

Kids in combat: U.S.-funded child soldiers

by [Dean Peerman](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

In the decade 1995-2005, 2 million child soldiers were killed and 6 million permanently disabled or injured in armed conflict, according to a United Nations report. Of the estimated 300,000 children (younger than 18) currently serving as soldiers in various parts of the world, some have joined voluntarily, out of economic desperation or for their own safety. Others have been forcibly recruited, trained and deployed by rebel forces. But many are conscripted and used in combat by recognized sovereign governments—at present the governments of nine countries, and eight of the nine receive military assistance from the United States. The eight: Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda.

Some of these exploited children are as young as eight. Sometimes girls as well as boys are recruited—and often the girls are raped or otherwise sexually abused. In addition to being compelled to engage in combat—wielding AK-47 assault rifles and the like, often while hopped-up on drugs—the children may serve in support roles as porters, cooks, guards, medics, messengers, spies, human mine detectors or sex slaves. Children are often targeted as recruits because they are viewed as more malleable and easier to manipulate than adults.

On occasion child soldiers are forced by their commanders to commit grisly ritual killings or engage in torture and mutilation, and sometimes other children are the victims. The child warriors are at great risk not only of physical harm but of severe psychological trauma as well. That trauma is likely to be heightened when the shooting is over and they return home, where they tend to be stigmatized and ostracized and may be disowned by their own families. Since they are without suitable skills and often without means of rehabilitation, the transition to a comparatively normal and productive life is extremely difficult. Generally branded as terrorists by U.S. immigration law, former child soldiers are denied asylum or refugee status.

That U.S. taxpayers' money would be dispensed to finance state-run armies using children is an atrocity in itself. Such funding is also in violation of treaties and agreements to which the U.S. is a signatory, such as the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict—a protocol approved and ratified by the U.S. Senate in 2002. About 125 countries have ratified the protocol, but not all of them enforce it; five of the above-named eight nations are signatories. People who recruit and use child soldiers run little risk of being prosecuted.

Last spring liberal Democrat Dick Durbin of Illinois and conservative Republican Sam Brownback of Kansas introduced the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2007 in the Senate. Designed to end the use of children in hostilities around the world, the measure encourages governments to “disarm, demobilize and rehabilitate child soldiers from government forces and government-supported militias.” While putting restrictions on U.S. assistance to child-using militaries, the bill would not immediately cut off such aid but would allow for a phase-out period of up to two years, during which the U.S. would help the affected countries to professionalize their armed forces and to provide therapy and reeducation for former child soldiers and restore them to society.

A coalition of NGOs—headed by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International USA, the Center for Defense Information and the Christian humanitarian organization World Vision—is strongly backing the bill. One of the arguments advanced by this coalition: “It is . . . in our own national interest to reduce the incidence of child soldiers in the world: our commanders do not want U.S. troops to confront the spectacle of an armed child in a combat situation.”

Speaking about the child-soldiers bill to fellow senators, Durbin quoted Cicero's dictum that “in times of war, the law falls silent,” then went on to say: “We must prove Cicero wrong. Even during times of war, the law should never fall silent for the most vulnerable among us—our children.”

The bill is still in committee and has yet to come up for debate, much less for a vote. A similar bill is pending in the House.

On October 1 the United Nations held a meeting to reaffirm political support for the Paris Principles—a multination pledge not to use children to wage war that was signed in Paris last February. The U.S. participated in neither the Paris conference nor the October meeting at the UN.