Quaker United Nations Office

Oral statement by Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers), an international non-governmental organization in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC to the 60th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights

Delivered by Rachel Brett, Quaker UN Office, Geneva, on 7 April 2004

Item 13: Rights of the Child

Child Soldiers: Why Adolescents Volunteer

Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers) has recently completed research[i] on why adolescents volunteer for armed forces and armed groups. The purpose was to discover the reasons young people themselves identify for having joined, in order to take these into account when considering both preventive strategies, and demobilisation and reintegration. If demobilisation is taking place where conflict is ongoing or the situation remains unsettled, unless the reasons for volunteering are addressed, the prospects for demobilisation and long-term reintegration are not good.[1]

The research identifies five major factors: war, poverty, education, employment and the family. All of these have both "pull" and "push" aspects, nor do they operate in isolation from each other. Thus the impoverished child in a war zone, without access to school or employment, and whose family is destroyed or dispersed, is most at risk. However, even in this situation not all children will join: there are always more specific features as well.

Very few children go looking for a war to fight.[ii] Most get involved because the war comes to them. However, for adolescents war can also be an opportunity: for employment (formal or informal); for escape from an oppressive family situation or humiliation at school; for adventure in serving "the cause" or emulating real or fictional military role models. In addition, war often creates or exacerbates the other factors, for example causing closure of schools, dispersal or death of family members, loss of employment or general impoverishment.

Poverty is often cited as *the* cause of child soldiering. This is too simplistic. There are many more poor children who do *not* become child soldiers than do, even in war zones. What *is* true is that children who are not living in poverty rarely become child soldiers. The role of poverty is both direct and indirect. Thus fewer poor children are in school in all situations. By exacerbating family poverty, or leading to the death of adult family members, war causes more children to withdraw

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[1] See also our written statement on this subject contained in document E/CN.4/2004/NGO/4

from school either to take over financial responsibility or, especially for girls, to look after younger siblings freeing others to work.

School is a dominant influence in children's lives - for good or ill. Lack of education or vocational training restricts choices of employment. Equally, for those in neither education nor employment, there is a strong tendency to become involved with armed forces or groups where these are prevalent. This may be simply because they have nothing else to do, or because recruiters see them as being available and thus target them; or because they get involved in violence or crime and joining an armed group becomes a form of protection. Even when education is available, adolescents tend to drop out if it seems unlikely to lead to employment or if the educational environment denigrates or humiliates them. If the army or armed groups are perceived as the only "employer" it is not surprising that those who drop out select this alternative, whether by preference or as a measure of last resort. Indeed, for many the critical moment of decision arises from the closure of the school, or their exclusion from it, either because of *force majeure* or as a result of their own behaviour. Conversely, schools can themselves be recruiting grounds, or serve this function indirectly as part of the ethnic, religious, or political dimension of a conflict.

The factor most under-estimated is the family. It is important to bear in mind how central the family is in a child's life. Whether as "push" or "pull", the family is possibly *the single* most critical influence determining whether or not a child in fact joins. Where adult family members have been killed or dispersed, children may not only have to fend for themselves, but also take on the responsibilities of heads of households, providing economic and physical protection.

However, many adolescents are running away from an abusive or exploitative domestic situation. In particular, there is a direct link between domestic exploitation, physical and/or sexual abuse and the decision of girls to volunteer. This illustrates not only the prevalence of such practices but also the scarcity of other options for girls who are running away from home; but many boys also cite domestic violence as being a factor. Conversely, the family can be a "pull" factor: the military family tends to have military children. Some boys feel pressured into joining because it would reflect badly on their father if they did not; some girls join to assert their equality with brothers already involved.

In conclusion, to counter the problem of child recruitment in addition to taking legal steps, it is necessary to address the key underlying factors of war, poverty, education, employment and the family. These provide a framework for policy and programmatic planning, without which no initiative is likely to have sustained effect.

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[i] The Young Soldiers Research Project was undertaken jointly by the Quaker UN Office, Geneva, and the International Labour Organisation's In-Focus Program/Crisis. The research entailed in-depth interviews with 53 individuals from nine countries who identified themselves as having volunteered to join armed forces or armed groups before the age of 18. The countries were: Afghanistan, Colombia, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland). The full results will appear in Rachel Brett & Irma Specht: *Young Soldiers – Why they choose to fight* (International Labour Organisation & Lynne Rienner, May 2004)

[ii] The term "war" is used to cover situations of both international and internal armed conflict and also situations of militarised violence not amounting to armed conflict in the strict legal sense.