

## **Child Soldiering in Africa: What we can do to end child soldiering**

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### **War, child soldiering and its aftermath continue to destroy societies in West, East, Central, Southern and Great Lakes Region Africa. In African and global wars, children are increasingly the soldier of choice**

Twice in May last year, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacked two Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Northern Uganda. Most of those killed were women and children. Most of those who did the killing were also children.

The May 16<sup>th</sup> raid was on Pagak Camp just north of Gulu. Most of the victims, estimated as between 40 and 80 in number, were shot or hacked to death. A UN team that visited the camp said that 544 grass-roofed houses were also burned in the raid and over a third of the camp's 12,000 persons were streaming toward Gulu town for refuge. Just before leaving the camp, LRA soldiers looted food and abducted women to carry the food out of the camp. When they had gone a short distance from the camp, the soldiers took the food they had looted and clubbed the women and the babies strapped to their backs to death.

In the second raid on May 20<sup>th</sup> at Lukodi Camp, also near Gulu, the victims either died in their houses when they were set ablaze or bludgeoned to death. Several weeks before that, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, over 200 people were killed in Odek village. Many thousands of civilians in Uganda's northern districts have been raped, maimed, and slaughtered by LRA raids over the years. In fact, this carnage on the civilian population of Northern Uganda has been going on for 18 years without relief. Because the attacks have been increasing, the number of IDPs has trebled since 2002, to 1.6 million people.

So what is the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, and why are they attacking the civilian population of Northern Uganda? As important as it is to condemn and stop the atrocities, and to bring the leadership of the LRA to justice, it is equally critical to understand the vast majority of LRA soldiers are abducted children, both boys and girls, some as young as seven years old. LRA is commanded by one Joseph Kony, who claims to be guided by the Holy Spirit. There is also a history of division between Uganda and its northern communities. The decades old war in Sudan is also a factor in LRA's survival. The Kampala government, until recently, supported the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in their quest for self-determination. In response, the Khartoum government has supported the LRA, which is based in and attacks from Sudan. The LRA's stated goal is to overthrow the government of Uganda. The recent peace accord between the Khartoum government and SPLA may end LRA's support from Sudan, although it may find support elsewhere. After eighteen years, LRA, which is more like a warlord group than a rebel army, has many ways of financing its army.

To be sure, LRA would appear to be an unusual army – its “soldiers” are almost all children and someone who claims to be seized by the Holy Spirit leads its commanders. Looking more closely, LRA is not the only children's army. 80% of combatants in the 40-year war in Colombia, South America - government and rebel forces alike - are children,

and throughout Africa as well as globally, children comprise an increasingly larger proportion of combatant forces.

Likewise, while there may be political motivations not to do so, there are humanitarian reasons why the LRA is not hunted down with the aim of killing all its soldiers. These are children, most of whom were abducted at very young ages, forced to kill and maim. In addition, girls serve as sex slaves to commanders and soldiers while boys become cooks, porters, sentries and bodyguards.

A recent study from Belgium entitled “Post-traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers,” as reported in the 13 March 2004 edition of *Lancet Medical Journal* reveals that 77% of former child soldiers in LRA saw someone killed and 39% had been forced to kill at least one person in their average more-than-two-year stay in rebel captivity. 63% had to loot properties and burn houses of civilians. 52% were seriously beaten. 48% got injured. 39% had to abduct other children. 65% were forced into military training. 55% had to carry heavy loads. 61% had to stay in difficult circumstances in Sudan. 64% had to fight. 35% were sexually abused. 18% gave birth to one or more children while in captivity. 27% had to drink urine. The mean age of abduction for these children-turned soldiers was 12.9 years.

The majority of children had high levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and many were now orphans. Of the 301 former child soldiers studied, 66% of their fathers were deceased, 46% of whom had been killed. 37% of their mothers were also deceased, 32% of whom had been killed. Disease also killed many parents. The manner in which parents had been killed – some abducted children witnessed the killing of their own parents – also impacted on post-traumatic stress. The fact so many of these children were also orphans with no family or community to which to return added to the post-traumatic stress.

