Briefing Paper

Committee: UNICEF

Topic: The Question of Ending the Use of Child Soldiers

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Summary

The recruitment and use of child soldiers is one of the most pressing humanitarian issues of the modern era. Although the United Nations (UN) formally prohibited the use of child soldiers through the adoption of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) in 2000, compliance remains inconsistent across the globe. In many conflict zones, children continue to be forcibly recruited or manipulated into joining armed groups, often under threat of violence or due to extreme poverty. The UN, alongside numerous NGOs and humanitarian organizations, has launched multiple initiatives aimed at preventing recruitment, rescuing children from combat roles, and rehabilitating those who have endured the trauma of armed conflict. Despite these efforts, the persistence of civil wars, insurgencies, and organized crime networks has made enforcement challenging. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that combines legal frameworks, education, poverty alleviation, and international cooperation.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Soldier – Any person under the age of 18 who is recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including combatants, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes.

Recruitment – The act of enlisting individuals into armed forces or groups, whether voluntary or forced.

Demobilization – The formal discharge of combatants from armed forces or groups, often as part of peace agreements.

Reintegration – The process of helping former child soldiers return to civilian life through education, vocational training, and psychosocial support.

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) – A UN treaty adopted in 2000 that prohibits the recruitment and use of children under 18 in hostilities.

Non-State Armed Groups – Armed organizations not affiliated with a recognized government, often responsible for the majority of child soldier recruitment.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) – A set of programs aimed at removing combatants from armed groups and reintegrating them into society.

Forced Recruitment – The coercion of individuals, often through threats or violence, into joining armed forces or groups.

Voluntary Recruitment – Enlistment without direct coercion, though often influenced by poverty, lack of education, or social pressure.

Combatant – A person actively engaged in fighting during armed conflict.

Psychosocial Support – Services designed to address both psychological and social needs of individuals affected by trauma, such as child soldiers.

Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) – A UN system established to track and report violations against children in armed conflict.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – A body of law that regulates armed conflict and seeks to protect civilians, including children.

Re-recruitment – The phenomenon where former child soldiers return to armed groups due to lack of reintegration support or economic opportunities.

Background Information

Recruitment – The use of child soldiers is not confined to failed states or war-torn regions; it is a global issue with varying degrees of severity. While some countries allow voluntary enlistment under the age of 18, others forcibly recruit children into militias or paramilitary groups.

Impact on Mental Health – The psychological impact of being a child soldier is profound and long-lasting. Children exposed to armed conflict often experience severe trauma that affects their emotional, cognitive, and social development. Common mental health consequences include:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):
  Former child soldiers frequently suffer from PTSD due to exposure to extreme violence, including killing, witnessing death, and experiencing torture or sexual abuse. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness.
- Depression and Anxiety Disorders:
  Many child soldiers develop chronic depression and anxiety, often linked to feelings of guilt, shame, and hopelessness. These conditions can persist for years, even after reintegration into civilian life.
- Substance Abuse:
  Armed groups often introduce children to drugs or alcohol to desensitize them to violence or maintain control. This can lead to long-term addiction and further complicate rehabilitation efforts.

- Aggression and Behavioural Issues:
  Prolonged exposure to violence normalizes aggressive behaviour. Former child soldiers may struggle with anger management, impulsivity, and difficulty forming healthy relationships.
- Suicidal Ideation:
  The combination of trauma, isolation, and lack of support often results in suicidal thoughts or attempts among former child soldiers.
- Impact on Cognitive Development:
  Interrupted education and constant stress impair cognitive growth, making it harder for these children to succeed academically or professionally later in life.
- Secondary Trauma in Communities:
  Communities receiving former child soldiers often experience collective trauma. Soldiers who fought against child combatants also report heightened PTSD, creating a cycle of psychological harm.

Rehabilitation Challenges – Rehabilitating former child soldiers is one of the most complex humanitarian tasks. While disarmament and demobilization are critical first steps, true reintegration into society requires addressing deep-rooted psychological, social, and economic issues. Key challenges include:

- Psychological Trauma:
  Many former child soldiers suffer from severe PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Access to mental health professionals in conflict zones is extremely limited, and cultural stigma around therapy often prevents children from seeking help.
- Social Stigma and Community Rejection:
  Communities frequently view returning child soldiers as perpetrators rather than victims, especially if they were involved in atrocities. This leads to isolation, discrimination, and sometimes violence against reintegrated children.
- Interrupted Education:
  Years spent in armed groups mean children often lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Reintegration programs must provide accelerated education, but funding and resources are often insufficient.
- Economic Vulnerability:
  Without vocational training or job opportunities, former child soldiers face poverty and unemployment, making them vulnerable to re-recruitment by armed groups or criminal networks.
- Gender-Specific Challenges:
  Girls recruited as child soldiers often face additional trauma from sexual violence and

exploitation. They may return with children born of rape, which increases stigma and complicates reintegration.

