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REGIONAL CHILD WARRIORS IN WEST AFRICA

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A widespread and deplorable development in recent years is an increase in the practice of using young children as soldiers. There are as many as 300 000 children under the age of 18 presently serving as combatants around the globe; representing 10% of all global combatants.¹ They are recruited by national armies, terrorist organisations and rebel groups.

In West Africa, thousands of children have been involved in conflicts in the last 15 years. The wanton acts of violence that characterised these conflicts include summary executions of innocent civilians, forceful amputations of the limbs of ordinary citizens, rape of women and children, destruction of property with reckless abandon, cutting open the bellies of pregnant women just to see what sex the child is, and other atrocities that are too horrific to mention. Sadly, the perpetrators of these violent acts included

child combatants, who have acquired a reputation among commanders for unquestionable obedience – and a reputation among civilians for extreme cruelty. Empowered by Kalashnikov (AK-47) rifles and often high on marijuana or crack cocaine, they were enabled to serve as combatants both in their own countries and neighbouring countries.

Since the late 1980s, the armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire have reverberated across each country's porous borders. Roving back and forth from one conflict to another across these borders is a migrant population of young fighters – regional warriors – who view war mainly as

Above: Child combatants have a reputation for unquestionable obedience and extreme cruelty.

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an economic opportunity.² Drifting in and out of wars and operating as they wish, it is rightly agreed that they are the most dangerous tool that any government or rebel army can have.

In West Africa, the military ‘careers’ of these regional warriors often began as children, when they are abducted and forcibly recruited to fight with an armed group in their own country. Once recruited, these children undergo varying degrees of indoctrination, and are shoved into a world of brutality, physical hardship, forced labour and drug abuse – ‘socialising’ them into violence. Subsequently, they emerge as perpetrators, willing to commit heinous atrocities on the civilian population.

Later, after the conflict ends, as veteran fighters struggling for support and a means of livelihood within the war-shattered economy at home, and unable to cope with the shortcomings of post-conflict programmes, they are lured by recruiters back to the frontlines – this time to a neighbour’s war – and subsequently drawn into regional conflicts.

The following is a story of a child combatant, who was recruited when he was about 18 years old.³

“I was living with my mother, a petty trader in Kailahun, the eastern part of Sierra Leone. One morning, after my mother had gone to the market to sell her wares and most of the other grown-ups

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Regional child warriors are a migrant population of young fighters who rove back and forth from one conflict to another in order to improve their economic circumstances and life situations.



Child soldiers are empowered by weapons, which they are able to operate with terrifying skill, particularly when under the influence of narcotics.

had gone to the farm or to the market, I was in our compound playing with other children, when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels attacked their village and came to our compound. Dragged by my feet from under the bed, I was thrown in the middle of the compound, joining a group of six other boys about the same age. We were eventually taken to the rebels' base camp, where initially I served as a house help to my commanders' wives. Later, I was trained and drafted into the Small Boys Unit (SBU), where I rose to the rank of a deputy commander.

"Our unit mainly comprises of child combatants between the ages of eight and 15, who were similarly abducted during raids in villages, towns and different communities. One of our main areas of assignment was to lay ambush, as traders ply the route with their wares. This was crucial to armed groups, as it provided us with food, medicines and sometimes manpower. Our orders were to collect the foodstuff and medicines, get just enough

manpower to tote the goods to the base, kill and burn the rest. We also carried such raids in villages and towns, carrying out the same order.

"After four years as a combatant, the peace agreement was signed in my country, and after disarmament I started going through the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process. I never met my mother again. I was sent to school, but it was difficult to cope. Later, a former SBU mate told me that his commander has a 'mission' in Liberia. He seems to have a lot of money, and had recently bought a bicycle. After, about 11 of us crossed with him over to Liberia. Once in Liberia, we were given guns and another commander came to tell us about the operation."

When fighting in neighbouring countries, the regional warriors are generally referred to as 'Special Forces'. With training from outside and previous war experience, the 'Special Forces' are expected to play an essential role in the conflict. In West Africa, most



Disarmament and demobilisation programmes that offered cash handouts provided an economic incentive for regional child soldiers to move from one conflict in the region to the next.

of these regional warriors have fought with at least two armed groups in as many countries, and many have fought with three or more groups. Many RUF ex-combatants in Sierra Leone crossed over and joined the National Patriot Front of Liberia (NPFL). As members of the NPFL armed group, they were involved in cross-border attacks in neighbouring Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

Recruitment

Recruiters of regional warriors are mostly former commanders from the original group of fighters or, rather interestingly, other commanders or fighters who were previously enemies. Fighters from different groups get to know each other as they assemble in disarmament sites. As in many cases, association to a particular group is not based on political or ideological commitment. Thus, there is hardly any future commitment after disarmament.