Since the war began, tens of thousands of people have been killed and maimed, hundreds of thousands internally displaced and food production activities have been totally suspended. Approximately 20,000-30,000 children have been abducted to date, with the largest number of abductions during the past several years. It is estimated that several hundred thousand people, mostly Acholi, have died from the effects of this war, especially from war related disease in IDP camps. 90% of LRA’s soldiers are children.

Sadly, children serve as soldiers throughout the world - in Latin America, Asia Europe and Africa – but nowhere is their condition as grim and urgent as in Africa. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, founded by Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva and World Vision International believes there are more than 300,000 children serving as soldiers worldwide at any given time, of whom 120,000 are in Africa.

It is generally agreed throughout the world, including by the United Nations, that this number is a soft figure, a low estimate of a more accurate figure that is hard to pin down. This is because most combatant forces – government, rebel or otherwise - do not admit to abducting children and soldiers, or recruiting children below the age of fifteen. Those that do so state they have demobilized children, but fail to admit they are re-recruited. Some children escape or are demobilized by one combatant group and then abducted or recruited by another. Throughout the world, whether in Colombia, Myanmar/Burma, Liberia, Bhutan, Sierra Leone, Lebanon, Guatemala, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Sudan or Uganda, child soldiering is not just a violation of the human rights of children. It is a human disgrace.

Nowhere is this human disgrace more prevalent than in Africa. Almost half the world's child soldiers are in Africa, serving in wars that start and stop and start all over again. The war in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a tragic example, a war in which four million people have died since 1998. The magnitude of that statement should be hard to grasp. *Four million people* have died in the DRC war since 1998, more people than any war since World War II. Yet this war, under official cease-fire but reigniting again, receives precious little publicity internationally and throughout the continent. Is it because the value of human life in Africa is undervalued? Is there an assumption that the depth of suffering the Congolese people have endured for centuries is somehow expected and acceptable or, if not acceptable, should not be comprehensively addressed by a united African society? Or is the level of hopelessness and disempowerment so high that there are no unified strategies to end the complex span of wars and suffering that has plagued the Great Lakes region in general and DRC in particular?

Whatever one's thinking on these questions, it is hard to dismiss the fact that few people on Earth have endured as much suffering and external destabilization as the Congolese. From the centuries of slave trading when many millions of the Congo Kingdom's men, women and children were kidnapped from highly advanced and well governed civilizations to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century's pathological colonial reign of King Leopold of Belgium – when perhaps ten million people died from labor camp conditions on rubber plantations in which the strongest of the strong were worked to death and less productive workers had their hands chopped off – the people of the Congo have known little peace.

Just briefly, there was a ray of collective hope when a liberation leader was elected Prime Minister by the people of a liberated nation, then called Zaire. Patrice Lumumba was a Pan-Africanist and believed the resources of the Congo belonged to the people of the Congo. He also believed imperialism had ruined Africa and that enough was enough. In Washington and New York, Paris and Brussels, this was interpreted to mean, possibly correctly, that external forces could no longer exploit the wealth of the Congo. The CIA hatched a plan, approved by then U.S. President Eisenhower, endorsed by UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold, and executed by local collaborators and Belgium Police. Lumumba was arrested on trumped up charges, detained, tortured and assassinated. His body was sawed up and dissolved in acid. The rest of the story is well known. Almost four decades of oppressive rule by the tyrant Mobutu – a frequent guest of the White House - resulted in continued political oppression and economic under development. Then, in the mid 1990s, a weakened and dying Mobutu was overthrown in a series of regional operations, resulting in the armies of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi from the

East and Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia from the South and West invading or defending. Rebel forces and the Congolese Armed Forces also played roles, as did Western covert operations. The new president Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and his 29-year-old son, General Joseph Kabila became president, flying to Washington within the first week of assuming power.