- Security Risks:
  Some former child soldiers retain access to weapons or maintain ties to armed groups, posing risks to community safety and undermining trust in reintegration programs.
- Funding and Infrastructure Gaps:
  Rehabilitation programs require sustained funding for education, healthcare, and psychosocial support. However, donor fatigue and competing global crises often lead to underfunded initiatives.
- Legal and Identity Issues:
  Many child soldiers lack birth certificates or legal documentation, making it difficult to enrol in school, access healthcare, or participate in formal employment.

Why These Challenges Matter – Failure to address these issues perpetuates cycles of violence. Children who cannot reintegrate successfully may return to armed groups, fuelling ongoing conflicts and destabilizing regions.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

San Marino – Holds the lowest enlistment age globally (15), raising concerns about international compliance.

United Kingdom – Allows enlistment at 16, making it the largest military power with a sub-18 recruitment policy.

Conflict Hotspots – CAR, DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen remain primary regions where child soldier recruitment is rampant.

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund) – UNICEF is one of the leading global actors in protecting children in armed conflict. Key roles include supporting the release and reintegration of child soldiers through education, psychosocial care, and family reunification; running DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration) child-specific programs; advocating for stronger international laws prohibiting child recruitment and working directly in conflict zones to prevent recruitment through community engagement.

Save the Children – A major child-rights NGO working globally. Key roles include operating child protection centres in conflict zones; providing psychological support, healthcare, and education for children affected by war; publishing annual reports documenting child soldier use, pressuring governments and armed groups and running campaigns promoting the end of child recruitment.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – A neutral humanitarian organisation operating in conflict zones. Key roles include visiting detention centres to ensure child detainees' rights are respected; reuniting former child soldiers with families through tracing services; providing medical care and emergency relief to children affected by conflict and promoting International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including protections for minors.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) – A global watchdog monitoring human rights violations. Key roles include investigating and publishing reports on recruitment practices by governments and non-state armed groups; advocating for sanctions or international action against violators and pressuring states to strengthen laws preventing recruitment.

Amnesty International – An international human rights advocacy organisation. Key roles include conducting research on child soldier recruitment and related abuses; running global awareness and accountability campaigns and lobbying governments to comply with OPAC and IHL standards.

War Child – An NGO specialising in assisting children affected by conflict. Key roles include delivering education, psychosocial support, and livelihood training to former child soldiers; running community programmes to prevent recruitment and supporting safe spaces for child survivors of war.

World Vision – A Christian humanitarian and development organisation active in over 100 countries. Key roles include providing reintegration support including trauma recovery,

counselling, and vocational training; working with families and communities to reduce stigma against returning child soldiers and conducting advocacy to strengthen child protection systems.

Plan International – A rights-focused global NGO. Key roles include running youth empowerment programs to reduce vulnerability to recruitment; advocating for strong child protection laws in conflict-prone regions and supporting educational access for children in displaced communities.

Geneva Call – A unique NGO that works specifically with non-state armed groups. Key roles include persuading armed groups to sign "Deeds of Commitment" pledging to stop child recruitment; providing training to armed groups on humanitarian norms and monitoring compliance through field verification teams.

International Rescue Committee (IRC) – A major humanitarian NGO operating in many conflict zones. Key roles include providing emergency aid including shelter, healthcare, and education; supporting reintegration of child soldiers through community-based programs and offering livelihood training to prevent re-recruitment.

Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children – A UN-backed global network. Key roles include coordinating international action to end violence against children, including recruitment; funding prevention programmes in high-risk regions and supporting governments in strengthening national child protection systems.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – A medical humanitarian NGO. Key roles include providing emergency healthcare to children wounded or traumatised by conflict; operating mental health programmes for war-affected youth and delivering medical care in areas where UN agencies may lack access.

International Crisis Group (ICG) – A global conflict-analysis organisation. Key roles include studying political and military conditions that drive child recruitment; advising governments and UN bodies on conflict prevention and publishing policy recommendations on addressing instability and armed group behaviour.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1924 – Declaration of the Rights of Children by the League of Nations

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1989 – UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC), USA is the only member state not part of the convention

1993 – World Conference on Human Rights

2000 – 1st Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) on the UNCRC, alongside the 2nd Optional protocol that banned the sale of children and sexual use of children in multiple capacities.

