forms of sexual violence.²

In this report Amnesty International describes the violation of the most fundamental rights of the children of Sierra Leone. Much of the information included comes from the children themselves who were interviewed by Amnesty International representatives during visits to Sierra Leone in March, June and July 2000.

The scale of the problem of child combatants in Sierra Leone is well known and has been recognized, including by the UN Secretary-General, his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the government of Sierra Leone and non-governmental organizations, both national and international. There is a wealth of international and regional standards, resolutions and statements on the protection of children in situations of armed conflict. What is now urgent is to give substance to the repeated commitments to end the recruitment and use of children as combatants, by whatever side.

Amnesty International is making a series of recommendations to the government of Sierra Leone, the leaders of RUF forces and the international community aimed at finally ending the use of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. These include:

- the highest priority should be given to resuming the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child combatants, and prompt and effective measures should be taken to ensure that no child under the age of 18 is recruited for military service, including by passing legislation raising the minimum age for military recruitment to 18;
- all children held by RUF forces, either used as combatants or in any way associated with fighting forces, should be released immediately and RUF forces should immediately cease forcible or voluntary recruitment and use of children under the age of 18;
- in all efforts by the international community to resolve the political and security crisis in Sierra Leone, the needs of children affected by the internal armed conflict, including

² For further information about human rights committed during the conflict, see previous reports published by Amnesty International, in particular: *Sierra Leone: Recommendations to the international contact group on Sierra Leone, New York, 19 April 1999* (AI Index: AFR 51/05/99), 19 April 1999; *Sierra Leone: 1998 - a year of atrocities against civilians* (AI Index: AFR 51/22/98), November 1998; *Sierra Leone: A disastrous set-back for human rights* (AI Index: AFR 51/05/97), 20 October 1997; *Sierra Leone: Towards a future founded on human rights* (AI Index: AFR 51/05/96), 25 September 1996; and *Sierra Leone: Human rights abuses in a war against civilians* (AI Index: AFR 51/05/95), 13 September 1995.

child combatants, should be given the highest priority and concrete steps should be taken to implement commitments made to end the recruitment and use of child combatants in Sierra Leone;

- those responsible for grave breaches of international human rights law and humanitarian law, including the abduction and forcible recruitment of children, should be brought to justice.

The use of child combatants in the internal armed conflict

Children have fought with the various forces involved in Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict which began in 1991. These forces include the RUF, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), the Sierra Leone Army and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF). The AFRC came to power following the military coup on 25 May 1997 which overthrew the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah elected in 1996. The AFRC joined forces with the RUF after coming to power and remained its ally after the AFRC was forced from power in February 1998 by forces deployed in Sierra Leone by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), known as ECOMOG. With the signing of the peace agreement in July 1999, the AFRC allied itself to the government of President Kabbah but some of its forces continued to engage in hostilities against government-allied forces. Rebel forces who remain in control of parts of the north and east of the country continue to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers. Previously disarmed and demobilized members of the AFRC and those members of the Sierra Leone Army who had remained loyal to the government, including children under the age of 18, have again been recruited and rearmed to fight on behalf of the government since May 2000. Large numbers of children have also been recruited and used in combat by the CDF, the civilian militia based on societies of traditional hunters, such as the *kamajors*, which support the government of President Kabbah.

The involvement of children in conflict has devastating effects on their physical and mental integrity. There have been higher casualty rates among children because of their inexperience, fearlessness and lack of training. Children are considered as particularly useful because their size and agility means that they may be sent on particularly hazardous assignments. Frequently ill-treated or even killed by the commanders, they have no protectors. Adult combatants who commit human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, involve children in those crimes. In addition to the obvious risks of death or serious injury in combat, children suffer disproportionately from the general rigours of military life, especially in the bush, and are particularly vulnerable to disease and malnutrition. As for the severe psychological consequences of active participation in hostilities, with children witnessing and at times also committing atrocities, the full extent of the impact on child combatants as well as society as a whole may only become apparent over a long period.

Former child combatants tell their stories

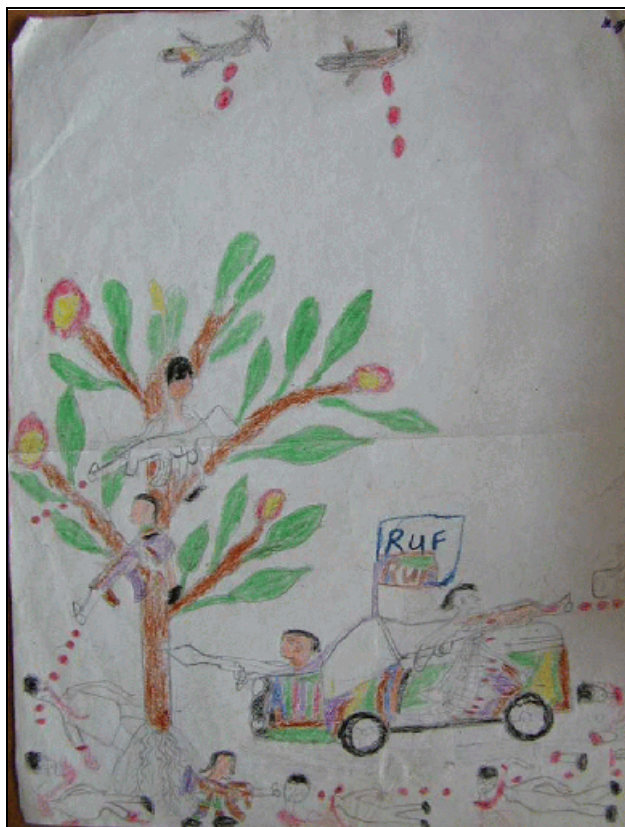
Those children who have been released or have escaped and who have been disarmed and demobilized provide horrifying accounts of how the conflict has affected them. The names of the children whose testimonies are included have been changed in order to protect their identities. Most were interviewed by Amnesty International representatives during June and July 2000.

Child combatants live in constant fear of being beaten and killed. Many former child combatants describe being threatened, intimidated and severely beaten; others recount the killing of their friends and companions. Former child combatants describe the killings and mutilations of civilians which they carried out while fighting. If they refused, they risked being beaten or killed. Peter, a 12-year-old former child combatant, said: *“When I was killing, I felt like it wasn’t me doing these things. I had to because the rebels threatened to kill me.”*

Former child combatants fighting with RUF

Ibrahim is now aged 16 and living at a centre for former child combatants at an internally displaced people’s camp at Waterloo, 20 kilometres east of Freetown. He was captured by the RUF in 1992 in Kono District, Eastern Province, and from there was transferred to the rebel stronghold of Kailahun District, also in Eastern Province. He was taught how to use weapons, how to advance and attack the enemy and how to ambush. He described how before attacks, each combatant, including child combatants, was given cocaine and marijuana: *“After sniffing cocaine, I was not afraid of anything. I became bloody.”*

Ibrahim told Amnesty International on 19 June 2000 that when the RUF forces with whom he fought heard that RUF leader Foday Sankoh was going to be tried in 1998: *“We were ordered to kill any civilian that we came across. Any fighter or children suspected of being reluctant to do the killings were severely beaten. We were asked to advance and to do everything possible to terrorize the civilians. It was during this period that people’s hands and limbs were cut off, in Kono, Masingbi, Matatoka, Magburaka and Makeni. During that time, one of the children asked the commander the reasons for the killings. He said that the civilians were supporting President Kabbah’s government. Sheriff Kabia, who was 17 and known as ‘Crazy Jungle’, was killed because he asked this question.”* Sheriff Kabia was reported to have been killed in November 1998. Ibrahim also described the death of Mamadu Kamara, aged 14, who was killed because he refused to cut off the hand of someone from his own village.