One could discuss DRC endlessly – it is not discussed enough – but the purpose of this discourse is not to digress but to point out this is the very nation in which there have been more child soldiers than any other nation in Africa.

DRC illustrates that, short of intervention, it is the context of a nation's history and circumstances that determines whether it shall be at war or peace. In the context of today's wars, child soldiering is not merely a symptom; it is the means by which today's wars function. We shall come back to that.

In Southern Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa endured decades of war and struggle from the 1960's until, in the case of Angola, just two years ago. In Mozambique and Angola alone, over two million people were killed in wars that were sparked and fueled by liberation struggle, the Cold War, counter-revolution and the role of Western supported *apartheid*-South Africa in sponsoring the RENAMO atrocities in Mozambique and Zimbabwe and collaborating with UNITA in Angola.

Child soldiering in Angola and Mozambique defined the lives of tens of thousands of children in both nations over a long span of time. Here, we shall discuss Mozambique. Although it is well established that Mozambique was ultimately punished by *apartheid* South Africa and its Western supporters for having the audacity to support the South African Freedom Struggle, and ultimately "destabilized" in an attempt to deprive South Africa's liberation movements from having frontline bases – the 1985 raid of Renamo headquarters in Casa Banana in Gorongosa District first exposing the direct role of SADF in the training and operations of RENAMO soldiers – it was the downing of the plane carrying President Samora Machel, his cabinet and military command in 1986 that spelled the commencement of a holocaust in Mozambique no one could have imagined would occur in such proportion. For the next six years, from 1986-1992, RENAMO atrocities committed against Mozambique's mostly rural, civilian population had few equals in terms of breathtaking horror. Village raids at night resulted in the hacking up of elders, the raping and disfigurement of women, the killing of teachers and nurses and the abduction of children as soldiers. The mutilation of women and the abduction of children were two central characteristics of the terror. Women's breasts were slashed. Their lips, noses, eyelids and ears were sliced off. Mothers were raped in front of daughters; daughters in front of mothers. The aim was to debase, humiliate and degrade. We see this today as a tactic in Iraqi prisons. It is not new. It is a way of breaking down the will of a society, a perverse form of punishment. When it happens systemically as in Iraq today and in Mozambique during the so-called civil war, it comes from the top as a strategy to destabilize and dismantle the very fabric of a society. Almost always, those who are punished in scenarios of war and extreme violence are not ultimately responsible for any wrongdoing.

So too with the abduction of children during the RENAMO atrocities. It is estimated that at any given time between 1986-1992, approximately one third of RENAMO soldiers were children, most of whom were abducted. The means of abduction was traumatizing; children as young as eight or nine were forced at the point of a rifle to shoot a parent, sibling, or other family member. Those who refused were killed. Those who complied were forced from their village after a raid in which not only did the abducted child kill but –these were mostly boys – witnessed the mutilation, raping and killing of family members, neighbors and friends.

Children aged 8 – 15 were brought to training camps where they were “trained” under the most unspeakable conditions – as child soldiers still are today. Training involved intimidation, beatings, physical endurance, food deprivation, instilling the willingness to abduct other boys and kill boys who disobeyed or tried to escape. Abducted boys accompanied RENAMO soldiers on raids, then were ordered to conduct raids on their own under the watchful eyes of a commander or RENAMO “guards.” Soon, abducted boys were also robbing and looting for food, clothing, jewelry and money, developing a lifestyle and culture of petty criminality.

The conditions inside Mozambique during this period prevented rural agricultural production. Four million of Mozambique’s people endured famine; there was an outward flight from the country to refugee camps in Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe and child soldiers also escaped and followed the pathway to the camps. By the late 80’s, tens of thousands of children who had escaped their combat roles with RENAMO, and some with government forces, wound up in refugee camps. Graca Machel, widow of the late president, attempted to mobilize the world to try to end Western support for RENAMO. Support for RENAMO came from Europe and the United States and was positioned as “fighting communism.” Machel invited humanitarians, human rights and aid organizations and the world media to the refugee camps where they interviewed former child soldiers. Many were so traumatized by their experiences they were no longer verbal.