2011 – 3rd Optional Protocol created

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The international community has made significant efforts to address the recruitment and use of child soldiers, but these attempts have faced numerous challenges. Key initiatives include:

- International Legal Frameworks
  The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) were landmark steps in prohibiting child soldier recruitment. These treaties have been widely ratified, with OPAC requiring states to raise the minimum age for compulsory recruitment to 18 and to take measures against non-state actors. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and some states still allow voluntary enlistment below 18.

  Why These Efforts Fell Short:
  - Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are not treaty signatories:
    NSAGs - responsible for most child recruitment - cannot legally ratify treaties and rarely feel compelled to follow them.
  - Domestic enforcement mechanisms are often weak:
    Even when countries ratify OPAC, they may lack functioning courts, child-protection services, or a stable government to enforce compliance.
  - Voluntary recruitment loopholes persist:
    Many states still allow “voluntary enlistment” below 18, creating ambiguity that armed groups exploit.

  Legal frameworks alone are insufficient; they require enforcement capacity, governance reforms, and mechanisms for engaging NSAGs.

- Regional Agreements -
  African Union and ECOWAS have adopted regional protocols reinforcing child protection in armed conflict. Despite these, weak governance and ongoing conflicts in member states have hindered implementation.

  Structural Causes of Failure:
  - States facing active conflict could not realistically implement child-protection policies.
  - Regional militaries often lacked resources, monitoring systems, or trained personnel.
  - Economic crises reduced governments' ability to prioritise child protection.

  Regional agreements must be paired with financial and operational support for member states.

- UN Peacekeeping and Monitoring -
  The UN established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) under Security

Council Resolution 1612 (2005) to track violations against children in conflict zones. While this has improved data collection, it has not fully prevented recruitment.

Major Obstacles:

- Access restrictions: Peacekeepers and UN monitors are often barred from recruitment hotspots.
- Retaliation risks: Communities providing information may be targeted by armed groups.
- Data does not equal enforcement: Identifying violations rarely leads to consequences without political will.

  Monitoring must be paired with enforceable accountability mechanisms.

- Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Programs -
  DDR programs have been implemented in countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the DRC, providing education, vocational training, and psychosocial support. These programs have had success stories but often suffer from underfunding, lack of infrastructure, and difficulty reaching remote areas.

  Structural Weaknesses:

  - Underfunding and short-term timelines. Reintegrating traumatised children takes years, not months.
  - Geographical barriers: Many child soldiers operate in remote jungle or desert regions unreachable by NGOs.
  - Re-recruitment incentives: If reintegration offers no economic stability, returning to armed groups becomes rational.
  - Community rejection: Stigmatisation often prevents successful reintegration.

    DDR must be long-term, fully funded, and community-based to succeed.

- NGO and Civil Society Efforts -
  Organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and War Child have launched campaigns to rescue and rehabilitate child soldiers. They also advocate for stronger laws and provide community-based reintegration programs. However, these efforts are often limited by security risks and resource constraints.

  Challenges:

  - High security risks prevent access to many conflict zones.
  - Dependence on donor funding makes programs inconsistent or short-lived.
  - Lack of coordination leads to duplication of efforts.

    NGOs require stable, multi-year funding and closer coordination with governments and the UN.

- Awareness Campaigns and Advocacy -
  Global campaigns like the “Children, Not Soldiers” initiative have raised awareness and pressured governments to comply with international standards. While these campaigns

have influenced policy changes, they have not eradicated the practice in conflict zones dominated by non-state actors.

Why These Attempts Fall Short – Despite strong legal frameworks and advocacy, the persistence of armed conflicts, poverty, and weak governance means that child soldier recruitment continues. Non-state actors, who are not bound by treaties, pose the greatest challenge. Additionally, lack of sustained funding and political will undermines long-term success.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening International Law – Amend existing protocols, such as OPAC, to impose stricter compliance measures and introduce penalties for violations. Encourage all member states to raise the minimum enlistment age to 18 without exceptions.

Advantages:

- Creates clearer, universal standards.
- Applies pressure on governments maintaining low enlistment ages.

Limitations & Risks:

- Enforcement is nearly impossible in failed states or territories governed by armed groups.
- States may ratify updated protocols but fail to implement reforms domestically.
- Sanctions can worsen humanitarian conditions for children, potentially *increasing* recruitment incentives.

Focus on coupling legal reform with technical support, phased compliance, and monitoring.

Targeting Non-State Actors – Develop strategies to engage with and dismantle armed groups that recruit children. This could involve sanctions, international tribunals, and community-based interventions.

Advantages:

- Targets the primary source of child recruitment.
- Realistic in regions where the state does not control territory.

Limitations:

- Many NSAGs fear that cooperating signals weakness.
- Some groups lack central leadership capable of enforcing agreements internally.
- Engagement risks being seen as “legitimising” armed actors.

