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"Child soldiers have suffered from a life completely out of order with anything that can be considered normal human development. Childhood is lost, with all the devastating consequences in the present and for the future. These consequences also affect the countries where they live as well as their social order and security, for unintegrated child soldiers of today form the criminal gangs of tomorrow."

*Hidden Displacement:
Child Soldiers
Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care
of Migrants and Itinerant People*



Decades of Civil War in Burma

Burma, renamed Myanmar by the ruling military junta, has a history riddled with conflict. The second largest country in Southeast Asia with a current population of over 55 million people, Burma stands on the Andaman Sea between the resource-hungry nations of China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, and Thailand. Burma's abundant natural resources have long been the cause for exploitation from outside nations and

inner strife amongst various ethnic groups. Conflict within its borders is only expected to continue due to lucrative ruby and jade mines, the discovery of abundant natural gas deposits, and the country's emerging potential in the sector of hydropower.

Since its liberation from British colonial rule and Japanese occupation in 1948, Burma has been plagued by despotism, militarization, civil unrest and a dramatic decline in living conditions. The fight for independence caused splits between many of the country's ethnic

Sold to Army for US\$15, a Sack of Rice, and a Vat of Cooking Oil: Childhood in Burma

Megan M. Irving

groups. Over 100 distinct ethnic groups are identified within the country, but the Burman ethnic group contends that they are the majority and for decades have sought to maintain dominance of the region.

After the Burman-controlled military took power in 1962, Burma was sealed off from the outside world and the nation's development ceased. Increased militarization led to a general deterioration of human rights, including unwarranted arrests, relocations, indiscriminate warfare, use of child soldiers, and indirect structural involvement in political and economic affairs.

In 1988, the National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, led a nonviolent student revolution against the military regime. As hundreds of thousands joined the movement, the junta initiated violent crackdowns. In what was known as "the 8888 Massacre," over 3,000 unarmed demonstrators were killed, hundreds more injured, and thousands, including Suu Kyi, imprisoned. As the repression spread, it is estimated that more than 10,000 Burmese were killed.

Due to years of internal ethnic conflict, economic mismanagement, increased isolationism, and escalating militarization by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Burma currently ranks as one of the most impoverished and corrupt nations in the world. The

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children of Burma are especially vulnerable to the effects of extreme poverty, the human rights abuses of the junta, and the atrocities of armed conflict.

In August 2007, thousands of Buddhist monks gathered in the streets of Burma in nonviolent protest against crippling inflation rates and the abuses perpetrated by the SPDC. Hailed as the "Saffron Revolution," the movement was brutally repressed by the national army, the Tatmadaw. Hundreds of unarmed monks were killed, thousands of protestors were injured, and over 2,000 political activists, monks, journalists, and community activists were imprisoned. As in the "8888 Massacre," child soldiers were among those forced to attack their own people.

Child Soldiers of Burma

The United Nation's Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in accordance with Catholic social teaching, holds that every child has an inalienable and inviolable right to grow up free from exploitation, oppression, and violence and with access to the resources necessary to develop their full human potential. Armed conflict, however, strips children of these rights and strikes at the heart of human dignity.

Currently, there are over 300,000 child soldiers around the world. Both government forces and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) unlawfully recruit children under the age of 18 through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. Now considered one of the worst forms of human trafficking, the use of children as soldiers is, without doubt, an egregious crime against humanity.

Burmese children face a daily risk of involuntary recruitment into the Tatmadaw, which is the only state military in Asia that actively recruits combatants under the age of 18. While ethnic NSAGs that occupy the border regions of Burma are believed to also use child soldiers, the SPDC and its army of more than 500,000, is by far the worst violator of international laws against the conscription of child combatants.

Children are abducted from markets, transit hubs, community farms, and schools throughout Burma. The most common technique used by military recruiters is the threat of arrest. Children who are found alone are accused of a minor offense, such as not having an ID card or loitering, and are then given the choice of joining the army or going to jail.

