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The Deadliest Catch: Child Soldiers in Africa

Perhaps one of the most abominable practices of modern military reality is the overwhelming use of child soldiers on the battlefield. Child soldiers are active in more than three quarters of all ongoing, armed conflicts in the world – the first US casualty in the War on Terror was a Green Beret, gunned down by a fifteen-year-old sniper in Afghanistan.¹ The war-torn regions in Africa alone account for more than 120,000 child combatants out of an estimated global minimum total of 800,000 – and that number is increasing.² The reality is that in all corners of the world “troops now face real and serious threats from opponents from those whom they generally would prefer not to harm.”³

Within the western academic community there seems to be a loose consensus on factors that lead children onto the battlefield, and proposed fixes to the problem. Most scholars agree that child soldiering is prompted by a complex interaction of poverty, displacement, the evolution of “criminalized” warfare, and technological advancements that have allowed children to become potent battlefield tools.⁴ To address these issues, scholars have essentially proposed increased western intervention in conflict areas: development aid to raise living standards – thus alleviating poverty, the supposed primary cause of armed rebellion in developing regions – and increased direct, armed, international protection of displaced children

¹ Peter Singer, “The Enablers of War: Causal Factors behind the Child Soldier Phenomenon,” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 94.

² The 800,000 estimated minimum represents some 300,000 child soldiers used by insurgent groups and an estimated 500,000 currently employed by national armies. Randall Fegley, “Bound to Violence: Uganda’s Child Soldiers as Slaves” in *African Systems of Slavery*, ed. Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2010), 204.

³ Peter Singer, *Children at War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 166.

⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

in conflict regions – thus reducing armed groups’ access to recruits, alongside judicial reforms to hold leaders accountable for child soldier use. However, specific instances in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the conflict in northern Uganda highlight the potential shortcomings of these solutions. More specifically, the documented potential for aid distribution to exacerbate, prolong, and motivate a conflict must be addressed before any solution can be effectively implemented.

Since the end of World War Two, warfare has evolved away from the tradition of equipped, trained national armies battling one another. The advent of an international political arena dominated by a single superpower has essentially eliminated military conquest as a viable tool of national interest. However, international conquest is not the only face of armed conflict. “In the majority of conflicts carried out in the developing world, warfare has become messier and criminalized,” consisting of one or more “criminal” insurgent movements fighting a national government or international coalition.⁵ Within these movements, “the private profit motive has become a central motivator, equal or greater to that of political, ideological, or religious inspirations.”⁶ The vast income potential of the untapped mineral wealth of Africa, for example, has motivated much of the violence in the more tumultuous areas of the continent. The economic rewards of exploiting mineral resources are often incentive enough for insurgent leaders to continue fighting. As a result, even though many African armed movements commence with some legitimate popular or ideological aims, the “income potential” of the uprising often rapidly displaces those aims.⁷ Essentially, “With enough money anyone can

⁵ Ibid, 50

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 51.

equip a powerful military force. With a willingness to use crime, nearly anyone can generate enough money.”⁸

An unfortunate result of the end of Cold War hostilities has been an increase in this type of armed conflict. Western and Eastern governments “simply abandon[ed] countries formerly in their sphere of influence to sort out the tenuous status of their systems of democracy, governance, rule of law and human rights on their own.”⁹ This destabilized further the many African regimes still struggling “to invent themselves within the artificial borders left behind by the colonial regimes.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the fall of the Berlin Wall brought a veritable flood of small, lightweight, yet incredibly deadly weapons onto the international arms market as Eastern-bloc nations reduced their military arsenals – weapons small and simple enough for a child to use.¹¹ The availability of small arms coupled with the destabilization of many established regimes allowed both popular and fringe movements to begin or reinvigorate ongoing campaigns of armed dissent. The vast economic opportunities of Africa’s mineral wealth only allowed these campaigns to grow. Unfortunately, it has become apparent that for movements like these “there is no more readily available, cost-effective and renewable weapon system in existence today” than children.¹²

Children - especially the very young - are easily transformed into and maintained as effective, useful members of a military organization. Not only do children eat less than adults, they don’t require much pay. For example, surveys have shown that only six percent of child

⁸ Ibid, 50

⁹ Romeo Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 108.