Promote engagement via humanitarian, not political, channels, using local intermediaries.

Education and Poverty Alleviation – Address root causes by investing in education, healthcare, and economic development in vulnerable regions. Providing viable alternatives to armed groups is essential for long-term success.

Advantages:

- Long-term sustainable reduction in recruitment.
- Helps communities resist armed-group coercion.

Limitations:

- Decades-long timeline: Not a quick solution for active conflict.
- Schools in conflict regions are often targeted, making access dangerous.
- Requires large-scale funding that many conflict states cannot manage.

Combine short-term protection measures with long-term development assistance.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration – Expand funding for programs that support former child soldiers, including mental health services, vocational training, and community reintegration initiatives.

Advantages:

- Directly reduces re-recruitment.
- Stabilises communities recovering from conflict.

Limitations:

- Geographic isolation: Many child soldiers operate in remote areas; extraction is dangerous and expensive.
- Severe shortage of trauma specialists in conflict zones.
- Communities may reject returnees, especially if atrocities were committed.
- Reintegration without economic opportunities becomes unsustainable, leading to re-recruitment.

Advocate for mobile mental health units, community sensitisation campaigns, and long-term vocational funding.

Monitoring and Accountability – Establish independent monitoring bodies to track compliance and report violations. Utilise technology such as satellite imagery and AI-driven data analysis to identify recruitment hotspots.

Advantages:

- Satellite and AI surveillance improves early-warning systems.
- Better data encourages donor funding.

Limitations:

- Technology cannot access dense forests, underground networks, or mobile armed groups.
- Collected data may not lead to action if political will is absent.
- States may refuse access or obstruct monitoring to avoid international embarrassment.

Pair monitoring with clear escalation mechanisms, such as targeted travel bans for recruiters rather than broad sanctions harming civilians.

Appendix

Below is a list of all countries with enlistment ages below 18:

Australia (17 Voluntary[V]), Austria (17 V; 18 Compulsory[C]), Azerbaijan (17 V; 18 C), Bangladesh (16 V), Brunei (17 V), Cape Verde (17 V; 18 C), Canada (16.5 Reserve; 17 V), China (17 V; 18 C but nuanced), Cuba (17 C), Cyprus (17 V; 18 C Greek), Greece (17 wartime C), Guatemala (17 C), Guinea-Bissau (16 V; 18 C), India (16.5 V), Israel (17 V; 18 C for some groups), Jamaica (17 V), Jordan (17 C), DPRK (17 C), Kuwait (17 V), Lebanon (17 V), Netherlands (17 V), New Zealand (17 V; 18 Combat), Norway (17 V-men; 18 V-women; 19C), Pakistan (16 V), Papua New Guinea (16 V), Philippines (17 V), Poland (18 V; 17 wartime enlistment), San Marino (15 V), Sao Tome and Principe (17 V; 18 C), Saudi Arabia (17 V), Singapore (16.5 V; 18C), Tonga (16 V), Trinidad and Tobago (17 V), UK (16 V), USA (17 V; 17 C [poorly defined militia]), Zambia (16 V). While these policies often claim to involve voluntary enlistment, the reality is that socio-economic pressures and lack of alternatives frequently make such decisions coercive. In conflict zones such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, recruitment is almost always forced and accompanied by severe human rights abuses.

Useful Links

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights | OHCHR
2. Our Story - RDCSI
3. Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups | UNICEF
4. The effects of child encounters during military deployments on the well-being of military personnel: a systematic review - PMC
5. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict
6. Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF
7. Children and Armed Conflict | Human Rights Watch
8. Protected persons: Children | ICRC
9. Children and Armed Conflict Publications : Security Council Report

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2. Our Story - RDCSI
3. 10 U.S. Code § 246 - Militia: composition and classes | U.S. Code | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute
4. List of enlistment age by country - Wikipedia
5. The effects of child encounters during military deployments on the well-being of military personnel: a systematic review - PMC

6. Child soldiers exposed to more violence and combat are at greater risk of mental health problems - ACAMH
7. Children and Armed Conflict Publications : Security Council Report
8. Save the Children International | Save the Children International
9. ICRC: Neutral humanitarian action | Protecting lives in conflict
10. Human Rights Watch | Defending Human Rights Worldwide
11. Amnesty International
12. About World Vision | HomePage | World Vision International
13. Plan International
14. Geneva Call | Protecting civilians in armed conflict
15. International Rescue Committee | International Rescue Committee (IRC)
16. MSF - Médecins Sans Frontières | Medical humanitarian organisation
17. International Crisis Group
18. Copilot