Also, recruitments have taken place from within displaced and refugee camps. There are reports of recruitments in camps in Guinea, Sierra Leone and

Liberia. Confirmed reports state that the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) faction started from a refugee camp in Ghana. A 15-year-old narrates⁴:

“There were several meetings held by elders from our tribe (kran) in the camp. One day, around midnight, about 40 of us were briefed about the situation back home. We were told that our people have been held captive and slaughtered by the Charles Taylor government. And that we must fight to remove Charles Taylor from power. We were told that the Ivory Coast government would supply arms and necessary training. A week or two later, around 5:00am, few hundreds of us left the refugee camp in Ghana for Ivory Coast in three buses.”

Factors Leading to the Regional Child Warriors Phenomenon

It is quite difficult to understand how a child can join and fight for an army without necessarily even understanding or believing in the particular cause.

ALONE, ORPHANED, FRIGHTENED, AND WITH FRAGMENTED FAMILIES, THERE ARE FEW INFLUENCES THAT CAN COMPETE WITH A WARRIOR'S LIFE

The presence of children in the battlefronts of conflicts in West Africa can be mainly attributed to the following factors.

Economic Factor

In West Africa, the presence of children in the battlefields mainly emerges from intertwined forces. These regional warriors are born in and fight in some of the world's poorest countries. Until recently, Sierra Leone occupied the lowest ranking in the United Nations Development Project's (UNDP) Human Development Index. The poverty statistics and

development indicators in the neighbouring countries are among the 20 least-developed countries in the world, which demonstrates the extreme poverty in this region. Dispossessed and disconnected, living a precarious economic existence in a shattered post-conflict economy, obsessed with the struggle for daily survival – and then being motivated by the promise of financial compensation, and possibly the opportunity to loot – offers an invaluable opportunity for re-recruitment into subsequent wars.

In examining the desperation of Liberian youth drawn into war, Swedish anthropologist Mat Utas⁵

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A child soldier, wearing a teddy-bear backpack, points his gun at a photographer in Monrovia, Liberia in 2003.

writes: "For these young people, the daily prospect of poverty, joblessness and marginalization effectively blocked the paths to a normal adulthood; drawing them instead into a subculture characterized by abjection, resentment and rootlessness. As opportunity came, their voluntary enlistment into one of the several rebel armies of the civil war therefore became an attractive option for many."

An Environment and Culture of Conflict

Vicious cycles of bad governance and the inevitable economic decline in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire allowed this region to be susceptible to repeated waves of insurgencies. The conflicts in this region were long-drawn-out. At some stage, Sierra Leone and Liberia were fighting internal conflicts at the same time. Children growing up in these countries and contexts tend to see this as a permanent way of life. Alone, orphaned, frightened, and with fragmented families, there are few influences that can compete with a warrior's life. Furthermore, after a peace agreement was reached in Sierra Leone, neighbouring Liberia was still at war, and then Côte d'Ivoire. This created an environment for ex-combatants to continue utilising their 'military careers'. In addition, the DDR and Rehabilitation

match for a similarly armed adult. However, a child with an assault rifle is a fearsome match for anyone.

The Life of a Child Regional Warrior

At the age of 17, Lahai⁶ is now a veteran fighter.⁷ He was abducted by the RUF in Sierra Leone at the age of nine. After disarmament in Sierra Leone, he crossed over to neighbouring Liberia with his commander, to fight alongside the NPFL. As there were reports that the Guinean and Ivorian governments were supporting their rivals – the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and MODEL forces respectively – he was involved in several cross-border raids in these countries, and later fought as a member of the NPFL in Côte d'Ivoire for a year. Initially, fighting in French-speaking Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire was difficult for Lahai, coming from Sierra Leone and later Liberia, where English is the official language. He learned the language and can now communicate fluently.

During Lahai's life as a regional warrior, he has fought as a member of a rebel group (RUF) against the government in Sierra Leone, fought on a government side (NPFL) in Liberia, and against the government forces in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. "Life as a foreign fighter can be very risky," he explained. "Sometimes you are ambushed and you can't even remember the

A SOCIETY INHERITING A GENERATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS IS A SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL CRISIS IN THE MAKING, AS IT CAN IGNITE FUTURE CYCLES OF CONFLICTS THAT CAN THREATEN REGIONAL STABILITY

(DDRR) programmes across this porous border region, offering widely varying cash handouts – from US\$300 in Liberia to US\$900 in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire – were a motivating factor to move from one conflict to the next one – if not for anything but to be eligible to access the DDRR programme and incentives.