Drawing by a former child combatant at the interim care centre at Lungi

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Abdul, now aged 17, was abducted by the RUF in 1997 during an ambush in Kenema District, Eastern Province. He told Amnesty International on 21 July 2000 that he was taken to an RUF training camp, known as Camp Lion, near Pendembu in Kailahun District where he was trained by both Sierra Leoneans and Liberians. He was taught to use a variety of weapons, including AK47 and AK58 rifles, which he said came from Liberia. *“After the Lomé peace accord, we thought that was the end of the whole war. We were waiting to disarm; there was no fighting. Instead we all went to Tongo Field to mine. Most rebels did that.”* Abdul was then ordered to go to Lunsar, Port Loko District: *“We didn’t even reach the front line when we met some wounded colleagues. I wanted to surrender but I was afraid.”* When he gave himself up to Sierra Leone Army forces, his arms were tied tightly behind his back; rope marks on both arms were still visible. He was first taken to Masiaka, some 50 kilometres east of Freetown, where he was hit on the head with a pistol by a soldier and then transferred to

Cockerill military headquarters in Freetown. *“They threatened to kill me. For the first week I was treated badly but then I was given food and water and no one treated me badly. For the first two weeks I was not allowed out of the cell.”* He remained there for more than three weeks before being transferred to an interim care centre in Freetown. *“I want to go back to school but here in Freetown, not in the provinces. I am scared that I’ll get taken back to the front line.”*

David, now aged 14, from Bumbuna, Tonkolili District, Northern Province, was abducted in 1996 by the RUF when they attacked Bumbuna. He is now at a centre established to care for former child combatants, known as an interim care centre, run by an international non-governmental organization, in Freetown. When interviewed by Amnesty International on 12 July 2000, he said that after his abduction he was taken first to Kabala, Koinadugu District, Northern Province, and then to Bunumbu in Kailahun District, an RUF stronghold. There he, together with another 40 children, was trained to fight at Camp Lion. *“I had to go through the training and learn to fight, otherwise the RUF people would beat me or kill me.”* Among those killed by the RUF during the training was a boy, aged about 11, with whom David had become friends. He was beaten to death because he refused to continue training. He had complained of being tired - the training was difficult and he was exhausted. He was beaten in front of more than 30 other children and his body was thrown into the bush. Another child, aged 14, was also beaten and killed.

David described how, even under the influence of marijuana and alcohol, he was still afraid to fight, but he did not tell anyone for fear of being killed. David remained with rebel forces for three years until surrendering to forces of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) at Makeni, Bombali District, Northern Province, after the peace agreement was signed in July 1999. Now at the interim care centre, he said: *“I want to become a doctor now and go back to school to learn how to cure people.”*

Many former child combatants with rebel forces have described how they were forced to drink alcohol and take drugs and the effect that it had on them. Among the drugs used were marijuana, amphetamines, commonly referred to as “blue boats”, and cocaine. When child combatants refused to take drugs they were beaten and, in some cases, killed.

Komba, now aged 15, was captured by the RUF in 1997 in Binkolo, Bombali, District. Now at the centre for former child combatants at Waterloo, he told Amnesty International on 20 June 2000 that he was among rebel forces who attacked Freetown in January 1999: *“My legs were cut with blades and cocaine was rubbed in the wounds. Afterwards, I felt like a big person. I saw the other people like chickens and rats. I wanted to kill them.”*

When interviewed by Amnesty International on 20 June 2000, Gibril, aged 11, said: *“Before battles, I was given white powder which was mixed with rice. It made me brave, it made me think that I could do anything.”*

Fifteen child combatants, including at least two girls, were among some 2,500 Sierra Leonean refugees who fled into Gueckédou in Guinea during the first two weeks of August 2000 to escape intensified fighting and bombing by government forces of rebel-held areas in Eastern Province. All but one had been abducted by rebel forces and forced to fight for periods of up to seven years. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), all the children said that they had been heavily drugged with cocaine and they acknowledged that they had been extremely brutal. They were separated from other refugees because they feared that victims of the atrocities which they had committed would recognize them.

Former child combatants fighting with the AFRC

After being removed from power in February 1998 by ECOMOG forces acting in support of President Kabbah, the AFRC, together with the RUF, wreaked a campaign of terror against civilians, particularly in Northern Province. From April 1998 reports emerged of widespread killings, amputations and abductions in villages in Northern Province.

When interviewed on 19 June 2000 by Amnesty International, Sayo, now aged 14, said that he was abducted by AFRC forces in 1998 in Makali, Tonkolili District. He was trained in different places, including Koinadugu District. He described how his skin was cut in different places, including near his eyes, and cocaine put in the wounds. *“When I go to the battle fields, I smoke enough. That’s why I become unafraid of everything. When you refuse to take drugs, it’s called technical sabotage and you are killed.”* After the peace agreement was signed in July 1999 Sayo was freed and taken to a centre for former child combatants run by a non-governmental organization, CARITAS-Makeni, in Kabala. He is now at the centre for former child combatants at Waterloo.

Hassan, now aged 15, from Makeni, told Amnesty International on 21 July 2000 at a centre for former child combatants in Freetown that he was abducted with four of his cousins by the AFRC in 1998 when he was aged 13. He was trained in a camp near Kabala where he was given an AK 47 rifle. He claimed that there were several hundred other young boys in the camp. The training lasted three months. He had to learn how to dismantle a weapon, how to use a rocket propelled grenade (RPG), how to attack, how to undertake guard duty and how to parade. He also said that he had to parade for AFRC leaders, including Johnny Paul Koroma, now head of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, established under the July 1999 peace agreement, and Brigadier, now Colonel, Gabriel Mani, who was appointed in July 2000 as Director of Army Training.

Hassan spent over a year with the AFRC in Kono District, Eastern Province. Following the signing of the peace agreement in July 1999 he remained with the AFRC in the Occra Hills, some 40 kilometres east of Freetown, the stronghold of a faction of the AFRC known as the “West Side Boys” who had not disarmed after the peace agreement. In late June

2000 Hassan travelled to Freetown to purchase drinks for the “West Side Boys”. He was not armed and he travelled in a public transport vehicle. At a checkpoint he was recognized as a West Side Boy by members of the Sierra Leone Army and the *kamajors* and ordered to get out of the vehicle. His shoes and trousers were removed but, initially, he was not otherwise ill-treated. He was taken to Benguema military training camp, 20 kilometres east of Freetown, and the following day to Cockerill military headquarters in Freetown. He was interrogated about a recent attack on the town of Masiaka. One soldier, however, beat him severely on his back; three weeks later, in July 2000, deep scars were still visible. The beating was stopped by a more senior officer.

Hassan said: *“At first, I loved being in the bush. I could get money and other things, including vehicles, for free. But then I got tired. Now I want to go home.”*

When interviewed on 24 July 2000 John, now aged 15, from Mokanji, Moyamba District, Southern Province, did not remember when he had been abducted by the AFRC and did not know what had happened to his family. He was threatened that he would be killed if he did not go with the AFRC and was taken to Makeni where he was trained how to use weapons and how to fight the CDF and ECOMOG. John said that he was told not to kill civilians and that civilians were killed in the cross-fire. He was also instructed not to loot property but said that many AFRC members did engage in looting. *“I was not happy living in the bush but I had no way to escape. I asked to leave and was told ‘go if you can’ but I then saw children being killed - many of them - when they tried to escape to go home. I was afraid of fighting but I was given ‘blue boats’. After that I felt like I could do anything. I never refused to take drugs.”*

John recalled that children were punished if they refused to obey orders: *“I was punished after I was asked to be part of an advance team to attack Koinadugu. I was not feeling well; I was feeling sick and had a stomach ache. I said that I could not go and fight. The commander ordered other small boys to beat me. After I was beaten a doctor who had been captured helped me.”*

Isatu, a girl now aged 17, was abducted by AFRC forces from Fadugu, Koinadugu District, in 1998. She told Amnesty International on 24 July 2000 at a centre for former child combatants: *“I did not want to go; I was forced to go. They killed a lot of women who refused to go with them.”* She was forced to become the sexual partner of the combatant who captured her and is now the mother of their three-month-old baby: *“When they capture young girls, you belong to the soldier who captured you. I was ‘married’ to him.”*

Isatu was trained in a base near Kabala to use weapons, including a bayonet, gun and knife, and fought in the area around Fadugu and Makeni. She admitted that she had cut off the hands of children and adults, and set fire to houses with civilians locked inside. *“There is a law of the AFRC that forces you to kill; if you refuse to, you yourself are killed.”*

Former child combatants fighting with the CDF

Child combatants recruited by the CDF have also recounted their experiences. The parents of 12-year-old Brima, now at the centre for former child combatants at Waterloo, gave permission to the CDF to use him as a child combatant in 1998. He continued to live at his home but was active with the CDF in areas around Masiaka, Port Loko and Yele. He was trained to fight by CDF "initiators", those who admit members into the societies of traditional hunters. Brima told Amnesty International on 20 June 2000 that when children disobeyed orders they were beaten unless their parents paid a fine. Brima recalled: "*I was beaten because I became separated from a CDF patrol.*"