Children in West Africa suffer as child soldiers and surely the world has become acquainted with the role of children as combatants in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote D’Ivoire. Thousands of abducted and recruited children in Sierra Leone were given drugs to induce a euphoric feeling while killing, causing many children to work hard on becoming “effective” killers. Children were trained to cut off limbs and kill entire families as acts of loyalty to the armed units they were serving. Children as young as four were carrying weapons and amputations and rape became the tools of child warfare.

One could go on – there are huge stories to tell about child soldiering in Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Guinea, and elsewhere on the continent – and each child has a story so chilling, so disturbing that it raises the question, how and why can child soldiering exist in a world supposedly committed to human rights and human dignity. Beyond human rights, how can child soldiering exist on a continent steeped in a cultural heritage that values children and family?

As we move in this discussion from reviewing the problem to analyzing solutions and coming up with strategies, by now it should be clear that not only are many thousands of children engaged in combat on the continent, there are even more former child soldiers who are in dire need of rehabilitation, restoration and support. In DRC and Uganda, for instance, children continue to be abducted and recruited as soldiers while many more are now former child soldiers in need of critical services. In Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and elsewhere throughout the continent, hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of children who were combatants and are no longer – former child soldiers, in other words – are in need of services and support that are urgent and long overdue. Part of the solution of ending child soldiering, and a culture of violence, is addressing the cultural, clinical, emotional, community, educational, economic, and full restorative needs of former child soldiers.

### **Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration**

Today's term that describes the needs of children who were soldiers as well as the needs of their families, communities and societies is ***DDR, Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration***.

Children need to be demobilized from captivity and enlistment with combatant forces and this implies permanent demobilization. At the same time, children – indeed all soldiers - need to be disarmed. Many children take their weapons with them after they escape captivity or are demobilized. Trained to intimidate, rob and kill, these weapons are now used by children in newly formed militia, or in criminal enterprises in order to survive. Remember, these are children who were deprived of education, cultural enrichment, family and community support. They have lived by their wits and through violence. The gun and machete have become their plow. In addition, former child soldiers with guns or callous to committing atrocities are vulnerable to being lured into criminal activity by organized crime. In addition, those who aspire to political power by force seek out former child soldiers as a ready army for their purposes. Disarmament is a must if children are to move forward and society is to be secure and free from armed violence.

Reintegration is a broad term encompassing all the needs of a child who was abducted, coerced or recruited into combat or combat-related activities. Among the many needs of children who were soldiers include the following:

- Clinical and cultural treatment for depression and post-traumatic stress
- Cultural and clinical counseling and therapy
- Prevention, management and treatment of diseases, including HIV/AIDS
- Peer socialization
- Empowerment and restoration of girls stigmatized by sexual abuse and rape
- Literacy, education and vocational skills training
- Arts, culture, sports and recreation activities
- Jobs creation and job-readiness skills
- Reproductive health and family planning services

- Diversion from criminal justice systems
- Drug and alcohol rehabilitation
- Participation with projects that build peace and a culture of human and children's rights
- Reintegration into family and community

In addition, many former child soldiers killed family or community members and cannot easily return home. Families and communities also need preparation for the return of a child who killed at home or in the community. Oftentimes, traditional healers and family and community members must conduct traditional rituals and ceremonies with the returning child to chase away spirits or commune with ancestors. Sometimes, third party organizations must help to facilitate the former child soldier's return to his family and community, and help the family and community to prepare in advance.

