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### RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement\* submitted by Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers),  
a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 December 2003]

#### Child Soldiers: Why Adolescents Volunteer

Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers) would like to draw attention to the recently completed research on why adolescents volunteer for armed forces and armed groups undertaken by the Quaker UN Office, Geneva, jointly with the International Labour Organisation. The purpose was to discover the reasons that the young people themselves identified for having joined, in order to be able to take these into account when considering both preventive strategies, and demobilisation and reintegration. In particular if demobilisation is to take place where conflict is ongoing or the situation remains unsettled, unless the reasons for volunteering are addressed, the prospects for demobilisation and long-term reintegration are not good.

The research identifies five major factors: war, poverty, education, employment and family. All of these have both "pull" and "push" aspects, nor do they operate in isolation from each other. Thus the impoverished child in a war zone, without access to school or employment, and whose family is destroyed or dispersed, is most at risk. However, even in this situation not all children will join: there are always more specific features as well.

War: Very few children go looking for a war to fight. (The term "war" is used to cover situations of both international and internal armed conflict and also situations of militarised violence not amounting to armed conflict in the strict legal sense). Most get involved because the war comes to them. However, for adolescents war can also be an opportunity: for employment (formal or informal); for escape from an oppressive family situation or humiliation at school; for adventure in serving "the cause" or emulating real or fictional military role models. Many boys dream of becoming a hero in battle:

relatively few are in a situation which tempts them to try it out in real life. In addition, war often creates or exacerbates the other factors, for example causing closure of schools, dispersal or death of family members, loss of employment or general impoverishment.

Poverty: Poverty is often cited as *the* cause of child soldiering. This is too simplistic. There are many more poor children who do *not* become child soldiers than do, even in war zones. What *is* true is that poverty is the single most readily identifiable common characteristic of child soldiers. Children who are not living in poverty rarely become child soldiers. The role of poverty is both direct and indirect. Thus fewer poor children are in school in all situations. By exacerbating family poverty, or leading to the death of adult family members, war causes more children to withdraw from school either to take over financial responsibility or, especially for girls, to look after younger siblings freeing others to work. Lack of education reduces poor children's already limited job prospects. In developed countries, the army may be one of the few employers who require no educational qualifications; elsewhere it may be one of few paid employments of any sort.

Education and Employment: School is a dominant influence in children's lives - for good or ill. Lack of education or vocational training restricts choices of employment. Equally, for youngsters in neither education nor employment, there is a strong tendency to become involved with armed forces or groups, particularly where these are prevalent. This may be simply because the youngsters have nothing else to do, or because recruiters see them as being available and thus target them, or because they get involved in violence or crime and joining an armed group becomes a form of protection. Even when education is available, adolescents tend to drop out if it is seen as unlikely to lead to employment or if the educational environment denigrates or humiliates them. If the army or armed groups are perceived as the only "employer" it is not surprising that those who drop out select this alternative, whether by preference or as a measure of last resort. Indeed, for many youngsters, the critical moment of decision arises from the closure of the school, or their exclusion from it, either because of *force majeure* or as a result of their own behaviour. Conversely, schools can themselves be recruiting grounds for the government or armed opposition groups, or serve this function indirectly as part of the ethnic, religious, or political dimension of the conflict.

Family: Perhaps the factor hitherto most under-estimated is the family. As with school, it is important to recognise how central the family is in a child's life. Whether as "push" or "pull", the family is possibly *the single* most critical influence determining whether or not a child in fact joins armed forces or groups. Where adult family members have been killed or dispersed, children may not only have to fend for themselves, but also take on the responsibilities of heads of households, providing economic and physical protection. Interestingly, this reason for volunteering was often cited by boys but by none of the girls in this study, who spoke more often of the need for self-protection, in particular against rape and sexual violence.

However, many adolescents are running away from an abusive or exploitative domestic situation. In particular, there seems to be a high correlation between domestic exploitation, physical and/or sexual abuse and the decision of girls to volunteer. Such

abuse may happen in their own homes, in extended family or non-familial domestic situations. This linkage illustrates not only the prevalence of such practices but also the scarcity of other options for girls who are running away from home, but many boys also cite domestic violence as being a factor in their decision. Conversely, the family can be a "pull" factor. Some boys feel pressured into joining because it would reflect badly on their father if they did not; some girls join to assert their equality with brothers already involved. It is noticeable how often it is the military family which has military children. This may be because of explicit encouragement by the family, or because the child sees military life as the norm, or just because this is an option which might not occur to those without military connections.

