

an uncertain future?

Children and Armed Conflict in the Central African Republic

May 2011



In order to advise policy-makers at a critical juncture after the re-election in January 2011 of President François Bozizé of the Central African Republic (CAR), the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) joined forces to conduct a four-week field mission to CAR to research and report on the situation of children affected by armed conflict. We found evidence that at least four of the six grave violations monitored under UN Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005) are still being committed against children in CAR: the abduction of children, recruitment or use of child soldiers, attacks against schools, and the denial of humanitarian access to children.

CAR is situated at the heart of one of the most volatile regions in the world, where it shares borders with Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Sudan. CAR also has some of the worst humanitarian indicators in the world and has been ranked the world's fourth most underfunded and ignored humanitarian crisis. In addition, the people of CAR suffer a weak government, with minimal support from the international community, which cannot protect them from violence or meet their urgent needs for nutrition, water and sanitation, health care, and education.

Children in CAR face severe human rights abuses and violations. Numerous armed groups are active throughout the country, terrorizing communities and abducting children. Three groups in particular are guilty of egregious crimes against children and are still committing four of the six grave violations against CAR's children.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which for years has terrorized communities and abducted children in northern Uganda, more recently has been forced into remote areas of nearby countries, including CAR, where it has attacked villages and abducted children. The Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) is the only armed group still fighting the government, and is reportedly recruiting or using child soldiers and attacking schools in the northeast. Self-defense militias, created by communities to protect themselves from attack, recruit children as young as 12 years old and use them to fight.



WATCH LIST ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

IDMC internal displacement monitoring centre



To make matters worse, systems for monitoring violations and protecting and assisting children in CAR are virtually non-existent. For example, the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), established under UN Security Council Resolution 1612 to address the six grave violations committed against children, has been practically dormant since its establishment in CAR in 2008. The MRM in CAR has received only minimal operational support from the international community. Inadequate funding and a lack of awareness and knowledge of the MRM by UN agencies has further aggravated the situation. In addition, few protection-mandated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in CAR focus on children's issues, or offer specialized assistance such as psychosocial care. As a result, violations perpetrated against children in CAR are under-reported.

There are other UN mechanisms in CAR that can help protect children forced into armed groups. The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) supports countries emerging from conflict, such as CAR, whose governments have asked for assistance from the international community. In CAR, the PBC is working in numerous areas, such as security

sector reform which includes the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers. It has been effective in mobilizing funds for CAR, however it has not prioritized reintegration programs in its allocation of funding.

The Protection Cluster in CAR, part of the UN's cluster approach to strengthen partnerships and ensure more predictability and accountability, has recently reactivated the child protection sub-cluster led by UNICEF and UNHCR, and created the gender-based violence (GBV) sub-cluster led by UNICEF and UNFPA. Its success in protecting children affected by armed conflict will lie in its ability to establish complementary systems for collecting data among the relevant sub-clusters, and its ability to share this information with the MRM.

The signing of an action plan, an agreement between an armed group and the UN that marks a commitment to end the recruitment or use of child soldiers and outlines concrete, time-bound steps for their release, would be an important step towards improving the protection of children in armed conflict in CAR. None of the armed groups in CAR have signed an action plan, however.

1. Findings:

Abduction of children: The Lord's Resistance Army

While in the captivity of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), boys abducted from Obo in the southeast of CAR are trained to use weapons with which they have been forced to commit atrocities such as looting and burning villages, killing village residents, and abducting other children. Girls from CAR are forced to do domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, and fetching water, and are given to LRA commanders as sex slaves. Children who manage to escape experience great difficulties in getting home—a journey that in some cases lasts almost as long as their time in captivity, which can be upwards of ten months. They rarely receive much-needed psychosocial care or adequate assistance to heal from these traumatic experiences.