At the age of 14, Maung Zaw Oo was forcibly recruited into Burma's national army. He was separated from his family and sold to the army by a military recruiter for 20,000 kyat (\$15

“**A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is a member of or attached to the armed forces or an armed group, whether or not there is an armed conflict. Child soldiers may perform tasks ranging from direct participation in combat; military activities such as scouting, spying, sabotage, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill and other preparations; support functions such as portering and domestic tasks; sexual slavery and forced labor.** (Child Soldiers Global Report 2004) ”

US), a sack of rice and a vat of cooking oil. Although managing to escape once, Maung Zaw Oo was once again enlisted by the age of 15. When his family learned of his conscription and tried to secure his release, the captain of the battalion offered his release in exchange for five new recruits. Maung Zaw Oo refused and bravely told his

family, "I don't want five others to face this, it's very bad here. I'll just stay and face it myself." Maung Zaw Oo's lost all hope by the age of 16 and began to volunteer for the most dangerous combat positions, later explaining, "In the army, my life was worthless." In Burma an estimated 70,000 children - more than any other individual country - have similar stories to Maung Zaw Oo 's. Extreme poverty, a culture of militarization and impunity, and a systematic deterioration of human rights are the root causes of child recruitment. Reduced to the status of a commodity, children as young as 9 are routinely bought and sold by military recruiters desperate to fill unrealistic quotas. As Burma is not involved in any outside conflict, these children are forced to fight against their own people. Entrenched in the frontlines of the longest continuous civil war in modern history, Burmese child soldiers are repeatedly exposed to war crimes and the resulting trauma has devastating consequences.



Links to Child Soldiers Websites:

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers
www.child-soldiers.org/home

Amnesty International and Child Soldiers
www.amnestyusa.org then select "Children" under "What's Going On Where?"

Humanitarian News and Analysis
www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=24&ReportId=66280

Invisible Children
www.invisiblechildren.com/

SOS Children's Villages: A Loving Home for Every Child
www.child-soldier.org/

UNICEF: Children and Armed Conflict
www.unicef.org/emerg/index_childsoldiers.html

Child Soldier Relief Supporting Former Child Soldiers Worldwide
childsoldierrelief.org/

For your convenience, these and other resources are linked on our website: carmelitengo.org

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With few educational or economic opportunities, the army represents a feasible choice for Burmese children, especially the urban poor, refugees, and orphans. Child soldiers are subjected to intense psychological trauma, undergo corporal punishment, and are required to do manual labor or engage in combat. They are often forced to perform terrible acts against civilians, including murder and rape.

As there is no formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration strategy for child soldiers in Burma, children who attempt to desert from the Tatmadaw are almost always caught and either imprisoned or forcibly returned to the ranks. The inability to leave the army has reportedly led some child soldiers to commit suicide, while many others conform to military life and pass their terrible legacy on to future generations.

International Response

Several UN Security Council resolutions and other international standards have been implemented to address the crisis of children caught in armed conflicts. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the military recruitment of children as a war crime and a crime against humanity thus allowing perpetrators of child soldiers to be tried in international court. The UN's Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which increased the minimum age of enlistment from 15 to 18, has been signed by over 120 nations. In 2010, UNICEF endorsed the "Zero under 18" campaign to achieve universal ratification of this protocol by 2012. The Paris Principles offer guidance on protecting children from recruitment and provide guidelines on the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of children associated with armed conflict. The International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 182 defines child soldiering as a form of trafficking and one of the worst forms of child labor.

Indeed, the international community as a whole has recognized a moral obligation to intervene on behalf of child soldiers in Burma. However, the Burmese government has largely ignored these international efforts. The ILO has recently taken up complaints of child recruitment in Burma and in several instances has been able to secure the release of individual children. However, procedural restrictions within the ILO and the Burmese government's intimidation of children's rights activists severely limit the ILO's ability to address the problem.

Several nations, including China, Russia, Israel, and Serbia, prosper from a direct arms trade with the junta and several other nations benefit from economic trade relations with Burma. While the U.S. and the U.K. have imposed economic sanctions on the country, many believe these have resulted in extreme poverty for the civilian population, but had little effect on the totalitarian regime. Efforts have been made within the UN to bring attention to the situation in Burma, but China and Russia have utilized their veto powers to block humanitarian and political intervention in Burma's affairs and the UN Security Council's stance on Burma remains lenient.

One of the few results of international pressure has been the junta's creation of a Committee for Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children in 2004. While this has led to the release of a few hundred child soldiers, the Committee has unfortunately taken no significant actions to redress the issue of systemic child conscription and the government continues to prohibit NGOs from operating rehabilitation shelters for former child soldiers within Burma.

