

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Ensuring protection for youth in areas of armed conflict

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Introduction

Countless children around the world undergo violence in areas of armed conflict. Due to their vulnerability and innocence, children easily become victims in those areas. These children are often exposed to recruitment, abuse, and misplacement.

Children suffer from exploitation, as certain parties use children as weapons or force them to work as cooks, guards, messengers, and more. In such forces, children are often mistreated and neglected for their needs. These children are victims of child rights violations, as children are not supposed to be viewed as soldiers from the beginning. Children in the armed forces are mostly threatened, abducted, or manipulated by adults in the forces; some also participate due to the poverty in their families.

Children who live in conflict zones also suffer from a lack of protection, exposing them to sexual violence, killings, and abduction. Due to such phenomenon, the United Nations (UN) security council appointed six violations against children in areas of armed conflict: sexual violence; abduction; the refusal of children's humanitarian access; maiming; recruitment in armed forces of any kind; and attacks on hospitals or schools. Protecting youth is a fundamental responsibility of all nations. To this end, nations must take actions to support mental and physical wellbeing to youth in armed conflict areas and collaborate to stop armed violence.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Soldiers

Child Soldiers are children under the age of 18, participating in an army or an armed force in areas of armed conflict. Child soldiers are often mistreated in such forces, most being used as human shields or combatants. Today, there are around 250,000 child soldiers globally. Children rarely voluntarily participate in armed forces, most of them are abducted or forced to join. To stop this reoccurring phenomenon, nations must take action to remove all illegal armed forces and stop violence.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that is often caused by a horrifying event. In times of armed conflict, this is especially common and devastating for youth. PTSD is a very common and serious mental hazard for youth in armed conflict. Symptoms can disrupt their daily lives and lead to life-long consequences.

Reintegration

Reintegration is the process of transitioning into society again. In this case, it is the action of integrating back into society after experiencing war or being a child soldier. Reintegration is crucial for youth, and it is their only hope for rebuilding their future. To this end, the reintegration process of children must be fully supported. Prior to reintegration, children must also be supported with their mental and physical wellbeing so the further reintegration process can be successful.

Background Information

In times of war or armed conflict, children become especially susceptible to its effects. Youth in those areas are deprived of fundamental human rights, needs, education, and more. As relatively vulnerable individuals, these youth often face severe physical and mental health issues. Their experience and lack of care often cause life-long consequences for these youth, that is, if they survive.

Child soldiers

Even today, thousands of youths are serving as combatants in areas of armed conflict. These children often fight on the front lines or get sent on suicide missions. In the armed forces, child soldiers' lives do not mean any value, which is the reason why most of them are mistreated. Many child soldiers are also victims of sexual violence due to their incapability to revolt against adults. To the least, youth in the armed forces may witness numerous deaths, torture, and killings, causing them irreversible mental damage. In most cases, warring parties deprive child children of health and nutrition. In extreme cases, children are subjected to substance abuse.

Even after conflicts, child soldiers may not be accepted back into their society, community, or families for various reasons. These reasons can include their association with the armed forces or their perceptions of the community. Some are not accepted in the first place; others face difficulty in fitting in. Returning children are often not taken care of thoroughly. Reintegration is a chance for these children rebuild their futures, thence hey require immense support. When returning children fail to get such support, their psychological distress may worsen.

The foremost cause of child soldiers derives from illegal armed forces. To resolve the issue of child soldiers, governments must eliminate those armed forces and stop them from forming to begin with. Worldwide there are more than 600 armed groups still existing, in which all of the groups have the ability to cause major violence. Most of the groups are consisted of thousands of members, making them extremely influential and hard to control. These illicit groups cause humanitarian concerns, not just to the vulnerable children, but also to the population living in the armed conflict areas. In 2022, armed groups in Ituri killed over 800 civilians including women and children. Such incidents are happening more and more frequent, in results to the increasing international conflicts.

The mental well-being of youth in areas of armed conflict

In areas of armed conflict, youth are exposed to extreme violence or other traumatic events. Studies have shown that most children who lived through those conflicts face PTSD or depression. In later childhood or later in life, these children often experience behavioral problems, which causes their reintegration into society extra difficult. Former child soldier can face stigma and a lack of understanding of the conception of community and family.

In addition, armed conflict may disrupt family relationships, where children's family members get killed or kidnapped. Being separated from important family members, the feeling of loss lays immense stress on children. Meanwhile, this destroys the chance for children to have an environment that can foster healthy and positive social and cognitive development.

UNICEF's plan for change

UNICEF has created an agenda aiming to protect and solve the problems regarding youth in areas of armed conflict. This agenda, consisting of several parts, acts as a guideline and goal for all nations and organizations. Overall, it is a rather holistic approach to addressing this issue.

Children's rights

The agenda states that children in areas of armed conflict must be protected with their rights, and it is the warring parties' obligation to do so. These obligations include ending any attack on education, healthcare, and sanitation facilities. Moreover, killing, maiming, or any actions of violence toward children are strictly prohibited. Other details state the ending of child soldiers and how any violations of these obligations are seen as a failure of leadership, humanity, and morality.

Children's recovery

The agenda calls for increased findings and investments in protecting youth in conflicts. Any youth survivors must be monitored, supported, reported, and treated to end any remaining possibilities of child rights violations. Meanwhile, mental and physical well-being, as well as their reintegration, must be prioritized at all costs.