¹⁰ Ibid, 106.

¹¹ Singer, *Children at War*, 45-46.

¹² Dallaire, 3.

soldiers in Burundi ever received pay; only ten percent in the DRC.¹³ Children are also seen as desirable soldiers due to their psychological vulnerability and manipulability. Often, child soldiers are forced to kill their family and clan members as an “initiation ceremony” into an armed faction, thus removing any place for children to return to should they run away.¹⁴ In some extreme cases, children are “forced to perform ritualistic acts of cannibalism on their victims, such as eating the victim’s heart” – an example of initiation rites that even further psychologically remove children from their home communities, thus guaranteeing loyalty and obedience.¹⁵ The effectiveness of child soldiers has led to many armed factions actively “recruiting” children into their ranks.

While many children are involuntarily “recruited” – abducted – into the ranks of armed factions world wide, the vast majority join voluntarily. Poverty, displacement, and social deprivation certainly all “pull” children into armed groups without any physical coercion, yet very little is known about the concrete factors that prompt children into voluntary service.¹⁶ Many scholars and most NGOs working in the field are quick to highlight the utter “hopelessness” of a child’s socioeconomic situation as the primary causal factor in their decision to join an armed group, but “in the areas where [these] forces recruit, almost everyone is poor and most children refuse to enlist.”¹⁷ However, while poverty may not be the exclusive determinant to a child’s decision to join a military organization, it is certainly a fundamental

¹³ Singer, *Children at War*, 55.

¹⁴ David Francis, “Paper Protection Mechanisms: Child Soldiers and the International Protection of Children in African Conflict Zones,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45, no. 2 (2007): 216, doi: 10.1017/S0022278X07002510

¹⁵ Singer, *Children at War*, 74.

¹⁶ Francis, 212

¹⁷ Barry Ames, “Methodological Problems in the Study of Child Soldiers” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 19.

element to the web of causal factors scholars have outlined. For example, children living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) or refugee camps are typically viewed as some of the most at-risk of becoming child soldiers.¹⁸ Within these camps not only are poverty levels high and prospects for socioeconomic improvement low or nonexistent, but many of these camps today are the result of conflicts entering their second generation of fighting.¹⁹ “In such extended conflicts, children grow up surrounded by violence, and often see it as a permanent way of life,” thus arguably vastly increasing a child’s likelihood to actively seek out and join an armed movement.²⁰ Furthermore, these camps are rarely fenced or guarded sufficiently, and there is little protection available for children. In the absence of adequate security, rebel agitators can easily slip into a camp, indistinguishable from the resident population, and persuade children to join.²¹ However, once children make the decision to join, they are subjected to the same gruesome initiation rites, violent coercion, and systemic torture that “involuntary recruits” – abductees – endure, “with no possibility of returning to normal life.”²² The effectiveness and all around “desirability” of children as effective battlefield weapons for many insurgent groups has made the practice of recruiting within displaced persons camps commonplace.²³

While scholars have not been able to decisively prove a specific combination of circumstances that will lead to a child’s participation in an armed movement, the general consensus over widespread causal factors has offered insight into potential avenues for reducing child soldier participation rates. These recommendations largely focus on direct

¹⁸ Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich, “No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers,” *International Security* 31 no. 1 (2006): 136-138, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ins/summary/v031/31.1achvarina.html>.

¹⁹ Singer, *Children at War*, 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Achvarina and Reich, 140

²² Francis, 216

²³ Achvarina and Reich, 139

intervention from the west to alleviate poverty and on protecting children from belligerents within camps.²⁴ As a result, humanitarian organizations are pursuing several distinct strategies to “bolster the protection given to civilians.”²⁵ These strategies include immediate efforts “reasserting the role and validity of international humanitarian law [prohibiting the use of child soldiers], expanding the scope of humanitarian protection, and diversifying the implementation strategies of humanitarian protection,” as well as longer term initiatives – such as the UN Millennium Development Goals.²⁶ In general, the recommendations focus on an expansion of targeted international intervention in conflict areas.