Brima recounted that when a rebel is caught, his arms are tied up behind his back. The captive is then interrogated and stabbed to death. "*I saw four executions.*"

Mohamed, also aged 12, from Port Loko, Port Loko District, Northern Province, was recruited by the CDF in 1998. His parents were not informed about the recruitment but they did nothing to prevent it because of the status attached to membership of the society of traditional hunters, such as the *kamajors*, described by Mohamed as "*the supremacy of the society*". In addition to carrying water and machetes for the CDF, he escorted captured rebels to the Sierra Leone Army. He also described to Amnesty International on 20 June 2000 how the CDF executed rebels they had captured or those suspected of being rebels: "*I saw three captured rebels being killed; their heads were cut off. The children had to bring the heads to the SLA [Sierra Leone Army] headquarters to show that the CDF were effective.*"

Rehabilitating child combatants

Until the resumption of hostilities in May 2000 UNAMSIL, including its human rights section, played an important role in negotiating the release of children held by rebel forces and providing logistical support and military escorts to ensure their safe transfer to interim care centres. It worked with a number of non-governmental organizations, both national and international, who have been active in trying to secure the release of children and to provide the assistance they need. In March 2000 UNICEF and non-governmental organizations were supporting more than 700 children in interim care centres; about 80 per cent of these were demobilized child combatants.

Following the July 1999 peace agreement and before the resumption of hostilities in May 2000, specific procedures had been adopted for child combatants. When children presented themselves to a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration reception centre - sometimes simply a table in the middle of the road - those who were not combatants were handed over to child protection agencies and taken to an interim care centre. If, after questioning, it was established that they were combatants, they were transferred to the

children's sections of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration camps. For those who had fought with the RUF, the AFRC or the former Sierra Leone Army this program lasted for five weeks; for those with the CDF a shorter program was provided because normally the children had not been separated from their families and communities.

At interim care centres former child combatants are provided with medical treatment, food and clothing, psycho-social rehabilitation, education and recreation. Some of the older children, especially those who had spent months or years with rebel forces, have bullet wounds or other injuries. Malnutrition, respiratory and skin infections and other ailments are common, as are sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Some still suffer the effects of narcotic drugs.

When Amnesty International met former child combatants at the centre for former child combatants at Waterloo on 25 March 2000, a boy aged 14 who had been abducted by AFRC forces in 1998 said: *"I want to go to school and learn so that I can forget the old times."* Another former child combatant interviewed at Waterloo on 19 June 2000 said: *"We want to go back to school; we don't want to go back to the bush."*



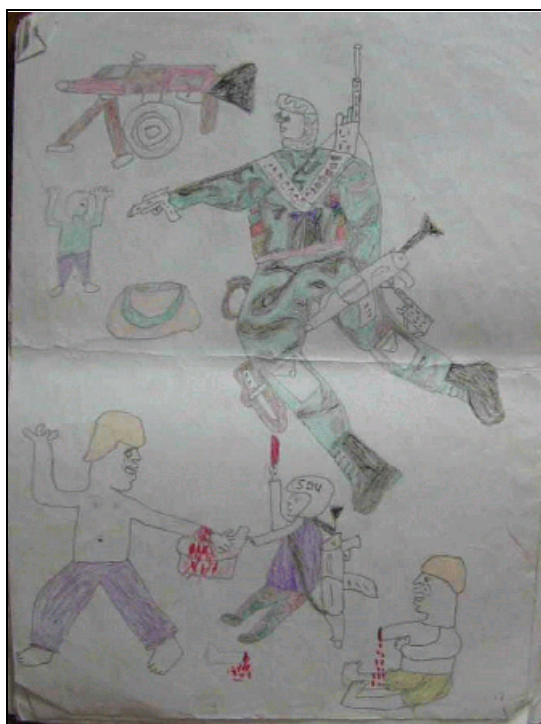
Former child soldiers in the interim care centre at Waterloo, east of Freetown, 25 March 2000
© Amnesty International

The psychological effects of the conflict on children have often been severe: many have killed, mutilated or raped or have witnessed such atrocities. During the rebel incursion into Freetown in January 1999 - when at least 2,000 civilians were killed, more than 500 people had limbs severed, and rape of girls and women was systematic - it was estimated that some 10 per cent of rebel combatants were children. Often under the influence of drugs, many of them

committed atrocities. During the first few weeks after they are disarmed and demobilized, former child combatants are reported to be often aggressive and violent, to show other behavioural problems, to suffer nightmares, alienation, outbursts of anger and an inability to interact socially.

In a report published in January 2000, the international humanitarian organization *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF-Holland) said that: “*The psychological impact of actually witnessing horrific events imposes a serious psychological stress. Deliberately or not, witnessing at least once events such as torture, execution, (attempted) amputations, people being burnt in their houses and public rape often results in traumatic stress or even post-traumatic stress disorder.*”³

At an interim care centre in Lungi, former child combatants have been encouraged to make drawings of their experiences as child combatants. Many have depicted horrific scenes of the mutilation, rape and killing in which they have been involved.



Drawing by a former child combatant at the interim care centre at Lungi
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³Assessing Trauma in Sierra Leone, Médecins Sans Frontières (Holland), 11 January 2000.

After considering Sierra Leone's initial report under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in January 2000, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern that the government had insufficient capacity to provide psycho-social assistance to the many children who have suffered forms of psychological trauma. The Committee urged the government to make every effort to strengthen available psycho-social assistance and to recruit more mental health workers, recommending in addition that the government seek international assistance in this area.

After undergoing the demobilization and rehabilitation process, efforts are made to reunite former child combatants with their families. Child protection agencies have developed programs for family tracing and reunification, often with success. In some cases, however, former child combatants, especially the younger ones, do not know their real names and have lost all knowledge of what a family is. One boy now aged 16, who was abducted by the RUF in 1992, said: *"The commander told me when I was captured: 'Your father is gone. Now I am your father'."* Another, aged 15, who was abducted in 1997 said: *"After you are captured you cannot think about your family; that is out. Sometimes, when I was by myself, I would think about them. But when you are captured you have to change or you are a dead man."*

Many former child combatants have been transferred to the province from which they originally came, if this has been possible, in order to increase the possibility of tracing their families. In other cases, however, their parents have been killed or displaced. Where their families cannot be traced, the children are placed temporarily with foster families. Significant efforts have been made to sensitize communities to the plight of former child combatants and to promote reconciliation. In some cases, however, former child combatants have been rejected by their families and communities because of the atrocities committed by rebel forces during the conflict. One 16-year-old former child combatant said: *"I don't want to go back to my village because I burnt all the houses there. I don't know what the people would do, but they'd harm me. I don't think I'll ever be accepted in my village."*

Girls who have been abducted and forcibly recruited often face specific problems. When an Amnesty International delegation visited Sierra Leone in March 2000, it identified that the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants appeared often not to provide any real opportunity to those girls and women who had been abducted by rebel forces and forced to become their sexual partners to free themselves from former combatants when they reported for disarmament and demobilization. The Fourth Report of the UN Secretary-General on UNAMSIL of 19 May 2000 recognized *"the need to protect dependants of ex-combatants, the majority of whom are women and children"* and that *"the majority of 'wives' of the combatants are in fact abductees and, if not interviewed separately*

from their 'husbands', would most likely not feel free to express their wish to return to their original families".⁴

Effective provision needs to be made for those girls and women, many of whom are pregnant or have young children, to leave former combatants, if they wish. This would require: firstly, the opportunity to indicate privately to UN personnel their desire to leave the men who abducted and sexually abused them; secondly, support to enable them to receive all necessary medical and psycho-social care; and thirdly, support either to return to their families where this is possible or to re-establish their lives together with their children.

In Resolution 1314 (2000) on children and armed conflict of 11 August 2000 the UN Security Council underlined "*the importance of giving consideration to the special needs and particular vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict, including, inter alia, those heading households, orphaned, sexually exploited and used as combatants*" and urged "*that their human rights, protection and welfare be incorporated in the development of policies and programmes, including those for prevention, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration*".



Former child combatants attending a human rights education session led by a human rights officer for CARITAS-Makeni at the interim care centre at Lungi, July 2000
© Amnesty International

May 2000 - children again forced into conflict

⁴Fourth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, S/2000/455.

“A whole generation of children has already been emotionally traumatized and physically scarred. They’d been told that peace had finally arrived. Now what are we supposed to tell them?” - Johanna van Gerpen, UNICEF representative in Sierra Leone, 10 May 2000.