A long-term solution

Though significant effort has already been made to address this issue, similar cases seem to be still happening. To call for lasting peace, UNICEF noted that there should be an immediate end to any armed conflict in general. At the beginning of COVID-19, the UN called for a global ceasefire. Such a ceasefire is the only way to permanently end children's rights violations and fully protect youth in armed conflict. To achieve this, people must continue to spread awareness and create legislations to stop the conflict.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) is a part of the UN, which specifically provides developmental and humanitarian aid to children around the world. As aforementioned, UNICEF has taken significant steps in order to protect youth in conflict; they are one of the major forces uniting governments and organizations worldwide to tackle this issue. UNICEF has created effective agendas and plans to protect children's rights.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The International Committee of The Red Cross is an organization that aims to protect victims in areas of conflict and provide relevant assistance to them. Over the past years, ICRC has continued to spread awareness about children in conflict in a variety of ways. ICRC focuses on supporting the recovery of these children by donating resources, sending professionals for help, and reintegrating children in conflict; this organization has helped a significant number of youths.

Syria

Statistics have shown that Syria is one of the countries with the most amount of child soldiers and mistreated youth in conflict. With constant and long-lasting conflict, Syria has more than 1500 child soldiers in 2021. With war raging since 2011, armed forces recruit children to maintain the shortage of combatants. Children in Syria are heavily exploited and used in war, causing them to have high numbers of underaged victims of sexual and physical violence.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) is an agency under the UN that is responsible for the public health of people worldwide. The WHO is consisted of related personnel, asset, resources, and more. It began in 1951 and has been helping related individuals since then. Children's health is also one of the targets of WHO. In fact, WHO have been providing consistent healthcare to underaged survivors during times of conflict.

Ukraine

Since the 2022 Ukraine and Russia conflict happened, countless lives have been endangered. Children fleeing Ukraine faced risks of being separated from family, abused, or sexually harassed. Children were being killed on a daily basis in Ukraine due to the heavy bombing and violence. The number of child refugees due to this event is also increasing exponentially. Around two in three Ukraine children are displaced. Even though several organizations have made efforts to save these children, there are still many of them neglected.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1949	The Geneva Conventions were put into action. In the convention, there were laws regarding the protection of child health in situations of conflict.
1959	The UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child was published.
1976	Sri Lanka used underaged volunteers as combatants. This introduced the term rebel groups, which are essentially volunteer groups of child soldiers.
1980	The Iran-Iraq war recorded the first official use of child soldiers. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was formed, it is a treaty that establishes 40 rights of children. In the treaty, there was specific attention to youth in armed conflict.
2012	In the Syria massacres, large numbers of children were killed. Children were used as human shields for adult combatants.
2014	With ongoing violence in Syria, there were 150,000 women and children displaced without a home or shelter.
2018	The Global Coalition for Reintegration was formed. This is an alliance of multiple forces, aimed at supporting child reintegration after the armed conflicts.

2022

Due to the Russia and Ukraine conflict, at least 2 children are killed every day in Ukraine. Schools and health facilities were being attacked, endangering the lives of countless youth.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- The Geneva Convention, 12 August 1949
- Children and Armed Conflict, 25 August 1999 (S/RES/1261)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Spreading Awareness

Several organizations and governments have made efforts to raise awareness concerning youth in areas of armed conflict. The Red Hand Day on February 12th is a campaign aimed to spread awareness and stop any recruitment of underage children. The Red Hand Day campaign has existed for more than 15 years, making significant progress in the spread of awareness. The World Day of War Orphans on January 6th also aims to raise awareness for youth who have lost their parents due to armed conflicts. These awareness programs effectively educate people and give them a better understanding of the experience of children in areas of armed conflict children's experience in armed conflict areas. Such programs can also gather donations and other resources necessary to aid those youth. In addition, there are also numerous related films revealing the true lives of child soldiers or children who have been through war and violence.

Support for the reintegration of youth

With reintegration being a crucial step for youth who have undergone violence to re-join society, different forces have tried to support youth in different ways to make their reintegration process smooth and comfortable. The Global Coalition for Reintegration is an alliance formed by member states, the UN, civil organizations, and the World Bank to craft and implement innovative ways to support child reintegration. This alliance was able to identify gaps in the needs in child reintegration, and the result is the publication of three papers in 2020, including content that made recommendations on modalities in child reintegration. Different child reintegration programs were able to take the papers as a reference and improve their methods in supporting child reintegration.

UNICEF

The UNICEF collaborates with various communities, organizations, and governments to help the reintegration of child soldiers. They offer shelter, family, reunification, physical and mental support, and

community services to those in need. For those who suffered sexual violence, UNICEF provides special support. The UNICEF programs helped over 13,000 underaged survivors from the armed forces in 2018.

Possible Solutions

Improvement in awareness programs

Although there are existing awareness programs such as Red Hand Day and The World Day of War Orphans, the influence of these programs remains to be trivial compared to the large numbers of youth being affected by armed conflict. These awareness programs gather most of their popularity in Western countries. It has been noted that these programs have very little influence in Asian or African countries. To address this problem, member states of Asian and African countries may increase the raise of awareness in their countries through creative methods. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can host related activities, or social media accounts can be created on those countries' major online platforms. This can not only raise awareness but also gather more donations and funds from a wider population.

Creation of temporary centers for care

There are a significant number of youths displaced without shelter and support after their homes have been attacked. Displaced youth are extremely vulnerable to recruitment, abduction, maiming, and more. With the collaboration of relevant forces, a temporary center for care can be created for these children. In the center, they shall receive brief phycological and mental treatment. This center can be used as a transition also to better help their reintegration. In the center, related professionals can find a more long-term place for the children to stay and transfer the children there.

Annual forums to ameliorate international relationships

Wars are derived from unstable international relationships, so tackling this is the foremost step of ending armed violence. UN may host annual forums to create a platform where representatives from each nation can gather to discuss ways to ameliorate nations' relationships. By discussing possible collaboration of educational or cultural programmes, nations can find opportunities to build mutual trust. This forum would also act as a reminder and chance for nations to fully communicate before using any forms of violence when resolving conflicts.

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