



## Child Soldiers

Major John McLearn

When a military member is confronted by a child combatant brandishing a firearm several things can happen. First, the dissonance of the unexpected may cause the soldier to delay responding to the threat which the child soldier presents. Second, the child soldier may be indoctrinated to engage the soldier immediately. And third, the soldier may simply be unable to shoot a child in self-defence, leaving him open to lethal consequences.

Furthermore, the presence of children in a zone of operations, whether they are used as combatants, combat support, or in any other capacity, places an additional burden on members of peace-making or peace enforcement forces. They are to ensure the children receive care and treatment that is appropriate and recognizes the profound psychological and physical traumas they may have received at the hands of their overlords.

"The internationally agreed definition for a child associated with an armed force or armed group (child soldier) is any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity. This includes, but is not limited to, children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or sexual partners. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities." (*Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, 2007.)

If the world were a saner place, the term child soldier would be an oxymoron, in the same way one jokes about the term military intelligence. Unfortunately in Africa, the Middle East, the Far East and more recently in the Ukraine, the phenomenon of child soldiers is all too real. Many insurgent movements could not exist without a steady supply of "inexpensive and disposable" children to broaden their ranks of fighters and supporters. In every single one of this author's seven overseas tours, some use of children either as fighters or in indirect support of various insurgent or nationalist groups was seen.

The motivations towards using children by these groups vary. Some were relatively benign and actually took care of the children as there was no one else. Others, especially as described in both of Lieutenant-General Dallaire's books, are brutally kidnapped, recruited, psychologically destroyed and abused, forced to fight or provide support to fighters. Dallaire describes the children as a weapons system.

The use of child soldiers is pervasive. Most recently, Russian separatists actually bragged about having a fifteen and a seventeen year old in their ranks as combatants, noting their enthusiasm for the cause. The separatists also announced that

they visited schools to encourage the young to participate through their "patriotic talks."

The link is to a BBC article describing the child soldiers in eastern Ukraine is at:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30134421>.

Dallaire's own experiences in Rwanda and his more recent book "They Fought Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children" also provide horrific examples of the use of child soldiers.

In late November 2014, as part of a Canadian Army exercise held in the Atlantic region, Canadian soldiers were asked questions regarding children, including child soldiers, in a specific operational scenario based on war fighting. Participating soldiers had no specific briefings or training regarding the treatment of child soldiers. Their answers were, generally, right, in that, fundamentally, the soldiers knew any child had to be treated differently. The issue is that the soldiers had to develop solutions to the issues themselves, based on their existing training in ethics, the law of armed conflict, and treatment of prisoners of war. There was nothing specifically about children.

Below is a summary of the answers - they are anecdotal and require further study:

The minimum standard for all would be as "Prisoner of War" although it was clear from the beginning that this was clearly a minimum and not the answer for children in all circumstances;

Combatants actively engaged in combat would be subject to the rules of engagement no matter what their age;

Injured combatants are treated according to their medical requirements. However, a child combatant would be separated from adult detainees and subjected to standing agreements with the host nation authorities. The bottom line is that medical attention would be available and relevant non-government organizations would become engaged.

Captured child combatants would be disarmed and separated from other combatants. Everyone agreed however that more detail (involvement of a non-government organization such as the International

Committee of the Red Cross as an example) would be required to provide a better answer,;

Child combat supporters would be dealt with similarly if found. Again, participants received insufficient detail to lead to more specific answers;

Children who are recognized as internally displaced persons would remain with family groups when possible. Otherwise, they would be separated and information provided to the host nation child welfare authorities and suitable child welfare non-government organizations.

Canadian Armed Forces personnel may have to confront this issue daily on operations. There is a specific need to develop a working understanding on how child soldiers are dealt with by Canadian personnel.

The Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative is based in Halifax and is hosted at Dalhousie University. The team is already training foreign armies in dealing with this issue. They are looking for Canadian input and ideas. The Initiative's aim is to eliminate the use of child soldiers by way of creating conditions for the creation of a new international convention regarding this issue that would make child soldiering illegal. This is a fight that is well worth the effort.

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*This Position Paper was prepared for the Royal United Services Institute's Security Affairs Committee.*

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