After the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the RUF in July 1999, several hundred children were released by rebel forces; by the end of 1999 some 800 children, many of them combatants, had been handed over to UNICEF and other child protection agencies. During the first months of 2000 there was a significant increase in the release of children, most of them combatants, by AFRC forces from the Occra Hills to the east of Freetown and from Kabala, Northern Province. By the end of April 2000, some 1,700 child combatants, of an estimated total of 5,000, had been absorbed into the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program. According to estimates by UNICEF, about 800 of them had been reunited with their families or placed in foster care, or had run away, leaving 900 in interim care centres. Several thousand children, however, remained in the hands of rebel forces, particularly in Northern Province.

When the political and security situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated seriously at the beginning of May 2000, fears of an imminent attack on Freetown by rebel forces intensified and hostilities between RUF forces and forces of the Sierra Leone Army, the CDF and UNAMSIL troops were reported close to the capital and in Port Loko District.

Moves to secure the release of children still held by rebel forces halted. Former child combatants in interim care centres in areas where rebel forces were active again became vulnerable to being abducted and forcibly recruited by rebel forces. UNICEF and the child protection agencies with which it works have tried to ensure adequate protection for these children.

In his Fourth Report on UNAMSIL to the UN Security Council on 19 May 2000, the UN Secretary-General cited preliminary reports which suggested that child combatants were being used extensively as hostilities resumed. UNAMSIL human rights officers who visited Masiaka on 15 May 2000 observed several child combatants, mostly boys, with the CDF, the AFRC and former Sierra Leone Army and the reconstituted Sierra Leone Army. Some 25 per cent of the combatants observed were under 18 and some freely admitted that they were between 7 and 14. Almost all of them were armed. Other reports indicated that RUF forces were using a similar proportion of child combatants at the front line. In his subsequent report to the UN Security Council on 31 July 2000, the Secretary-General reported that both the RUF and forces fighting for the government continued to use children in combat.⁵ He expressed deep concern about continuing human rights abuses, including the forced recruitment of children, and urged *“all fighting forces to immediately release all child combatants among their forces and to cease the recruitment of children as combatants”*.

⁵Fifth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, S/2000/751.

Continuing recruitment of children by the RUF

Since May 2000 RUF forces have continued to abduct and forcibly recruit children as combatants, some of whom had previously been demobilized. While some of the children recruited by both rebel and government-allied forces since May 2000 were forcibly recruited, usually after being abducted, others were reported to have volunteered to join the RUF. It appears, however, that in many cases these children had little option but to do so. Reports from Kambia District, Northern Province, during May 2000 described RUF forces going from village to village demanding a quota of men and boys, most of whom were forced to join under duress. Local traditional rulers, known as Paramount Chiefs, were ordered to provide a certain number of recruits and families were forced to hand over children, including those aged under 18. For example, in Madina Junction, Kambia District, 300 men and boys were demanded. Similar reports have been received from the towns of Kambia and Kamakwie. This practice explained the comparatively high number of young men and boys, without their families, who fled across the border into Forécariah region, Guinea, during May 2000. Reports of forcible recruitment were also received from Mange in Port Loko District.

In Makeni, when the RUF first confronted UNAMSIL troops in early May 2000, children were pressed by RUF forces by threats and intimidation into joining them. RUF commanders positioned vehicles at the entrance of an interim care centre, run by CARITAS-Makeni, and repeatedly coaxed the older boys to rejoin them, through enticement and implicit threat. Some of the children were told by RUF forces that their families had been traced and that the RUF would help them return to their homes. It was also reported that the RUF had threatened to kill all those in the interim care centre if the children did not rejoin the RUF. Staff at the centre believed that up to 30 boys aged from 14 to 17 rejoined the RUF; other estimates put the number of those who rejoined the RUF at 40



Lungi interim care centre for former child combatants run by CARITAS-Makeni, July 2000
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or as many as 50. It appeared that shortage of food at the centre, which had been looted by rebel forces, was also a factor influencing the children's return to rebel forces. The centre had been looted on 2 May 2000 by rebel forces; some of the older boys in the interim care centre had tried to prevent the looting and one of the adult carers, a woman, had been beaten. The rebels came the following day and again looted the centre.

For fear of further attack, on 23 May 2000, 83 children from the centre - 73 boys and nine girls, most aged between 6 and 12 years - and 27 adult carers fled the centre for Freetown. On their arduous three-day trek their remaining possessions, including food and money, were stolen by RUF combatants. When they arrived in Petifu, Tonkolili District, some of the group, both children and adults, were beaten by members of the CDF. The children finally arrived safely in Freetown on 26 May 2000 and were taken to the interim care centre at Lungi.

One former child combatant, Francis, now aged 16 who had been abducted in 1998, described to Amnesty International on 15 July 2000 at the interim care centre in Lungi how RUF forces had tried to lure children back into their ranks from an interim care centre in Lunsar, Port Loko District: *"by then the rebels had moved from Makeni to Lunsar. They came to our camp and asked some children to join them again and we refused. We have rights to live and play. They encouraged us to join them. We told the manager of the centre to move us. At that time there were no vehicles; even the NGO's vehicle was not around. We walked along the road to Rogberi Junction where we met the rebels. They told us to return to our camp. We knew that they were killing people around. After that they said, please, come and join us or we are going to kill you people. After that we fled in the bush."*

On 31 May 2000 RUF forces were reported to have killed two boys and a young man at the village of Maforay, near Port Loko, after they refused to join them. On 15 June 2000, a farmer from a village near Magbile, Port Loko District, between Masiaka and Rogberi Junction, described to Amnesty International the killing of his sons by RUF forces on 11 June 2000: *"My four sons, aged 11, 21, 23 and 25, were building a new hut when the rebels asked them to join them. They refused and the rebels shot and killed them."* His three eldest sons were all farmers, married with children; his youngest son worked on his father's farm.

Continuing recruitment of children by government-allied forces

Government-allied forces have also continued to recruit children and use them in combat. Some of the child combatants who had been disarmed and demobilized after the peace agreement were again recruited to fight against the RUF. Government-allied forces comprise a loose alliance of the Sierra Leone Army, the AFRC and the CDF. Although in theory these various forces are under the command of the Chief of Defence Staff, in practice it appears that chain-of-command control is diffuse and often unclear and that, in the confused and unstable situation which prevails, it is unlikely that senior military personnel of the Sierra Leone Army exert effective control over all forces fighting on behalf of the government.

When an Amnesty International delegation met the Deputy Minister of Defence, Chief Samuel Hinga Norman, who is also the National Coordinator of the CDF, in Freetown on 25 May 2000, he denied that the CDF recruited children or “initiated” them into the societies of traditional hunters. He said that the children with CDF forces had been rescued or captured from rebel forces and that they were handed over to child protection agencies. Chief Hinga Norman has publicly announced that child combatants will be demobilized from government and government-allied forces. In mid-July 2000 he held a meeting in Bo, Southern Province, with CDF leaders and “initiators”. He instructed that no further children were to be “initiated” into the CDF. It is not clear, however, to what extent this instruction is being heeded. While it may reduce the number of children newly admitted into the CDF, it does not resolve the problem of those already with CDF forces.

A senior member of the CDF in Kenema, Eastern Province, told Amnesty International on 27 July 2000 that, although he personally opposed the use of children, he acknowledged that it was normal practice within the CDF. He was in the presence of two boys who appeared to be under 18 and who were both armed. He claimed that, before the peace agreement, there were some 600 children in the CDF forces around Kenema but that they were all subsequently demobilized and that there was no further recruitment of children.

On 12 June 2000 in Masiaka, an area where hostilities were continuing, much publicity was given to the apparent demobilization of 135 child combatants with government-allied forces, in particular the CDF. It subsequently transpired, however, that only 13 of these children were serving as combatants, nine with the CDF and four with the AFRC. It appeared that children and their families were attracted by the potential assistance and facilities provided to former child combatants, including food and education, as well as the opportunity to remove the children to safety from an area close to the front line. The children who were not former child combatants, and who had been separated from their families, were subsequently returned to their homes.