Former child soldiers often get arrested and wind up in jail. Increasingly, criminal justice systems are being asked to consider diverting former child soldiers to alternatives to prison. Children and Armed Conflict Units, such as at the University of Essex in England, are training judges, prosecutors, police and probation officers around the contexts and needs of former child soldiers and to help divert them to rehabilitation programs rather than jail. Unfortunately, many such systems do not have the capacity or access to rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers. Thus, many wind up in jail.

Communities also need education around human and children's rights, and the ability to monitor and enforce these rights. Children have internationally recognized rights not to be abducted and recruited as soldiers, and not to be neglected or abused, but these rights must be understood and the means to enforce them must be developed.

Many former child soldiers are orphans, their parents having been killed in conflict or died from disease, especially from AIDS. Such orphans are more vulnerable to being forced into child soldiering, or being re-recruited. Upon release from combat, orphans need a place to live, a means of support and rehabilitative and restorative services. If the orphan is a girl or young woman, oftentimes she is also a young mother and must support her child or children. She may also be HIV positive and have counselling, testing, management, treatment needs and income.

In regions where child soldiering is rife, HIV/AIDS rates are also higher than in the rest of the country, since health services in war zones are less accessible, have lower capacity or have collapsed. In Uganda, for instance, where government policies and civil society participation has reduced a once double-digit HIV/AIDS rate to about 6% nationally – a major feat, the HIV/AIDS rates in the Northern Districts are twice to three times as high, between 10 and 18% depending on the district and locale. Some of Uganda's western districts also have higher HIV rates due to their location on the DRC border, where years of insurgency affected the local population in Uganda.

Southern Africa as a region has the highest HIV positive rates in the world. Nearly 40% of Botswana's population is HIV positive; Zimbabwe and Swaziland rates hover just under 30%. Angola's HIV rate, still relatively low for Southern Africa, is rising; South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique suffer from double-digit rates. In DRC, where the rate may be under 10%, some sectors are four times higher, including in regions where conflict takes place, and among soldiers. AIDS has orphaned 800,000 – 900,000 children in DRC. Many of these children are far more vulnerable and more likely to wind up as child soldiers, having no parental protection from recruitment and having no means of support.

Finally, child soldiering and the conditions of conflict damage culture and a positive African identity. If we believe Cheikh Anta Diop's admonitions that it is essential to restore Africa's distorted place in world history and reclaim a positive African identity in order to break the psychological shackles of colonialism and restore a positive sense of self and community, child soldiering further damages the psyche, setting back the task of restoring the whole person. Children should identify with the greatness of African history and culture, not with killing, raping and maiming African people, looting property and burning down houses. It is possible that soldiers in general and child soldiers in particular never journey far from the role handed out by the colonial masters – as a force to terrorize, mutilate and murder an innocent civilian society. The restoration of children forced into soldiering should include the reclamation of a positive identity.

Throughout Africa, there are increasing numbers of options and opportunities for former child soldiers and children affected by conflict. These include programs and projects run by government ministries such as in Mozambique, international agencies such as UNICEF, church groups, NGOs such as World Vision and Save the Children, and grassroots organizations such as Friends of Orphans in Northern Uganda and SCARJOV in Angola that are providing services and support to former child soldiers, children affected by conflict and their communities. These services are being provided in refugee and IDP camps, within institutional programs and at the community and grassroots levels.

That said, the supply of restorative services simply does not meet the demand. With hundreds of thousands of former child soldiers in Africa, with new and ongoing wars continuing to abduct and recruit more children into conflict, and with the lack of capacity of many grassroots organizations serving former child soldiers, most children and youth who need services go without. In 2003, UNICEF almost closed down an important program in Sierra Leone providing educational and job training services to over two thousand former child soldiers due to lack of funding. Smaller organizations face the same challenges – lack of funding and support – and grassroots organizations, those closest to the minds and culture of former child soldiers need capacity and organizational development.