Recruitment or use of child soldiers: Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace

While reports indicate that the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) is still recruiting children, the lack of humanitarian access to areas in the northeast near Ndélé under CPJP

This document is a summary of the Watchlist/IDMC report "An Uncertain Future? Children and Armed Conflict in the Central African Republic". The full report includes first-hand information collected during a field mission to CAR from January 8 to February 6, 2011, as well as data gathered from secondary sources. Analysis was provided by a multidisciplinary team of people with expertise and/or experience in the particular context. Sources for information printed in this summary and in the full report are listed at the end of the full report in alphabetical order. Some sources are confidential and not listed to protect their safety. The people represented in the photos in this report are not necessarily themselves victims or survivors of human rights violations and other abuses.



control has made it impossible for the humanitarian community to gather information on the number of children that may have been recruited by CPJP, how many among them are girls, how many have been victims of sexual violence, and whether CPJP is willing to release children from its ranks.

Self-defense militias

Communities in Bocaranga and Obo in the northwest and southeast of the country, have formed self-defense militias. Children recruited by these militias may find themselves on the front lines of combat when, as part of their role with the militias, they conduct night patrols with their parents. By having to work at night to defend their communities and thereby unable to attend school during the day, these children are missing important developmental stages and their long-term well-being is being jeopardized.

Sustainable reintegration programs: Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy

While disarmament and demobilization programs in the northwestern towns of Paoua and Bocaranga have facilitated the release of 525 children from the Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy (APRD) – the largest armed group in CAR – sustainable reintegration programs are lacking and should be further developed to prevent released children from

returning to violence and to enable them to contribute to the future economic development of the region.

Attacks against schools

In CAR, armed groups have looted, burned, and destroyed schools when attacking villages, and have occupied schools for military purposes, further destroying an already fragile education system. Teachers in CAR have been threatened or attacked and schools have been closed as a result of insecurity and a lack of teachers.

Denial of humanitarian access to children

There is little humanitarian assistance available in CAR, particularly in the conflict zones, where children need it most. The CPJP, which is the only armed group that has yet to sign a cease-fire agreement or adhere to the 2008 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, has made it impossible to access some areas near Ndélé in the northeast of the country. The government of CAR has imposed military restrictions to counter insecurity which have further impeded humanitarian access in CPJP-controlled areas. LRA activity restricts access in the southeast of the country, where the UN requires its agencies to use armed escorts. These measures have left children with urgent protection and assistance needs that have yet to be met.

about watchlist

The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, the Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national, and international non-governmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children.

For further information please visit:
www.watchlist.org

Looking forward to an uncertain future

The re-election of President Bozizé has the potential to help CAR transition into a post-conflict situation and gradually foster socio-economic development if he and his government are able to consolidate the peace process and mark a real end to the armed conflict in CAR. Most importantly, this post-election phase offers a unique

opportunity for the children of CAR who have lost almost everything to conflict to reclaim their future. However, the international community must respond *now* and commit the necessary financial and human resources to help children affected by armed conflict in CAR. These resources are needed to improve the monitoring and reporting of violations committed against children, and to offer the necessary protection and assistance in response.

2. Recommendations:

As a result of these findings, Watchlist and IDMC propose the following recommendations:

Government of CAR

- Strengthen the capacity of the government's Central African Armed Forces (FACA) by increasing troop numbers, and by equipping and deploying troops trained in human rights to areas of displacement where communities have had to create self-defense militias because of the absence or limited capacity of state security forces.
- End government support of community self-defense militias that carry out security functions legally assigned to the army. Ensure that these militias release the children they have recruited, and sign and implement action plans with the UN to end all recruitment and use of child soldiers.
- Negotiate a cease-fire agreement with the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) that will restore unconditional humanitarian access to displaced communities living in zones outside of Ndélé currently controlled by CPJP.
- Ensure that the armed groups that are now aligned with the government as part of the 2008 Comprehensive Peace Agreement do not use school buildings or school property as bases for military operations.





Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP)

- Negotiate a cease-fire agreement with the government that will restore unconditional humanitarian access to displaced communities living in zones outside of Ndélé currently controlled by CPJP.
- Release all children under the age of 18 currently serving in CPJP ranks, and end further recruitment and use of children in accordance with international obligations.
- Immediately negotiate, sign, and implement an action plan with the UN to end all recruitment and use of child soldiers and other violations against children.
- Cease all attacks against schools, students, teachers, and other educational personnel.

Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy (APRD)

- Cease the use of school buildings or school property as bases for military operations.
- Immediately negotiate, sign, and implement an action plan with the UN to prevent further recruitment and use of child soldiers.

UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict

- Reinforce the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA)'s child protection component with the necessary financial and human resources to carry out MRM field missions and conduct MRM technical trainings that will strengthen the capacity of national and international NGOs to monitor and report on the six grave violations committed against children during armed conflict.
- In view of repeated and persistent violations against children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in breach of international norms and standards, impose targeted measures against the LRA in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 1539, 1612, and 1882.
- Encourage the government to negotiate a cease-fire agreement with CPJP that will restore unconditional humanitarian access to displaced communities living in zones outside of Ndélé currently controlled by CPJP.
- Encourage the government to end its support of community self-defense militias that carry out security functions legally assigned to the army. Ensure that these militias release the children they have recruited, and sign and implement action plans with the UN to end all recruitment and use of child soldiers.

about IDMC

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide. IDMC's main activities include monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalized violence, and violations of human rights; training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs; and contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

For further information, please visit
www.internal-displacement.org



- Urge all armed forces and groups to cease the use of school buildings or school property as bases for military operations.

UN Secretary-General

- Given the release of children from APRD ranks, and APRD's attempts to conclude an action plan with the UN, request that the UN Country Team renew efforts to develop and implement an action plan with APRD to prevent further recruitment and use of children, with a view to de-listing APRD from the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict.

- Urge the Secretary-General's Special Representative to the Central African Republic to ensure the effectiveness and continuity of the MRM in CAR by requesting that UN agencies that are members of the MRM Task Force commit significant time and human resources to the MRM technical group, including by attaching staff that have decision-making authority and are in CAR on long-term contracts.

UN Country Team in CAR

- Conduct negotiations with CPJP to secure unconditional humanitarian access to displaced communities living in zones outside of Ndélé currently controlled by CPJP.
- Strongly advocate for an increased UN presence in Ndélé by deploying UNICEF and UNHCR staff to monitor and report on the recruitment of children by CPJP, and to improve the protection of children affected by armed conflict, and of displaced communities in the area.
- Strongly advocate for the establishment of a UN presence in Obo, particularly of UNICEF, to monitor and report on the abduction of children by the LRA, and to improve the protection and assistance of children who have returned from captivity.

- Work with UN Country Teams and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the region to develop efficient regional logistics for reception and family tracing for children abducted by the LRA who are no longer in captivity, particularly to shorten the route, distance, and length of time it takes to get Central African children home.
- Work with the MRM Task Force in CAR to develop and implement: (1) action plans to prevent further recruitment and use of children by armed groups who have already released all children from their ranks, such as APRD; (2) action plans to release children from armed groups that have yet to release children, such as CPJP and self-defense militias.

MRM Task Force in CAR

- Support the UN Country Team in negotiating: (1) action plans to prevent further recruitment and use of children by armed groups that have already released all children from their ranks, such as APRD; (2) action plans to release children from armed groups that have yet to release children, such as CPJP and self-defense militias.
- Secure the participation of national and international NGOs in the MRM Task Force by addressing their concerns regarding confidentiality and the safety of sharing sensitive information, and by providing them with technical trainings that will build their capacity to monitor and report on the six grave violations committed against children during armed conflict.



- Decentralize the process of verifying information collected through the MRM by making field-based UN agencies responsible for verifying information coming out of their respective geographical areas of operation.
- Establish a secure information-sharing system with the protection and education clusters, and the gender-based violence and child protection sub-clusters, both in the capital, Bangui, and at the field level, to ensure that any information related to UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1882 that is being collected or shared with the clusters is also shared with the MRM Task Force.
- Develop technical trainings designed specifically for NGOs working on education to build their capacity to monitor and report on attacks against schools in CAR.
- Work with UNICEF to develop trainings on the MRM and the six grave violations committed against children for armed forces and groups to inform them about the mechanism and to alert them to the fact that UN agencies and NGOs will be monitoring and reporting on issues related to UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1882.

UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA)

- Ensure that BINUCA's child protection component has the necessary financial and human resources to carry out MRM field missions and conduct MRM technical trainings that will strengthen the capacity of national and international NGOs to monitor and report on the six grave violations committed against children during armed conflict.

UNICEF

- Commit the necessary financial and human resources, including key staff on long-term contracts, to adequately co-lead the MRM Task Force in CAR.
- Work with the protection cluster to ensure that the action plans of the newly reactivated child protection sub-cluster are fully funded and implemented, that the child protection sub-cluster can access the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) for funding for the MRM, and that child protection concerns are mainstreamed into all clusters activated in CAR.
- Strongly advocate for the establishment of a UNICEF presence in Ndélé to improve the protection of children affected by armed conflict.
- Strongly advocate for the establishment of a UNICEF presence in Obo to improve the protection of children abducted by the LRA who are no longer in captivity.

Protection Cluster in CAR

- Hold talks with the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF), which is fighting the LRA in southeast CAR and recruiting ex-LRA combatants for their forces, to address the re-traumatization of victims of the LRA in Obo, where UPDF has a military base. Children who were abducted by the LRA and who managed to escape are being forced to interact on a daily basis in Obo with ex-LRA combatants. Talks should consider quick impact solutions such as preventing ex-LRA combatants from leaving the UPDF base in Obo except as part of tracking teams sent into the forest to pursue the LRA, and ensuring that they have minimal contact with the local population. Talks should also consider longer-term issues of impunity and accountability on an individual basis.



UN Peacebuilding Commission

- In light of the Commission's efforts to rebuild communities affected by conflict and to prevent a return to violence, as outlined in the Commission's Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding in CAR, fund sustainable reintegration programs for children demobilized from APRD ranks in Paoua and Bocaranga, as well as urgently needed psychosocial programs for children abducted by the LRA who are no longer in captivity in southeast CAR, including girls who suffered rape and other sexual violence.
- In light of the Commission's promotion of good governance, rule of law, and security sector reform, as outlined in the Commission's Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding in CAR, fund the implementation of the MRM in CAR to ensure that the capacity of NGOs to monitor and report on children's rights violations under UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1882 is adequately strengthened.

US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)

- Pursuant to the declaration of disaster made by the U.S. Embassy in the capital Bangui on January 27, 2011 regarding displacement caused by the LRA, release USAID/OFDA funds for

urgently needed psychosocial programs to benefit children in southeast CAR abducted by the LRA who are no longer in captivity, including girls who suffered rape and other sexual violence. Funds should also be released for agriculture, food security, and health services to benefit internally displaced persons (IDPs) in LRA-affected areas of southeast CAR.

European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO)

- Assess humanitarian needs in LRA-affected areas of southeast CAR and reevaluate existing programs accordingly to strengthen the humanitarian response to children affected by armed conflict.
- Fund urgently needed psychosocial programs in southeast CAR for children abducted by the LRA who are no longer in captivity, including girls who suffered rape and other sexual violence.
- Assess humanitarian needs in districts near Paoua and Bocaranga in the interest of funding much-needed reintegration programs for demobilized children and assistance to the displaced communities from which they come.

Donor Countries

- Ensure flexible and sustainable funding for (1) the MRM process in CAR to ensure that the capacity of NGOs to monitor and report on children's rights violations under UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1882 is adequately strengthened; (2) sustainable reintegration programs for children demobilized from APRD ranks in Paoua and Bocaranga; (3) prevention programs for children at risk of recruitment in Ndélé; and (4) psychosocial programs in southeast CAR for children abducted by the LRA and no longer in captivity, including girls who suffered rape and other sexual violence.