According to some reports, recruitment of children by the CDF is continuing in Bo and Moyamba Districts in Southern Province. It is often difficult, however, to distinguish between “initiation” into the societies of traditional hunters and recruitment to fight. Child protection agencies report that recruitment of children, including those who had previously been demobilized, is continuing. According to reports which remain unconfirmed, villages in Southern Province are expected to provide a certain number of children to the CDF. In some areas the CDF appear to be no longer using children so openly to guard checkpoints along major roads in Southern Province; children, some of them armed, have been seen close to checkpoints but hidden in the bush. In late May 2000 two children with the CDF aged about 14 or 15 were observed in Moyamba close to a checkpoint. In other areas, however, an increase in the number of children guarding checkpoints has been observed.

Arming the children

Military assistance to rebel forces

Rebel forces in Sierra Leone have received and continue to receive significant military assistance, including arms and ammunition, despite a UN embargo on the provision of such assistance. UN Security Council Resolution 1132 (1997) of 8 October 1997 imposed an arms embargo on Sierra Leone following the military coup of 25 May 1997 which brought the AFRC to power. After the government of President Kabbah was restored to power in March 1998, UN Security Council Resolution 1171 (1998) of 5 June 1998 lifted the arms embargo on the government of Sierra Leone but prohibited the sale and supply of arms and related *matériel* to non-governmental forces in Sierra Leone.

In view of the appalling level of human rights abuses against civilians perpetrated by rebel forces, military assistance to rebel forces can be assumed to have contributed, and to continue to contribute, to continuing violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Among these violations are the recruitment and use of child combatants. Arms and ammunition reaching rebel forces inevitably fall into the hands of the children abducted and forcibly recruited by rebel forces. Traffic in small arms and light weapons clearly facilitates and encourages the use of child combatants. Amnesty International is calling for the cessation of all military assistance to rebel forces in Sierra Leone, including the provision of arms, ammunition, combatants and training.

The government of Liberia has been consistently cited as violating the embargo on military assistance to rebel forces in Sierra Leone. Following a visit to Sierra Leone and Liberia in December 1998 the Chairman of the UN Security Council sanctions committee on Sierra Leone said that arms and ammunition were crossing into Sierra Leone from neighbouring countries, including Liberia, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1171 (1998).⁶ At the time of the rebel incursion into Freetown in January 1999, the governments of both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) unambiguously accused the government of Liberia of supporting rebel forces. Burkina Faso has also been reported to have acted as a transit route for military assistance to rebel forces in Sierra Leone. Some of this assistance has originated from countries in the former Soviet bloc and has been facilitated by the activities of international arms brokers and shipping agents, some of them based in Europe.

In April 1999 the commander of ECOMOG in Sierra Leone accused Liberia and Burkina Faso of transferring arms to rebel forces. He asserted that a Ukrainian-registered cargo plane had delivered arms and ammunition to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, for on-

⁶S/1998/1236, Report of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to Resolution 1132 (1997) concerning Sierra Leone, 31 December 1998.

shipment to RUF forces through Liberia.⁷ A Gibraltar-based company was reported to have organized the arms shipment to Burkina Faso, using a UK-based air company.

These accusations against Liberia and Burkina Faso have continued and intensified, especially as the international community has focused increasing attention on the role of the illicit trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone in financing the provision of military assistance to rebel forces.⁸

On 5 July 2000 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1306 (2000) which imposed an embargo on all diamond exports from Sierra Leone for 18 months until the government of Sierra Leone can establish a proper certification system for diamonds and regain full access to those areas of the country - notably in Eastern Province and in particular Kono District and Tongo Field - where RUF forces remain in control. Liberia was specifically referred to as a transit route for diamonds from rebel-held areas; the Security Council expressed its concern “*at the role played by the illicit trade in diamonds in fuelling the conflict in Sierra Leone, and at reports that such diamonds transit neighbouring countries, including the territory of Liberia*”. The resolution decided that “*all States shall take the necessary measures to prohibit the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone to their territory*”.

The international diamond industry has meanwhile responded to growing international pressure. The International Diamond Manufacturers’ Association and the World Federation of Diamond Bourses, meeting in Antwerp, Belgium, from 17 to 19 July 2000, agreed that they will not trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone. The industry has sought further legal action from governments, such as import control and certification systems.

In line with the provisions of Resolution 1306 (2000), on 31 July and 1 August 2000 the UN Security Council sanctions committee on Sierra Leone held a public meeting, which included representatives of the international diamond trade, governments and non-governmental organizations, to debate the role of the illicit trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas in procuring military assistance for rebel forces.

⁷For further information, see *Neglected Arms Embargo on Sierra Leone Rebels*, published by Human Rights Watch on 15 May 2000.

⁸For further information on Amnesty International’s position on military assistance to rebel forces and the trade in diamonds, see *Sierra Leone: Cutting the link between diamonds and human rights abuses “forever”* (AI Index: AFR 51/56/00) 14 July 2000, *Sierra Leone: Amnesty International calls for fast and effective action on diamonds* (AI Index: AFR 51/54/00), 30 June 2000, and *Sierra Leone: Cutting the link between diamonds and guns* (AI Index: AFR 51/27/00), 31 May 2000.

Further allegations were levelled against Liberia and Burkina Faso, notably by representatives of the UK and USA governments. Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock of the UK said that: *“a variety of reliable sources show that President [Charles] Taylor [of Liberia] is orchestrating the activities of the RUF. He is giving direct military support, encouraging attacks against UNAMSIL and Sierra Leone government forces, providing strategic direction, influencing decisions on leadership and on command and control. Moreover, he is using the RUF to retain control of Sierra Leone’s diamonds reserves.”* Ambassador Richard Holbrooke of the USA said that: *“there was reason to believe that RUF leaders and the President of Liberia have taken increasingly large commissions for each of themselves, and particularly for Liberian President Taylor for his services as a facilitator of diamond sales and related arms transfers”* and added that the government of Burkina Faso was also involved providing arms to the RUF.

The governments of both Liberia and Burkina Faso vigorously denied these allegations and called on the international community to conduct independent investigations in their countries in order to substantiate these claims.

The UN Security Council sanctions committee on Sierra Leone established a panel of five experts to continue to investigate the link between the diamond trade and the conflict in Sierra Leone, including the alleged implication of the governments of Liberia and Burkina Faso. The panel of experts is expected to report on its findings by the end of October 2000.

In Resolution 1314 (2000) on children and armed conflict, the UN Security Council expressed its grave concern at: *“the linkages between the illicit trade in natural resources and armed conflict, as well as the linkages between illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons and armed conflict, which can prolong armed conflict and intensify its impact on children, and, in this regard, expresses its intention to consider taking appropriate steps, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.”*

Military assistance to government forces

Since May 2000 combatants below the age of 18 have continued to be recruited by the Sierra Leone Army and other government-allied forces, including the AFRC and the CDF.

While recognizing the responsibility of the Sierra Leone government to maintain security and protect its population and territory, Amnesty International opposes the provision of assistance to armed forces where it can be reasonably assumed to contribute to the recruitment of children under the age of 18 by the armed forces or other armed groups and their participation in hostilities. Effective mechanisms need to be put in place to monitor the distribution and use of arms and ammunition provided by other countries to the Sierra Leone Army and other forces fighting on behalf of the Sierra Leone government in order to ensure that they do not reach combatants under the age of 18. Continuing military assistance to

government forces should be conditional on guarantees being provided that such assistance does not facilitate the recruitment and use of child combatants, or contribute to other human rights violations. If evidence is found that military assistance from other countries facilitates the recruitment and use of child combatants, the international community has a responsibility to ensure that such assistance is suspended.

The UK government has provided substantial assistance to the government of Sierra Leone for training and equipping the new Sierra Leone Army. As a condition for proceeding with training and equipping the Sierra Leone Army, the UK government sought and obtained assurances from President Kabbah in March 1999 that children under the age of 18 would not be used by the Sierra Leone Army or the CDF and that equipment supplied would be used in accordance with international human rights and humanitarian law.

The UK leads what will become a 90-strong military training team composed of military personnel from several other countries. Some 200 UK military personnel are providing a two-month training for recruits for the new Sierra Leone Army; a first contingent of 1,000 recruits completed their training in July 2000 and a further contingent of 1,000 is now being trained. All have been over 18. In addition, the UK continues to provide arms and ammunition to the Sierra Leone Army.