Within the many needs of African society, the failure to provide full and proper rehabilitation and restoration services to former child soldiers is among the most glaring. Within this challenge is the good news: there have been major advances and successes working with former child soldiers. More has been learned – especially around

combining traditional and non-traditional techniques - and these learning experiences are resulting in more consistently successful rehabilitation of children and youth when the resources and programs are there. In addition, the increased consciousness and awareness of the needs of former child soldiers in Africa is growing in many sectors. This heightened awareness needs to be coupled with increased support.

### **Ending Child Soldiering**

Child soldiering in Africa and globally can end, but it will not end until the wars that drive child soldiering are prevented, managed down and no longer plague society. This is because today's wars are different from the wars of previous generations when armies largely fought opposing armies and civilian casualties were much fewer in number and by percentage. Today's wars are not designed for armies to engage other armies. The strategies of today's wars are to **target and terrorize civilian populations**. Part and parcel with these strategies is to use children to conduct the most brutal forms of atrocities against civilian populations. Children are more likely to commit atrocities because their moral barometers are less cultivated; they are also more vulnerable, impressionable and easily intimidated. Children are also expendable, provide a range of "extras" such as sex from young girls and child labor from young boys, and do not demand to be paid. Hence, children are often a soldier of choice. One cannot separate the use of children with the strategies of today's wars. Unless today's wars are ended, all the movements and campaigns in the world will merely reduce child soldiering, but never end it. Finally, the issue of war is squarely before us.

Not everyone agrees with this analysis, of course. Some believe that the best chances of ending child soldiering lie largely with strengthening international law, including enforcement of laws, treaties and protocols that prohibit the abduction and recruitment of children as soldiers.

Undoubtedly, strengthening international law that prohibits child soldiering is a necessity, and the process of doing so also elevates awareness of the critical needs of children who are vulnerable to becoming soldiers. Of course, in many ways, international law already prohibits various scenarios and degrees of child soldiering. For instance, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) makes it illegal for any armed combatant force, government or rebel, to recruit children under the age of fifteen or to engage in sexual slavery. Either may be prosecuted as war crimes although the statute begs the question about recruiting children fifteen or over. Western nations do not permit fifteen year olds to join their militaries. Why such lax standards when it comes to children who are vulnerable to coercive recruitment in Africa and the Global South? Knowing they can recruit fifteen year olds, will army commanders really check birth certificates?

Then there is the "Optional" branch of international law. The human rights community deserves full credit for their years of ardent work seeking and garnering increased international consensus around the prohibition of either conscription or coercive recruitment of children under 18 into military forces. This has resulted in the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed

Conflict. While this is a step forward, should we celebrate a situation in which it is legal to commit atrocities against civilians at the age of 18 while the same acts are prohibited if carried out by 17 year olds? Further, it should be unnecessary to define the term “optional.”

Another presumed step forward is the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). This is a regional standard that sets regional objectives to prohibit recruitment of children as soldiers in Africa. Recently, ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, has declared West Africa a child-soldier free zone.

Clearly, there are good intentions that emanate from the protocols, proclamations and condemnations, including the African Union’s strong statements against child soldiering. However, there are no teeth to back up these barks, and it is time to add other strategies to the optional protocols and international laws that permit children who are fifteen years old to participate in wars as soldiers.

International law especially needs strengthening in terms of enforcement. If laws against child soldiering are still vague and unprotective of children, laws against torture, slavery and genocide are far more clear and well defined. The ad hoc international criminal trials against defendant parties from Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone demonstrate the potential of international law being enforced against wrongdoers who lead violence against civilians. However, the fact that scores of national leaders and armies commit countless reigns of terror upon civilian populations yet there are only three full fledged prosecutions of these events – after the fact – illustrates the impotent nature of international law as it applies to the rights of civilian populations to be free from torture, slavery and genocide and to punish those who commit egregious crimes against humanity. In theory, at least, the ICC has the potential to provide more human rights protections than currently exist, except for the fact that it is untested and several major nations, including the U.S. and China, have indicated they do not intend to be subject to prosecutions.