Conclusion

International groups must find other ways to reach out to these children. Rehabilitation programs that offer trauma counseling and assist in social and economic re-integration into society are essential – especially in refugee camps in bordering nations. International efforts to create inclusive migration laws that reflect the UN Declaration of Human Rights should be implemented. Governments, international organizations, NGOs, religious leaders, and individuals must make an effort to spread awareness of the issue and to encourage increased funding and support for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs. In addition, it is necessary to address the root causes that drive the recruitment of children, including extreme poverty and military rule.

Pope John Paul II emphasized that "no human right is safe if we fail to commit ourselves to safeguarding all of them. When the violation of any fundamental human

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SUMMARY

CHILD SOLDIERS



Global Report 2008



EVOLUTION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Children and War: A Global Report

The Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 details how a near global consensus that children should not be used as soldiers and strenuous international efforts have failed to protect tens of thousands of children from war. When armed conflict exists, children will almost inevitably become involved as soldiers.

This is the third edition of the report and covers the period April 2004 to October 2007.

www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/files/country_pdfs/FINAL_2008_Global_Report.pdf



Effects of War on Children

Despite international bans, more than 250,000 children fight as soldiers in 86 countries across the globe, almost half of them in Africa. Two new studies explored how these children adjust after they return to their homes. Key to successful adaptation, the studies found, was the characteristics of the communities to which the children returned.

The studies appear in a special section on children and disaster in the July/August 2010 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100715090640.htm



right is accepted without reaction, all other rights are placed at risk. It is therefore essential that there should be a global approach to the subject of human rights and a serious commitment to defend them." Catholic religious leaders have a responsibility to educate their congregations about the situation of child soldiers in Burma and to support them through prayer.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to work towards the common good and to emphasize the human dignity of all people. We must

educate ourselves about the situation in Burma and share this knowledge with others. There are various organizations – such as the US Campaign for Burma and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers – that are dedicated to bringing an end to the use of child soldiers through public education, leadership development initiatives, and advocacy campaigns. By raising awareness about the issue of child soldiers and the human rights violations committed in Burma, it ensures that the problems cannot be ignored.

Efforts to demobilize children during conflict have been met with only limited success; thus peace remains the main hope for securing their release. Effective strategies must address the root causes of child soldiering in Burma – poverty, inequity, discrimination, and the rampant human rights abuses. The international community may not be able to resolve the current crisis in Burma, but we must at least bear witness in order to ensure that the people of Burma, especially its children, no longer suffer in silence.

Note: On March 30, 2011, a civilian government, the Union for the Solidarity and Development Council (USDC), officially replaced the SPDC. Although the regime maintains that the USDC is a democratically elected government, several nations, including the U.S., have questioned the legitimacy of these claims. It remains to be seen whether this new government will enact any comprehensive changes that will benefit the people of Burma, especially the child soldiers.

For references and a more detailed account on child soldiers in Burma, please go to <http://carmelitengo.org>



Let the Children Come to Me

"...children were brought to Jesus so that he could place his hands on them in prayer. The disciples began to scold them, but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to them.' And he laid his hands on their heads before he left that place." (Matthew 19:4)

The more we learn about child soldiers, child prostitution and child labor – all of which are forms of human trafficking – the more overwhelmed one might feel. We see the injustice that is committed against "these little ones" and also against society as a whole. As educators we understand the effects that good as well

as bad experiences have on a child. These effects do not stop at the end of childhood, but are carried throughout life. What are the effects a child soldier, a child prostitute or a child laborer carry throughout life? What good will society experience from a child soldier, a child prostitute or a child laborer not when but if he or she survive to adulthood?

We are a people of faith, hope and love and we must not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed to the point of inaction by the plight of suffering children. Children are suffering injustice in every country in the world. We cannot say it's not happening in my country because the evidence shows it is happening in each and every country from the wealthiest to the poorest. As a people of faith we believe there is something we can do to stop the crimes committed against children. As a people of hope we educate ourselves to know what are the ways we can get involved to stop child trafficking. As a people of love we will take action by our prayers, by raising our voices in the pulpit, in the classroom and in public to say, "Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to them."

by Jane Remson, O. Carm.
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