On 23 May 2000 the UK Ministry of Defence announced that it would be transferring 10,000 self-loading rifles to the Sierra Leone Army to assist in military operations against the RUF. UK government officials stressed at the time that the program to train and equip the Sierra Leone Army would be carried out under strict supervision. It sought to allay fears that arms supplied by the UK government would fall into the hands of children. These fears were fuelled by a photograph published by a UK newspaper of a 14-year-old boy, alleged to be fighting with government-allied forces, with a weapon previously supplied by the UK government. A spokesperson for the UK government said on 24 May 2000 that: "*We have instructed the [(UK) High Commissioner in Sierra Leone to remind the President of his undertaking last year that UK-supplied weapons would be used only by regular soldiers and in accordance with international law.*" During a visit to Sierra Leone in early June 2000 UK Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, obtained clear and public commitments from the leaders of government-allied force that they would not use child soldiers and that any remaining in their ranks would be disarmed and demobilized.

Further assurances were provided by the UK Secretary of State for Defence, Geoffrey Hoon, following an announcement that further military assistance, including ammunition, was to be transferred to the Sierra Leone Army. He was reported to have said on 12 July 2000 that: "*the ammunition is being provided subject to further reassurances that it will be used only by regular soldiers, in accordance with humanitarian law and human rights standards, and not by child soldiers.*"

A violation of children's rights and a war crime

The recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 as combatants is prohibited by both international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

Invariably, the use of children as combatants violates the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, ratified by Sierra Leone on 18 June 1990, for example by depriving them of a family environment, education and basic health care.

On 13 January 2000 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child considered Sierra Leone's initial report on its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and adopted its concluding observations on 28 January 2000.⁹ The Committee expressed "*its deep consternation at the very high numbers of children who have been forcibly recruited into armed forces, including children at least as young as five years old, and who have been forced to commit atrocities against other people, including other children and members of their community*". The Committee added that it was "*deeply saddened by direct effects of the armed conflict on all child victims, including child combatants, and is concerned with the tragic loss of life and severe psychological trauma inflicted upon them*".

Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

1. *States Parties undertake to respect and ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child.*
2. *States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities.*
3. *States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of 18 years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.*

⁹Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: Sierra Leone, CRC/C/15/Add.116.

4. *In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.*

Amnesty International believes that voluntary or compulsory recruitment and participation in hostilities, whether on the part of governments or armed opposition groups, ultimately jeopardize the mental and physical integrity of anyone below the age of 18. For this reason, Amnesty International actively opposes the voluntary or compulsory recruitment, as well as participation in hostilities, of children below 18 by governments or armed opposition groups.

In line with the general age of majority set in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Amnesty International and five other international non-governmental organizations have been calling for the age of military recruitment - be it voluntary or compulsory - as well as deployment in hostilities to be raised to 18.¹⁰

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict states:	
Article 1	<i>States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities.</i>
Article 2	<i>States Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces.</i>
Article 4(1)	<i>Armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of 18 years.</i>
(2)	<i>States Parties shall take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices.</i>
(3)	<i>The application of the present article under this Protocol shall not affect the legal status of any party to an armed conflict.</i>

¹⁰Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation *Terre des Hommes*, the International Save the Children Alliance, the Jesuit Refugee Service and the Quaker UN Office (Geneva) launched the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in June 1998. For further information, see *Stop Using Child Soldiers!*, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, second edition published by Rädä Barnen on behalf of the International Save the Children Alliance in November 1998.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 May 2000 and is now open for signature and ratification. The Optional Protocol raises the age for participation in hostilities, for both the armed forces and armed groups, from 15 to 18. Eight countries have so far signed the Optional Protocol; only one, Canada, has ratified it. UN Security Council 1314 (2000) on children and armed conflict urged member states to ratify the Optional Protocol.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which entered into force on 29 November 1999, is the only regional instrument which specifically prohibits the recruitment and use as combatants of children under 18 in both international and internal armed conflicts. Article 22 (2) requires States Parties to “*take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular from recruiting any child*”. Sierra Leone has signed but not yet ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

International humanitarian law - the laws of war - also prohibits the recruitment of children under 15 into the armed forces of governments and armed opposition groups as well as their participation in hostilities.¹¹

Article 4 (3)(c) of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions states that:

Children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities.

Francis, now aged 16 and at the interim care centre in Lungi, was abducted by rebel forces in 1998. He told Amnesty International on 15 July 2000: “*As far as the Geneva Conventions are concerned, we should not fight. They have violated our rights. Even the government troops, they some time ago made a mistake of killing the children because the rebels use children.*”

Many of the children who have been abducted and forcibly recruited have also been victims of deliberate and arbitrary killing, beatings and other forms of torture or ill-treatment. Girls have been raped and forced into sexual slavery. These abuses constitute the most serious violations of international humanitarian law. Article 3, common to all four Geneva Conventions, extends to “*armed conflict not of an international character*” (internal armed conflict) fundamental rules for the protection of those taking no active part in hostilities which each party

¹¹Sierra Leone acceded to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 on 10 June 1965. On 21 October 1986 it acceded to both Additional Protocol I of 8 June 1977 relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, and Additional Protocol II of 8 June 1977 relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.

to the conflict is *"bound to apply, as a minimum"*. Under the terms of common Article 3, people who take no active part or who have ceased to take an active part in hostilities must be treated humanely in all circumstances. Common Article 3 specifically prohibits: *"violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; taking of hostages; outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment."* This prohibition is binding not only on government forces but on all parties to internal armed conflicts, including armed political groups.



Former child combatants playing volleyball at the interim care centre at Lungi, July 2000
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Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions relating to the protection of victims of internal armed conflicts, which develops and supplements common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, requires all parties to the conflict to treat humanely every person affected by the conflict. Article 4 of Additional Protocol II prohibits: *"violence to the life, health and physical or mental well-being of persons, in particular murder as well as cruel treatment such as torture, mutilation or any form of corporal punishment"* of all those not taking a direct part in hostilities or who have ceased to take part in hostilities.

In Resolution 1314 (2000) on children and armed conflict the UN Security Council urged: *"all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of children in armed conflict, in particular the Geneva Conventions of 1949"*

and the obligations applicable to them under the Additional Protocols thereto of 1977, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and the Optional Protocol thereto of 25 May 2000, and to bear in mind the relevant provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.”

Bringing to justice those who recruit and deploy children as combatants

Although the recruitment of children is unlawful in many countries, prosecution is rare. The majority of the world's nations finalized in July 1998 the Statute of a permanent International Criminal Court which will have jurisdiction to prosecute those charged with war crimes, genocide, aggression and crimes against humanity. Included in the list of war crimes is “*conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years into national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities*” and, in the case of an internal armed conflict, “*conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities*”. The International Criminal Court will be formally established once 60 states have ratified the Statute, thereby giving the court jurisdiction over these provisions. Sierra Leone signed the Statute on 17 October 1998 and intends to ratify it shortly.

On 12 February 1999, Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, stated at a UN Security Council Open Briefing on the Protection of Civilians that: “*over 300,000 children, girls as well as boys, have participated as combatants in the 30 most recent conflicts. Many are recruited - others are abducted. Some join simply to survive. And many of these children, some less than 10 years old, have witnessed or taken part in acts of unspeakable violence, often against their own families or communities... Children's recruitment as members of the armed forces, their rape and slaughter, and the targeting of their schools and hospitals are recognized by the International Criminal Court statute for what they are: heinous atrocities.*”

The UN Security Council, in Resolution 1261 (1999) of 25 August 1999 on children and armed conflict, called on all parties concerned to comply strictly with their obligations under international law, in particular the Geneva Conventions, the Additional Protocols, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and stressed “*the responsibility of all States to bring an end to impunity and their obligation to prosecute those responsible for grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*”.

This was reiterated by the UN Security Council in Resolution 1314 (2000) in which it emphasized the responsibility of all States: “*to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and, in this regard, stresses the need to exclude these, where feasible, from amnesty provisions and relevant legislation.*” In a statement issued on 11 August 2000 when the resolution was adopted,

UNICEF said that it: “*underlines the urgent need for an end to impunity for those who commit crimes against children.*”

Although the use of child combatants under 15 violates both international human rights and humanitarian law, no one in Sierra Leone has yet been brought to justice for these crimes. The peace agreement signed in July 1999 provided an amnesty for all activities undertaken in pursuit of the conflict, including human rights abuses, even when amounting to crimes against humanity or war crimes. The UN at the time added a disclaimer to the agreement that the amnesty would not apply to international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law. Although the amnesty did not apply to crimes committed after 7 July 1999, human rights abuses against civilians, including deliberate and arbitrary killings, mutilation, rape, abduction and forcible recruitment continued to be committed with impunity.