The pervasive influence of gender stereotyping emerges more generally. In this research all the girls interviewed had been fighters - even when they had also served as wives, "sex slaves", cooks, nurses, or porters. However, few girls are demobilised and reintegrated equally with boys. Every demobilisation of child soldiers which excludes girls, whether by design or default, is not only in itself an act of discrimination, but perpetuates the imbalance. Because so few girls are demobilised, the assumption survives that there are few girl soldiers - that girls associated with fighting forces are just "camp followers". Girls who volunteered are thus doubly discriminated against. Many joined because they refused to accept the exploitation and abuse to which they were being subjected. The failure to demobilise them on an equal basis with their male counterparts, or to address the societal attitudes that led to their joining in the first place, simply compounds the original grievance. At the same time, to address the stereotyping which encourages or pressurises boys into taking up arms would have a major impact on child soldiering.

The results of this research demonstrate the close relationship between child soldiering and other forms of child labour. In general, it is the same children who are at risk. Thus, to seek to eliminate child soldiering without providing adequate alternatives will lead to a rise in other forms of child labour. Conversely, measures to reduce child labour in general are likely to reduce the incidence of child soldiering as well.

Finally, in this research "to volunteer" was defined as to join armed forces or groups when not abducted or physically forced to do so. In practice the interviewees were self-defined as volunteers but the interviews revealed that the degree of real choice varied, including seeing a friend who did not volunteer being shot. Thus any claim of volunteering should in practice be treated with a degree of scepticism. Moreover, many adolescents join assuming that they will be free to leave again. Sometimes they are deliberately misled in this respect; sometimes they simply fail to understand the irrevocable nature of the decision they are taking and the reality of such involvement. Is it enough that the choice having been exercised once, no second thoughts are permitted?

Conclusion: To counter the problem of child recruitment, in addition to taking legal steps, it is necessary to address the key underlying factors identified by this research: war, poverty, education, employment and the family. These provide a framework for policy and programmatic planning, without consideration of which no initiative is likely to have

sustained effect. At the same time, the particular manifestation of the different factors must be assessed independently in each situation. Is the problem lack of access to school, or is the school the breeding ground for recruitment? It may also vary between different regions in the conflict area, or the different groups involved. Thus, for example, urban boys in one area may prioritise access to formal education, while their rural counterparts may want work, or girls may see vocational training as more relevant than schooling, and so on.

Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers) therefore calls on the UN Commission on Human Rights to:

1. Urge States who have not yet done so to ratify the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, No. 182, the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and in relation to the latter to declare a minimum age for voluntary recruitment of at least 18 years;
2. Demand that States who currently recruit volunteers under 18 years raise their recruitment age immediately unless they can demonstrate their ability and willingness to comply strictly and fully with the safeguards in the Optional Protocol in relation to voluntary recruitment and the requirement not to send under-18s directly into hostilities;
3. Call on all relevant actors to work for non-recruitment in practice of all under-18s and demobilisation of existing child soldiers, including ensuring that girl soldiers are not excluded from such processes by accident or design;
4. Encourage the creation of alternatives to military involvement for children and young people, in particular by providing:
  - (a) education that is
    - accessible to all children in reality and not only theoretically;
    - relevant and appropriate to their situation and likely to lead to work/employment;
    - in an atmosphere that does not humiliate or denigrate the pupils;
    - not used to encourage or incite the pupils to become involved in armed forces or groups, or to use violence;
  - (b) employment or other viable economic activities;
  - (c) supporting families so that they do not keep children out of education because of poverty, as well as poverty not excluding children from actual participation in education;
  - (d) reducing the availability and acceptability of weapons, and teaching/encouraging children to resolve disputes by non-violent means;
  - (e) teaching parenting skills, and supporting families, so as to reduce the incidence of domestic violence, and physical or sexual abuse of children;
  - (f) addressing the gender-stereotyping of boys which encourages or pressurises them into military roles, and of girls who feel compelled to take up arms in search of equality or protection, or both.

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

<sup>1</sup> The research entailed in-depth interviews with 53 individuals from nine countries who identified themselves as having volunteered to join armed forces or armed groups before the age of 18. The countries were: Afghanistan, Colombia, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland). The full results will appear in Rachel Brett & Irma Specht: *Young Soldiers – Why they choose to fight* (International Labour Organisation & Lynne Rienner, May 2004)