

FACT SHEET

Child Soldiers

Who is a child soldier?

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative defines a child soldier using the 2007 Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Affected by Armed Conflict. Using the definition within the Paris Principles of a child used and associated with armed groups, the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative defines a child soldier as:

“any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”

How many child soldiers exist worldwide?

Due to the nature of the issue and how children are employed as soldiers in a wide range of capacities it is difficult to arrive at a specific number. However, child soldiers are used in 13 different countries and one region, by 7 state armies and 50 armed groups according to the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict. This is coupled by the fact that children continue to be affected in every conflict currently taking place around the globe.

How many children are affected by armed conflict?

At the end of 2014, Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF, stated that some 230 million children currently live in countries affected by armed conflict. 15 million of these children are directly affected by armed conflict in some capacity—as refugees, internally displaced persons or even as child soldiers.

Where are child soldiers used?

Each year the Special Representative for the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) releases its report on children and armed conflict. In 2015, the SRSG CAAC identified 13 countries and one region where child soldiers are used. In total, the SRSG identified 7 state armies, which use child soldiers along with 50 non-state armed actors.

While anecdotal evidence points to children used as child soldiers in other contexts, the SRSG CAAC report represents unequivocal evidence of children being used as weapons of war.

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In addition to the annual report, the SRSG releases ongoing reports and conclusions for each state where child soldiers continue to be used and countries of interest. In 2014, the SRSG CAAC launched the campaign #childrenotsoldiers which aims to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers by state armies by 2016. The Dallaire Initiative is an implementing partner of this campaign.

What do you mean by a child soldier as a weapon system?

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative uses the term “weapons system” to describe the use of children as soldiers. In doing so, it acknowledges the perversity of the concept. The use of this term in no way precludes or ignores the humanity of children; instead, it serves to highlight the security concerns posed by child soldiers that are often overlooked. By emphasising these concerns, the Dallaire Initiative underscores its belief that security sector actors have an important role to play in the protection of children during conflict.

What is the current international response?

The current response is a blended approach of humanitarian programs (demobilization, disarmament, reintegration), child protection, and international law deterrents. It is one where prevention efforts have not been given enough priority. Secondly, it tends to be relegated as a side-line issue, an after thought, and not a key priority to preventing or resolving conflict.

Why is the current international response falling short?

The global response to this phenomenon has been largely reactive, focused on the disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers. The contemporary use of children as weapons of war continues to challenge the international community. Often left picking up the pieces after the child has served as a soldier, we have failed to protect the child, and ultimately prevent their recruitment and use as a child soldier in the first place. Tackled from a humanitarian approach, the security sector actor is not included in the international response or solution to the issue.

Through taking a security sector approach, we compliment international efforts, including child protection, international law, and demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs. Through engaging with the security sector actors, who are often the first point of contact for child soldiers in the field, we can create a comprehensive international response that enables us to take a preventive approach to the issue of children used as weapons of war.