By June 2000, with the lack of implementation of key provisions of the peace agreement, the resumption of hostilities and the arrest of the leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh, and other leading members of the RUF, initiatives by the authorities began to address the issue of impunity. On 12 June 2000 the government wrote a letter to the UN Secretary-General requesting assistance from the UN in establishing a special court to try Foday Sankoh and other senior members of the RUF for “*crimes against the people of Sierra Leone and for the taking of UN peace-keepers as hostages*”.

On 14 August 2000 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1315 (2000) on the creation of an independent special court. Amnesty International has urged that the special court try all those alleged to be responsible for crimes under international law, including crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law, as well as certain grave crimes under national law, throughout the period since the conflict began in 1991. This would include the forcible recruitment and deployment of children under 15. Although forces of the RUF have been responsible for systematic and widespread abuses throughout the conflict, those of the AFRC, the Sierra Leone Army and the CDF have also been responsible for gross human rights abuses, including violations of international humanitarian law. Those allegedly responsible for these crimes, whether they be members of the RUF, the AFRC, the Sierra Leone Army and regardless of their current political position or allegiance, must be brought to justice.¹²

Child combatants themselves will not be brought to trial before the International Criminal Court, as the Statute bars it from exercising jurisdiction over any person who was

¹²For further information on Amnesty International’s recommendations for ending impunity in Sierra Leone, see *Sierra Leone: The United Nations Security Council should strengthen the independent special court to prosecute perpetrators of human rights abuses* (AI Index: AFR 51/66/00), 4 August 2000, and *Sierra Leone: Ending impunity - an opportunity not to be missed* (AI Index: AFR 51/60/00), 26 July 2000.

under 18 at the time that the crime was committed. Child combatants in Sierra Leone have been responsible for gross human rights abuses; many of the worst atrocities have been carried out by children who were abducted and subjected to horrifying acts of violence. In a situation where crimes have been committed by children terrorized and brutalized into submission, complex questions about their criminal responsibility are raised.

While recognizing the need for justice and accountability, former child combatants must be treated in accordance with the principles of juvenile justice, which place the best interest of the child as a priority, recognize the special factors and needs of childhood, and place an emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration rather than punishment. In conformity with the provisions of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child must be in accordance with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Any child who is detained should be held separately from adults.

The Sierra Leone government's responsibility to end the use of child soldiers

The government of Sierra Leone has made repeated commitments to demobilize all combatants under the age of 18, to raise the legal age of military recruitment to 18 and to fulfil its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Considering Sierra Leone's initial report in January 2000, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its deep concern about the massive participation of children associated with fighting forces in Sierra Leone, either as combatants or in other roles. The Committee also noted that there is no minimum age defined by national legislation for voluntary recruitment, when the consent of a specified adult party is given. The Committee welcomed the government's intention to pass legislation raising the minimum age of recruitment to 18 and urged the government to move quickly towards passing this legislation and to ensure that the new legislation was enforced.

On 24 May 2000, following reports that children were either fighting with government-allied forces or were being allowed to remain in front-line positions, the government issued a statement reiterating its position on the recruitment of child soldiers (see appendix A).

The government stated that this practice was "*totally against government policy which stipulates that 18 years is the minimum age for bearing arms in Sierra Leone*". The statement continued: "*The Acting Chief of Defence Staff has been instructed to ensure that all those below the age of 18 currently involved in fighting on the side of the government should be immediately withdrawn, demobilized and handed over to competent institutions for rehabilitation. Henceforth, any commander who allows a child below 18 years to carry*

arms within his area of operations or allows children to remain in areas of active conflict will face severe disciplinary action.” It is not clear, however, what measures have been taken to implement these commitments.

On the same day Johnny Paul Koroma, leader of the AFRC, issued statements on behalf of the AFRC and the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace which he heads. In these statements Johnny Paul Koroma “*warned all warring factions to desist from recruiting child soldiers*” and stated his strong opposition to the recruitment of child soldiers by both government-allied forces and rebel forces.

On 22 March 2000 CARITAS-Makeni launched a campaign to end the use of child combatants. Secondary school children marched through the centre of Freetown and speakers representing the government, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations called publicly for an end to the use of child combatants.

A Declaration of Commitment to the Release of Child Combatants and Child Abductees by the Various Factions was drafted as part of the campaign and signed by Chief Hinga Norman, Deputy Minister of Defence and National Coordinator of the CDF, Johnny Paul Koroma, leader of the AFRC and Chairman of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, and Colonel Tom Carew, acting Chief of Defence Staff. RUF leader Foday Sankoh declined to sign the declaration (see appendix B). The declaration made the following commitments:

Article 1 The parties hereto shall forthwith facilitate the disarmament of all child combatants, that is to say, children under the age of 18 years and bearing arms and shall take immediate steps to prevent the use of child combatants in any manner whatsoever.



Poster for CARITAS-Makeni's campaign against the use of child soldiers © Amnesty International

- Article 2* *The parties hereto shall in tandem with the actions contemplated in Article 1 above, release, free and cause to be released, all children and other persons abducted both during the conflict and after the signing of the Lomé peace accord.*
- Article 3* *The parties shall in utmost good faith facilitate the return and/or handing over of child combatants and abductees to UNAMSIL, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration camps and other humanitarian agencies by 15 May 2000 (the International Day of the Family), to enable them to receive care and attention and ultimately to be reunited with their families and relatives.*
- Article 4* *The parties in this regard undertake to cooperate with UNAMSIL, all agencies concerned with the welfare of children and the war affected and shall assiduously work towards the attainment of goals enumerated in the Declaration.*



Demonstration by schoolchildren to launch CARITAS-Makeni's campaign against the use of child soldiers in Freetown, 22 March 2000 © Amnesty International

Following the signing of the peace agreement in July 1999 Foday Sankoh became the Chairman of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development, and assumed the protocol rank of Vice-President. Other RUF members also became part of the government by being appointed to ministerial and deputy ministerial positions. The RUF therefore became obliged not only to implement the provisions of the peace agreement which it had signed, but also to implement the government's commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article XXI of the peace agreement stated specifically that all prisoners of war and non-combatants should be released immediately and unconditionally by both parties. This would include the thousands of civilians, including children, who had been abducted by rebel forces. Article XXX of the peace agreement stated that the government of Sierra Leone should give particular attention to the issue of child combatants and should mobilize resources, both within Sierra Leone and from the international community, to address the special needs of former child combatants in the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Foday Sankoh frequently denied that the RUF had abducted children. In a meeting with Amnesty International representatives on 25 March 2000 he said that the RUF had not abducted any children but had “rescued” them and was not holding any children captive. He was arrested on 17 May 2000, after more than 20 civilians were shot and killed by his forces during a demonstration outside his house in Freetown on 12 May 2000, and remains in detention. Other prominent members of the RUF are also detained. They are expected to be charged with a number of offences, including crimes amounting to violations of international humanitarian law.

In late April 2000, just before the resumption of hostilities, the government of Sierra Leone agreed to establish a National Commission for War-Affected Children in order to ensure that children’s concerns are addressed at the highest political levels. This agreement was reached during a visit to Freetown on 29 and 30 April 2000 of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, and the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy.

Moves by the international community to end the use of child soldiers

The plight of children in Sierra Leone has been highlighted repeatedly by the international community and commitments have been made to assist the children whose lives have been blighted by nine years of conflict. In the Eighth Report of the UN Secretary-General on the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (then known as UNOMSIL) of 23 September 1999, the Secretary-General stated that “*the plight of children is among the most pressing challenges currently facing Sierra Leone*”.¹³

On 25 August 1999 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1261 (1999) on children and armed conflict. The Security Council urged States and all relevant parts of the UN: “*to intensify their efforts to ensure an end to the recruitment and use of children in*

¹³Eighth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone, S/1999/1003.

armed conflict in violation of international law through political and other efforts, including promotion of the availability of alternatives for children to their participation in armed conflict”; and also “to facilitate the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of children used as soldiers in violation of international law.”