Little justification is needed to demonstrate the pressing need for effective methods to reduce child soldier participation rates. Beyond the tremendous moral insult that children as young as five have been documented participating in combat situations, the use of child soldiers effectively lowers the “barriers to entry” into an armed conflict, making armed campaigns a very accessible option for groups on the very fringe of society to initiate, and “mutes the possibility of any positive political change emerging from war.”²⁷ Child soldiers are so easy and cheap to field that an insurgency no longer requires an ideological or political justification to incite adults into risking their lives for the movement. Fringe movements “that would have been marginalized in the past, can now use child soldiers to become quite powerful forces.”²⁸ These reasons – and many more – highlight the urgent need for action, however, caution must be exercised due to the documented potential for international aid to exacerbate a conflict. For example, the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone saw groups of Revolutionary United

²⁴ Singer, *Children at War*, 135-162.

²⁵ Claude Bruderlen and Jennifer Leaning, “New Challenges for Humanitarian Protection,” *British Medical Journal*, 319, no. 7207 (1999): 431, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25185528>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Singer, *Children at War*, 20, 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

Front (RUF) fighters deployed as “cut-hands gangs” to sever civilian appendages.²⁹ The gangs were a part of a “rational, calculated strategy” intended to raise international awareness of the conflict and “deliberately drive up the cost of peace.”³⁰ One former RUF fighter, in reference to the international response to the amputations, said “It was only when you [Westerners] saw ever more amputees that you started paying attention to our fate...without the amputee factor, you people wouldn’t have come.”³¹ The aid community responded in force to the crisis in Sierra Leone, providing medical care to anyone in the conflict region – RUF fighters, civilians, and government-affiliated groups all received care. The RUF was also able to utilize many of the material resources brought in by the aid community to bolster their movement, and secure political concessions from the government once peace talks finally commenced. Arguably, without the international intervention the war would have ended much sooner, although the lives of many more civilians would have been jeopardized each year of the shortened conflict. It’s easy to conceptualize child soldiers as the “amputee factor” in other contexts. It has even been suggested that Joseph Kony’s infamous Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) used child soldiers in precisely that context in its almost 30-year-long war with the Ugandan national government.

On a recent research trip to Gulu, Uganda, I was able to speak with the former spokesman for the LRA, Brigadier Sam Kolo. Brigadier Kolo, widely regarded as “the most rational” amongst the LRA upper leadership, defected to the Ugandan People’s Defense Force

²⁹ Philip Gourevitch, “Alms Dealers,” *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/10/11/101011crat_atlarge_gourevitch?currentPage=all.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

(UPDF) in 2005 following internal conflicts within the LRA.³² He described his position within the LRA to me as in charge of the “political wing” of the organization – entirely separate from the combat leadership – leading the decision making process regarding “political policy.” While I was unable to get him to reveal more about his duties within the organization, he was quite candid about the decision to abduct children from their homes, employ them as soldiers, and force them to commit some of the most grotesque atrocities ever reported in recent warfare. Kolo informed me that the use of children was a calculated political strategy, intended to raise international recognition of the movement and therefore strengthen the LRA’s bargaining position in talks with the government. He said that the sheer volume of aid that flooded northern Uganda once details of the LRA’s child soldiers reached the international audience was an indication of the success of the strategy. Beyond that, Kolo said that the LRA was effectively able to utilize many of the humanitarian resources brought in by the aid community to strengthen its operations and reinvigorate its campaign against the UPDF.