Clearly, civilians affected by human rights violations – massacres, rapes, torture and mutilation – should be afforded full protection by international law. This means, practically, that the people of Northern Uganda and Eastern DRC should have someone to call, some place to turn, some international forum to intervene and prevent or end the violence being perpetrated against them. Since child soldiering is so much a part of this violence – including the means by which children are abducted as soldiers and the violence inflicted upon children by armies – international law that intervenes to prevent or end conflict would also favorably impact on ending child soldiering.

The idea that a mostly Western-based human rights community can or will create these enforcement powers within existing or future international or regional institutions, such as the United Nations, is wishful thinking. What is needed are strategies that empower *grassroots mobilization* by and in support of communities affected by war and violence. These are the communities, such as Northern Uganda and Eastern DRC, which must, despite the dangers, take the lead and mobilize enforcement of their human rights. If this sounds unduly harsh or impractical, look at the alternative, the current situation, where

an indifferent international community essentially looks the other way while civilian populations in Africa are subjected to the most horrific conditions. Even communities in Southern and East Africa outside the war zones are not mobilizing to save their fellow human beings inside the war zones. In actual fact, mass mobilization for enforcement of human rights protections will never happen until those most affected by the violations mobilize first. Then, communities outside war zones will support that mobilization, leading to a greater chance of regional and international intervention.

Currently, the United Nations, the African Union and possibly SADC are the only international and regional bodies that have the power to send in peacekeeping forces to regions such as Northern Uganda, Eastern DRC and Western Sudan. But will they? The African Union, both late and reluctantly, sent in a small peace keeping force (after arguing whether they were peace keeping or “observing”), in a number much too small to keep the peace in an area as large as Darfur. The African Union says it needs more capacity and the West says it will deliver that capacity, but the clock ticks away and more African people die. Kofi Annan has publicly called for greater UN action in Darfur, Western Sudan, where genocide long ago began and the killings go on and on. Yet is it not worrisome that the UN Secretary-General does not seem to have the power to send in UN peacekeeping forces to prevent another “Rwanda,” a 1994 genocide in which the world watched as up to one million people were hacked to death and the UN *withdrew* their peace keeping forces after rescuing the white population? Apparently, only the Security Council can approve such a resolution, and there is not sufficient will on the Council to do so. Permanent Security Council members Russia and China claim that to send in a UN force would violate Sudan’s “sovereignty.” So what will create the will for the Security Council to intervene in Darfur? Only the people of Western Sudan can bring world attention to their plight, unless of course, others do so in sufficient numbers on their behalf. If you know about the genocide in Western Sudan, have you been part of a movement to generate intervention on behalf of the men, women and children being hacked to death by government-sponsored militia? Chances are, you know about the tsunami in Asia, and we must admire the world’s response to these tragedies. But what prevents the same response to equally and more tragic situations in Africa?

Enforcement of international law should not be limited to prosecuting the actual perpetrators of human rights violations. International law should also prevent the support of human rights violations and war, and punish those who support, fund and arm the perpetrators.

Direct U.S. support of UNITA and US organizational support of RENAMO did not offend the sensibilities of Americans whose taxes, contributions and indifference supported the killings, but should not the people of Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Angola have the right to determine if such support was legal?

With regard to the current situation in DRC, it is no secret that DRC has always been exploited for its resources. Today, that exploitation is for diamonds, cobalt, timber and coltan, the mineral required to operate cell phones. Would it be surprising to learn that 80% of the world’s coltan supply is located in Eastern DRC?

Likewise, Congolese people of DRC might also pose the question: Is it legal to fund armies that create chaos for the sake of chaos? The U.S. is not the only industrial nation that does so, but it has been the worst offender in supporting chaos in DRC for economic and political advantage. As Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost* wrote in the Sunday, April 20, 2003 *New York Times*, in an article entitled: Chaos in Congo Suits Parties Just Fine: "It has not helped that in the 1990's the United States supplied more than \$100 million in arms and military training to six of the seven African countries that have been involved in the fighting of the Congo war."