At a debate on children and armed conflict at the UN Security Council on 26 July 2000, Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, said that many of the values, principles and concrete commitments enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child remained unfulfilled, as did those of Resolution 1261 (1999). The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, said that the use of child combatants must be curbed by mobilizing political pressure, addressing the economic, social and political factors leading to the use of child combatants and increasing capacity on the ground for receiving and rehabilitating child combatants.¹⁴ Commenting on UN Security Council 1314 (2000) on children and armed conflict which was passed on 11 August 2000, UNICEF said that: *“The council has reminded the world that it is both immoral and illegal to make children the victims and protagonists of war... It has helped to maintain awareness of the unacceptability of turning children into soldiers, of forcing millions of children and women to flee their homes, and of subjecting children to forced labour, sexual abuse and the pressure to commit atrocities.”*

Olara Otunnu has visited Sierra Leone on several occasions, most recently in April 2000, and has made recommendations for a special program for assisting children affected by the conflict. Following a visit in late August and early September 1999, he formulated a 15-point agenda for action for children affected by the conflict, which included recommendations in respect of: ending the recruitment and use of child combatants; access to and release of abducted children; demobilization of child combatants; and the establishment of a National Commission for Children in Sierra Leone.

UNAMSIL, whose current full strength is 13,000, but which is expected to be increased to 16,500 peace-keeping troops, was deployed to assist with the implementation of the peace agreement, including the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants. UN Security Council Resolution 1313 (2000) of 4 August 2000 extended UNAMSIL’s mandate until 8 September 2000 and requested the UN Secretary-General to make recommendations for the restructuring and strengthening of UNAMSIL.

The process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration was first hampered by the failure of large numbers of combatants to disarm and demobilize and then halted by the resumption of hostilities in May 2000. The human rights section of UNAMSIL is providing training in human rights, including children’s rights, and international humanitarian law for peace-keeping troops. Since the peace-keeping force comprises troops from several countries

¹⁴SC/6985, Security Council holds debate on children and armed conflict, 26 July 2000.

with different training and experience, it is essential to ensure that adequate time and resources are devoted to comprehensive human rights training, including in children's rights. A child protection adviser was appointed to UNAMSIL in February 2000 and the UNAMSIL human rights section includes human rights officers with specific responsibilities for children's rights.

Resolution 1261 (1999) of 25 August 1999 on children and armed conflict specifically requested the UN Secretary-General to ensure that: "*personnel involved in United Nations peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace-building activities have appropriate training on the protection, rights and welfare of children.*" It urged States and relevant international and regional organizations to ensure that appropriate training was included in their program for personnel involved in similar activities.

At the end of the African Conference on the use of Children as Soldiers, held in Maputo, Mozambique, from 19-22 April 1999, participants adopted a declaration against the use of children as combatants. The Declaration calls on all African states to end the recruitment of all children under 18 into the armed forces. The Declaration also condemned the use of children by armed opposition groups and called upon these groups to end the recruitment of children and to demobilize or release into safety children already being used as combatants.

On 27 and 28 April 2000 a West African ministerial conference on war-affected children was held in Accra, Ghana, sponsored and co-hosted by the governments of Ghana and Canada. It brought together ECOWAS foreign ministers, as well as civil society organizations, donor governments, UN representatives, including Olara Otunnu, and children affected by conflict in the region. The primary objective of the event was to mobilize concrete action for child protection in a region whose children have been acutely affected by armed conflict. The conference focused on practical ways to implement and support international instruments of child protection, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

At the end of the conference the delegates adopted and signed a West African Declaration on War-Affected Children which is expected to lead to commitments to: implementation of existing international, regional and local norms; ratification of the Statute of the International Criminal Court; incorporation of child rights and civilian protection into military training; and implementation or early warning/response systems to prevent armed conflict. At the conclusion of the conference, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs said: "*The protection of children affected by war and the promotion of their well-being is a moral, political, social and economic imperative.*" The outcome of the conference will be discussed and developed at an International Conference on War-Affected Children to take place in Winnipeg, Canada, in September 2000.

While some countries have made commitments towards providing assistance to children affected by the conflict and others have made significant contributions towards the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, the attention of the international community should continue to focus on the needs of former child combatants, both on securing their disarmament and demobilization and also providing the assistance they need to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into their families and communities. All these initiatives will require sustained commitment and resources from the international community.

Amnesty International's recommendations



Drawing by a former child combatant at the interim care centre at Lungi © Amnesty International

Amnesty International is urging that the Sierra Leone government, the leaders of the RUF and the international community implement swiftly and effectively the following recommendations in order to end the recruitment and use of child combatants in Sierra Leone and to meet the particular needs of former child combatants.

Recommendations to the Sierra Leone government, including the Chief of Defence Staff, the Deputy Minister of Defence and the leader of the AFRC:

- the highest priority should be given to the immediate disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child combatants;
- prompt and effective measures should be taken by the government

to ensure that no child under the age of 18 is recruited for military service, including by passing legislation raising the minimum age for military recruitment to 18;

- the Chief of Defence Staff should ensure that there is effective chain of command over all forces fighting on behalf of the government to ensure the immediate demobilization and disarmament of child combatants currently serving in these forces and to ensure that no child under the age of 18 is recruited or used in the future;
- the leader of the AFRC should give immediate effect to his condemnation of the recruitment and use as combatants of children under the age of 18 by instructing AFRC forces to release all children, both those used as child combatants or in any way associated with AFRC forces;
- the Deputy Minister of Defence and National Coordinator of the CDF should immediately and unequivocally denounce the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 by the CDF and instruct all CDF leaders to immediately demobilize and disarm all child combatants serving with the CDF and to cease any further recruitment;
- the government of Sierra Leone should take steps to implement the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, including by identifying priorities relating to child combatants and defining strategies to implement those priorities;
- the government should ratify without delay the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the Statute of the International Criminal Court;
- the government should take effective measures to end impunity and prosecute those responsible for crimes under international law including violations of international humanitarian law, such as the abduction and forcible recruitment of children under the age of 15.

Recommendations to the leaders of the RUF:

- leaders of the RUF should immediately and publicly condemn and prohibit the recruitment and use of child combatants and RUF forces should immediately cease forcible or voluntary recruitment and use of children under the age of 18;

- RUF forces should be instructed to release immediately all children either used as combatants or in any way associated with fighting forces;
- leaders of the RUF should make a public commitment to observing international humanitarian law, in particular Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions of 1949;
- RUF forces should be instructed to end deliberate and arbitrary killings, rape, sexual abuse and other forms of torture or ill-treatment of all captured civilians, including children;
- RUF forces should also allow immediate, full and unhindered access by child protection agencies and UNAMSIL personnel supervising the disarmament and demobilization program to children who continue to be held;
- RUF forces should allow immediate, full and unhindered access by humanitarian agencies, both national and international, to all civilians, including children, who continue to be held, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Recommendations to the international community:

- the international community should repeat its condemnation of the continuing recruitment and use of children as combatants in Sierra Leone which constitute a crime under international law and a violation of both international human rights and international humanitarian law;
- the highest priority should be given to implementing commitments made to end the use and recruitment of child combatants, including by taking concrete measures to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1314 (2000) of 11 August 2000;
- in all efforts to resolve the political and security crisis in Sierra Leone, including any reconsideration or renegotiation of the peace agreement signed in Lomé, Togo, on 7 July 1999, the needs of children affected by the internal armed conflict, including child combatants, should be given the highest priority;
- all governments should take all possible measures to end military transfers, including arms, ammunition, combatants and training, to rebel forces in Sierra Leone and enact legislation to prevent the trade in diamonds from rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone from facilitating the provision of military assistance to rebel forces;
- those governments which are providing military assistance, including training, arms and ammunition, to the Sierra Leone Army and other forces fighting on behalf of the government should first ensure that stringent safeguards are in place to ensure that this assistance does not facilitate or encourage violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the recruitment and use of child combatants; these safeguards should also include effective mechanisms to ensure that arms do not reach combatants under the age of 18; if evidence is found that such assistance facilitates the recruitment and use of child combatants, such assistance should be suspended;
- the international community should provide full and sustained support and assistance to relevant UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, both national and international, in order to strengthen initiatives for child protection, prevent further recruitment and use as combatants of children under the age of 18 and assist the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former child combatants, including by addressing their social, psychological and material needs;
- the child protection adviser and human rights section of UNAMSIL must be given full political support and adequate resources in order to undertake their work in relation to child protection;
- the UN should ensure that all troops participating in the UNAMSIL peace-keeping force are fully trained in international human rights and humanitarian law, including

children's rights, and that they have training in addressing the specific needs of child combatants;

- the international community should ensure that those responsible for grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the abduction and forcible recruitment of children, should be brought to justice; this should include provision of the necessary expertise and practical assistance for the independent special court to be established under UN Security Council Resolution 1315 (2000) of 14 August 2000.