Vulnerable and Opportune Target Group

Commanders have pointed out that children are loyal and obedient. Due to the fact that their immature minds can be easily manipulated and indoctrinated, unpopular armies and rebel groups are able to field far greater forces by using children as a cheap and easy way to obtain recruits. Experiences in West Africa show that they are effective soldiers and can operate with terrifying audacity, particularly when under the influence of narcotics. Furthermore, the changes in weapons technology and proliferation of light weapons have acted as enablers, allowing this pool of children to be tapped as a new source of military labour. A child might be able to wield a sword or machete, but is no

way to retreat; the enemy seems to be everywhere." In another instance in Guinea, when the national army went on the offensive and were forced to retreat abandoning everything, food became scarce. This resulted in cannibalism, where the captives were killed and some of their body parts eaten, and pregnant women's bellies were cut open, the foetus pounded in mortar and then eaten.

Although Lahai received cash incentives from three disarmament programmes in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, his life towards rehabilitation has not been very successful. He is a dropout living in neighbouring Liberia, father of a six-month-old baby and working as an illegal motorcycle driver.

"I can't go home," he said. "There is no home for me to go. My dream is to become a doctor, it's a respectable profession. But it's not working out that way. There are rumours about recruitment for a mission in Guinea, maybe by the government or a rebel group. If approached again, I think I will go.



Former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) child soldiers wait to be turned over to the United Nations in 2001 in Sierra Leone. The RUF was infamous for its forced recruitment of child soldiers.

I have a six-month-old daughter whose mother has left me. I need money to support her.”

Lahai’s story depicts the situation of thousands of child soldiers fighting in neighbouring countries as regional warriors. The spread of warlordism and failed states have created a new mode of war. Wars are driven less by politics and more for personal profit by local warlords, who see the new possibility of converting vulnerable, disconnected children into low-cost and expendable troops who can be easily manipulated to fight and die for their selfish causes. Later, these children are abandoned in a worse condition than they were in originally.

Recruiting children like Lahai into conflicts as soldiers does generate problems, even after the war is over. The children endure long-term trauma, which affects their psychological and moral development. A society inheriting a generation of child soldiers is a

significant social crisis in the making, as it can ignite future cycles of conflicts that can threaten regional stability. A noted example is Liberia, which had three civil wars in a span of 14 years.

Interventions

In a bid to tackle this crisis, several programmes have been designed by various intervenors. Search for Common Ground in West Africa has developed a youth strategy programme that seeks to identify opportunities where youth can have a positive influence in political and social events as they unfold in the region. The programme targets three main groups: young people who are out of school and seeking livelihoods; youth leaders who are already part of organised efforts to address issues affecting young people; and elders and decision-makers, who have a big influence on young people, including district council members, educators and paramount chiefs.

The overall goal of the youth strategy is to facilitate the inclusion and participation of young women and men in consolidating peace and development in the region.

In Sierra Leone, in consultation with the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, the National Commission for War Affected Children was created, with the mission to develop and facilitate the implementation of programmes for improving the welfare of war-affected children. These included street children, orphans, sexually abused children, returnee unaccompanied minors, and other children in difficult circumstances.

In Liberia, the Landmine Action Programme aims to gain an understanding of the wider issue of armed groups in order to develop a sustainable system of identifying, training and reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian society. This involves training groups of foreign ex-combatants – including child warriors – who previously occupied the Guthrie rubber plantation, in agriculture. This training aims to provide livelihoods, and supports the efforts of ex-combatants to become productive and responsible members of society.

Once armed conflict ends, child combatants often find themselves defeated by socio-economic conditions, which suspends them in a world of boredom and poverty. With the offer to fight another battle, they slip optimistically across borders into the next war. It is therefore crucial that DDRR programmes designed to engage child soldiers should have a long-term mandate, with an approach of getting to know these children's thoughts, motivations and hopes, and developing programmes that have a chance of putting them on the path towards meaningful and sustainable reintegration.

Furthermore, efforts to promote peace and development in the region by the governments concerned require an understanding of the root causes of the civil conflicts. The lack of educational and employment opportunities have been major contributing factors in the causes of armed conflict. Taking up arms to earn a better standard of living can be very convincing. Other solutions must include curbing the spread of illegal small arms, and prosecuting those leaders who abuse children in this way – that is, those responsible for the recruitment and training of child soldiers.

Conclusion

Apart from the raw human tragedy, the effect of this 'child soldier doctrine' for war itself is quite

terrifying. With the involvement of children, generals, warlords, terrorists and rebel leaders alike are finding that conflicts are easier to start and harder to end. Last year, during weeks of internal crisis in neighbouring Guinea, it was confirmed that ex-fighters crossed over from Liberia to Guinea to participate in the ongoing disturbances.⁸ The same was repeated in September 2007, during the elections in Sierra Leone. Even now, as we experience a season of calm in the region, there are reports that some child warriors have since travelled thousands of kilometres to offer their mercenary services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Such activity suggests that this region is held hostage to a ticking time bomb of regional warriors, ready to join the next leader who whispers a call to arms. ▲

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Endnotes

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- 5 Utas, Mats (2003) *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*, Uppsala: Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology.
- 6 The names of ex-combatants mentioned in this article have been changed to protect their identity and to respect their privacy.
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