

## World Campaign to stop the use of Child Soldiers

One of the most alarming trends in contemporary armed conflict is the employment of children as combatants. More than 300,000 children below the age of 18 are believed to be currently participating in armed conflicts around the world. According to UNICEF, in the past decade, more than 2 million children have been killed in armed conflicts and 6 million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. Many more bear psychological scars from being forced both to commit and also to witness horrific atrocities.

With the ready availability of weapons and the increasing simplicity of operating them, including their lightness, it means that some of these children are as young as seven. As a Congolese rebel commander said recently "(children) make very good fighters because they're young and want to show off. They think it's all a game and are fearless."

This is a situation which demands a response from the whole international community. Worldwide attempts are being made to introduce a protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which will make it

clear that no-one under the age of 18 years is to participate in conflicts or to be recruited into official armed forces or be drawn into armed resistance groups.

A coalition of international non-government organisations was formed in Geneva in May 1998 to campaign for a worldwide ban on the use of child soldiers. The Coalition's Co-ordinator, Stuart Maslen, visited Australia in mid May and addressed public meetings in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. He also had meetings with government representatives and was interviewed by several media.

Stuart Maslen spoke passionately about the situ-

ation in many countries, and especially in Africa, where the Coalition estimates that 120,000 children are involved in combat today and tens of thousands are being trained in military schools. He urged Australia to support the proposed Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, on Children in Armed Conflict and to promote its adoption by the UN and its effective implementation through legal measures and overseas aid projects.

The Coalition has a Steering Committee of seven organisations: Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Save the Children Alliance, International Federation Terre des Hommes, Jesuit Refugee Service and the Quaker United Nations Office (Geneva).

*"The involvement of children in conflict is not simply a violation of a child's rights. It affects the ways a conflict is fought and the likelihood of a successful transition to peace. It is no coincidence that states in which children have become combatants should be among the states where it is most difficult to create an enduring peace."*

Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the opening of the 55th Session of the Commission on Human Rights

National partnerships have been established in nearly 30 countries, and the first of five regional conferences, the African Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers, took place in Maputo, Mozambique from 19-22 April 1999. The Conference concluded with a powerful declaration backed by representatives of governments and civil society across Africa calling for an end

to the use as soldiers of all children under 18 years of age.

Forthcoming regional conferences on child soldiers are taking place in Latin America (Montevideo, 5-8 July 1999) and Europe (Berlin, autumn 1999). In 2000, Asian and Middle Eastern Conferences will precede the convening of a major international conference intended to spur the international community to effective action around the world. This campaign is gathering pace and support, much as the landmines campaign has done in recent years. In December, the European Parliament adopted an urgency resolution 1998 calling on the European Union to show leadership by supporting 18 as the

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minimum age for recruitment to armed forces and by directing resources towards the demobilisation and reintegration of former child soldiers.

Australia's support for this humanitarian effort is compromised because of the continuing recruitment of 17 year-olds into Australia's armed forces. The Defence Forces have argued strenuously that they need 17 year olds and that it is a popular alternative to unemployment. They also excuse this early recruitment because the 17 year-olds are not allowed actually to participate in armed conflicts. But do we really want Australia to stand out against worldwide efforts to ensure that military action is undertaken only by adults?

Defence for Children International's position is clear. No-one under 18 should be trained to kill or involved in fighting. The military discipline and training methods of armed forces are harmful to young minds. And the peacekeeping activities of our Defence Forces are best done by mature and experienced personnel. DCI does not accept that 17 year olds have any role in the defence forces, neither as combatants, as support personnel nor as trainees.

The Australian Coalition members are:

WORLD VISION, UNICEF AUSTRALIA,  
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL,  
QUAKER SERVICE AUSTRALIA, AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL, WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL  
LEAGUE FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM, MEDICAL  
ASSOCIATION FOR THE PREVENTION OF WAR,  
BAH'AI COMMUNITY, SAVE THE CHILDREN  
AUSTRALIA, PLAN INTERNATIONAL, UNITED  
NATIONS YOUTH ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA,  
MERCY REFUGEE SERVICES.

It is convened by Melanie Gow of World Vision. Other NGOs and agencies are welcome to join. The Australian Coalition is planning a year of action leading to a UN meeting early in 2000 which will decide the final content of the Optional Protocol. An Australian website will be established shortly. Contact the DCI Office for more information.

*The International website is*

*<http://persona.wanadoo.fr/child.soldiers>  
and the email address is  
<[child.soldiers@wanadoo.fr](mailto:child.soldiers@wanadoo.fr)>*

## ***Mandatory Sentencing Worsens in NT***

Denis Burke is continuing the proud tradition of Shane Stone, and responding to reasoned and intelligent arguments by tightening the screws. In an announcement recently, Burke has indicated that adult offenders will be slightly better off in that the Court will have a discretion on the first offence not to impose a mandatory term of imprisonment where exceptional circumstances exist.

Kids however are not so lucky. They will be subject to exactly the same regime of a mandatory 28 day term for the second property offence. The only difference is that NOW, their juvenile record may be raised in adult court if convicted of a like offence. So the regime is worse. There is some glib reference to "diversionary programs" on first offences, but they are not spelt out or costed. In any event, this option has always been available.

At least the new provisions are more consistent in that the range of offences one can be subject to mandatory sentencing for has been widened to include offences against the person. What an incredible feat!

In response to widespread community outrage, the Government has made things marginally better for adults, but tougher for kids. It's back to the drawing board for innovative strategies to defeat this outrageous policy.

*Michael Antrum*  
*Director & Principal Solicitor*  
*National Children's & Youth Law Centre*

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