The implications of Kolo’s assertion are vast, but his comments should be placed in context. Kolo is now in the direct employ of the UPDF, and was under the supervision of two handlers during our conversation. Much of what he told me was fabricated political propaganda promoted by the Ugandan Government through the UPDF, and there were significant factual inconsistencies between his narrative of the conflict and that offered by other members of the Gulu community. Many Gulu locals suspect the only reason he is still alive is his willingness to vocalize and promote government propaganda (it’s suspected the government amnesty program for LRA combatants is rarely applied to upper LRA leadership – LRA officers who defect have an alarming tendency to die “of natural causes” while in government custody). For example,

³² “Uganda Rebel Commander Surrenders,” *BBC News*, February 16, 2005.
<http://www.bbc.news.co.uk/>

Kolo assured me that his role within the LRA was completely distinct from combat operations, and that in the exceedingly rare instances of his participating in a combat operation, his participation was limited. However, nearly every single member of the greater Gulu community with whom I spoke attested to Kolo being one of the most ruthless officers in the LRA, often leading attacks on villages and personally forcing child “recruits” (abductees) to murder, decapitate, and/or rape their family members. That being said, no viable challenge was given against his claim that child soldiers were used as an “amputee factor” within the larger Gulu community. It seems as if the use of child soldiers to attract international aid resources is very real, and needs to be addressed.

The way in which the LRA employed child soldiers is one of the more notable and gruesome applications of child soldiers in recent memory, and elicited a substantial international response. Unlike other conflicts where children are enticed into armed service by misleading recruiters or perceived opportunities for economic advancement, “virtually all” LRA child soldiers were abducted.³³ The practice of abducting children emerged wholesale following collapsed peace talks in 1994, and regardless of whether the strategy was specifically intended to elicit an international response – as Brigadier Kolo’s assured me was the case – it is doubtless that significant amounts of resources brought in by the international community were appropriated by the LRA and used to bolster their position.³⁴ However, it is unlikely that any steps taken by the aid community to limit resources being appropriated by the LRA would have curbed the use of child soldiers in Uganda, largely because substantial international aid only began arriving in the region well after child soldiers had become a successful and integral

³³ Fegley, 203

³⁴ Frank Van Acker, “Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army: The New Order No One Ordered,” *African Affairs*, 103, no. 412 (2004): 337, doi: 10.1093/afraf/adh044.

component of the LRA strategy. It wasn't until the early 2000s that international awareness of the magnitude of the conflict reached a level that merited any significant response.³⁵ By that time, child soldiers had become the backbone of the LRA forces, and the LRA had become a significant military force in northern Uganda, forcing the government to move over 1.2 million people out of their homes and into IDP camps for "protection."³⁶ The IDP camps were so poorly protected and administered that the LRA was easily able to target children within the camps for abduction, further augmenting their ranks and capability. By the time international assistance arrived, the use of child soldiers had already become so profitable in terms of pure manpower and physical capability for the LRA that it is unlikely any additional efforts to protect humanitarian resources from LRA appropriation would have prompted the end of the practice.

Despite this, efforts by the aid community to address the unintended exacerbation of a conflict due to aid distribution are still necessary to consider and use appropriately in future conflicts. There are documented cases in the eastern Congo where families "sent children to armed groups for a few months in order to receive, upon their escape or release, [international] program support, including school enrollment, vocational training and starter kits for income generation activities."³⁷ Furthermore, the size and scale of the aid mission in northern Uganda exemplifies the sheer quantity of resources that the international community can leverage in the face of a humanitarian crisis involving child soldiers. Such resources can be seen as a huge temptation to those enveloped in the sheer poverty of developing Africa. In the modern age of low tech, rebel warfare, broadly disseminated stocks of easily accessible and usable light arms,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 336.

³⁷ Fegley, 219.

and the increasing ability of a leader motivated by nothing more than the “profit motive” to begin an armed insurgency, the possibility of an armed group baiting the international community into bringing resources into an area through the use of child soldiers cannot be discarded. The suggested strategies of increased direct intervention put forth by the academic community to curb child soldier participation rates arguably represent a viable, applicable, and feasible approach to address the issue. However, extreme caution must be exercised to ensure that efforts to protect children from the forces that push them into soldiering do ~~not~~ further endanger them in the process.

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