



MEETING BRIEF

Children and Armed Conflict: Security Sector Preparedness for Prevention and Response in the Field

Military and police personnel, including those in peacekeeping operations, are usually the first line of contact for child soldiers. Yet, they badly require training and practical guidelines to better equip and prepare them for dealing with this complex phenomenon. In fact, security sector actors have a key role to play in preventing child rights violations, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

These were the key conclusions from a policy forum at the International Peace Institute on February 26, 2014, co-organized with the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative and Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. This timely event—held as UN Security Council members prepare for the next Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict on March 7—brought together Lt. General Roméo Dallaire (Ret.), founder of the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative; H.E. Mr. Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations; H.E. Mr. Hervé Ladsous, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations; and Mr. Ger Duany, a South Sudanese actor and model who fled the civil war in his home country in the 1990s. The following insights emerged from the meeting:

- Increased, systematic training of military and police personnel can prevent the use of child soldiers. Training and awareness-raising among armed actors can also change their minds about using children as soldiers. These preventive efforts could save time and resources spent on costly reinsertion and peacebuilding programs after conflict, which are not always effective.
- Greater preparedness of security sector actors for encounters with child soldiers can prevent casualties and unnecessary loss of life on all sides—among children as well as troops. It can also mitigate the risk of post-traumatic stress. This requires providing security sector actors with practical tools and guidelines that are grounded in the field reality.
- Far from improving the fighting capabilities of security sector actors, the use of child soldiers is a liability: it impacts the effectiveness of police, military, and armed groups, and increases the risk of criminal prosecution. Bringing security sector actors' attention to these tactical, legal, and moral disadvantages can significantly contribute to preventing further recruitment and use of child soldiers.
- Armed groups do not just use children to carry arms. They also use them as porters, spies, cooks, messengers, and sexual slaves. This means that there is a whole range of interactions possible with child soldiers, other than the most extreme gun-to-gun encounter. Security sector actors need to be made aware of the various entry points they have to protect these children from harm.
- Although becoming a child soldier is never fully voluntary, children are not always abducted by force into armed groups. Due to their daily exposure to armed individuals in situations of conflict, the weapon-carrier may become a role model. Security sector personnel can therefore play a key role in affecting the mindset of children—commanding respect by virtue of being a soldier—and ensuring that children are not recruited or used by armed groups.

– Jérémie Labbé