While the legal question of government, mineral company and private military contractor funding of armed groups needs to be sorted out, other questions also deserve to be researched and resolved. Chief among these revolves around arms trading, especially the trading and shipping of small arms to regions of conflict.

80% of arms trading in the world today is considered "legal" and the US and UK sell more arms than the rest of the world combined. Is it legal to ship arms to regions of conflict when it is well documented that these arms are used against civilian populations? Just because the arms are shipped to governments or police forces, it is well documented that weapons, especially small arms, are used against civilian populations. This practice should be challenged in national and international courts, and the practice prohibited by national and international law. It is well known that small arms are the weapons of choice in Africa today and child soldiering and small arms go hand in hand. We as an activist human rights and peace building community must conduct appropriate research, tracking small arms shipments to regions of conflict and bring the appropriate legal challenges.

Not only do small arms fuel conflict, but conflict fuels small arms shipments in a symbiotic relationship that takes on a life of its own. In Northern Uganda, for instance, children who escape from armies, or are demobilized, bring their weapons with them. Soldiers and civilians alike have ready access to weapons, especially small arms. These weapons become like currency, guaranteeing high sale values. In a region where people cannot grow food due to the violence, weapons sales are a source of food security. Even when disarmament programs are underway, children and soldiers hide their weapons in trees, or beehives or bury them underground, and later trade them for cash or food. Sometimes, soldiers are killed for their weapons. Child soldiers steal weapons for relatives and friends who sell them for cash or trade them for more weapons. The prevalence of weapons as a trade commodity also ensures that Northern Uganda remains steeped in guns, making disarmament almost impossible so long as new weapons are available. Not surprisingly, many of the weapons that continue to fuel the carnage in DRC pass through Uganda.

Due to the 18-year war in Northern Uganda, many government services, including public education, have collapsed. Therefore, many children grow up illiterate and uneducated. Poverty festers. The widespread availability and use of small arms results in children learning how to use these weapons, preparing them for lives as child soldiers whether abducted or recruited.

In the same way that crack does not grow in the ghetto, guns are not manufactured in Uganda. They are shipped in by nations and companies which profiteer from arms sales and benefit from the chaos small arms create.

A multi-faceted approach to addressing the root causes of conflict through the strengthening and enforcement of international law combined with grassroots peace building may offer the best hope to prevent and end the dreadful wars that continue to plague African society.

In fact, among the best plans to **end** war – and hence, child soldiering - is to **prevent** war while **managing current conflicts down**. Not an easy task, but it can be best approached by regional peace building movements that combine the regional strengths of grassroots organizations, communities and institutions. Southern Africa, East Africa, and Great Lakes regions, as regions and sub regions with common histories, rich cultures and the potential for increased economic and political cooperation, need grassroots peace building movements which take a long term but consistent approach to peace building – at the community levels first. Peace building has many facets, and includes practices that embrace indigenous value systems, traditional mediation, conflict prevention and conflict management. There is a need to resolve past grievances born of colonial and post-colonial divide and rule tactics, build national as well as ethnic, political and religious identities and build trust. Former child soldiers and their organizations should also play key roles in developing and implementing peace building strategies. The increased role of women and women's organizations in grassroots peace building is also essential.

Peace building also includes how culture is embraced, the role of indigenous leadership, how land is used, resources allocated and how all life is respected.

There is always much more to say, and the purpose of this article was not to provide all of the solutions, nor even to ask all the right questions; rather, the purpose of this discussion was to insist that all of us are responsible for the world in which we live, a world which, for too many children in Africa, is a living hell. It will go on, endlessly and horrendously until we decide that the solutions on the table are not working, and that we must do more, do it well and do it now.

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