

## Child Soldiers

According to UNICEF, **more than a quarter of a million children** — boys and girls younger than 18 — are involved in armed conflicts worldwide (1); some of these **child soldiers** are as young as 7.

In the past decade, more than 2 million children have been killed in conflict situations. An estimated 6 million children have been seriously injured or permanently disabled (2).

**Children conscripted into military service** are forced to become:

- Sex slaves (especially girls)
- Spies
- Front-line combatants
- Suicide bombers
- Mine sweepers

### Where does it occur?

In Africa, up to 100,000 children, some as young as 9, were estimated to be involved in armed conflict in mid-2004 (3). Children are also used as soldiers in several Asian countries and parts of Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. For instance, in 2004, paramilitary and rebel groups in Colombia used an estimated 14,000 girls and boys as child soldiers (4).

### Who are the most vulnerable?

Children most likely to be forced into military service include those who are:

- Separated from their parent or caregiver
- Living alone without a supportive adult
- Living on the streets
- From minority groups
- Who are isolated or have limited social skills
- Living in or near conflict zones

### What are the driving factors?

The driving factors for forced child soldier conscription include:

- Abduction and enticement by armed groups
- Government complicity
- Abundance of small arms and light weapons
- Absence of work and education



*Nine countries are reportedly implicated in child soldier use.  
©June 2001/Alison Preston/World Vision*

### What is the impact on these children?

Children affected by war experience traumatic events, such as:

- Violent death of a parent or close relative
- Separation from family
- Witnessing of loved ones being killed or tortured

- Forced participation of violent acts

Experiences of this magnitude can lead to:

- General poor health (malnutrition and infectious diseases, including HIV)
- Serious war injuries
- Physical abuse or deprivation
- Drug addiction
- Sexual abuse and exploitation
- Serious psychological and social problems
- Unwanted pregnancy (particularly dangerous for girls who are often malnourished, physically immature, and living in unsanitary conditions)
- Death

In addition, girls and boys associated with armed groups and fighting forces often face:

- Uncertain futures and a loss of hope
- Rejection by families and communities
- Loss of identity outside the armed group
- Loss of childhood

### **What is World Vision doing?**

World Vision strives to address not only the immediate needs but also the long-term needs of all children affected by war, which includes **prevention, demobilization, and reintegration** of child soldiers. Specific interventions include:

- Assessing the physical and emotional condition of former child soldiers, and providing adequate medical attention and psychosocial support to them
- Providing *Child-Friendly Spaces* where children can meet with other children to experience their grief and loss together
- Coordinating with other agencies for family tracing and reunification
- Raising awareness in communities about the need to protect children from exploitation
- Sensitizing communities for children reintegration, and follow-up on children who have been reintegrated
- Providing educational and skills training opportunities
- Addressing the specific needs of girls who have been affected by armed conflict (i.e., sexual abuse and the consequences including pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases)

World Vision believes that the **protection of all children from armed conflict is essential** and addresses this concern through:

- Humanitarian assistance to children and their families during and after conflict
- Child-focused community development
- Peacebuilding activities for children and adults
- Advocacy to prevent the enticement and abduction of children by armed groups

### **Sources**

1. Children Associated with Armed Groups, UNICEF, May 2006
2. Children in Conflict and Emergencies, UNICEF,
3. Too Young to Kill. Singer, Peter W. The Brookings Institute. January 2005
4. State of the World Children, UNICEF, 2005