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Security for a New Century: A Study Group Report

Study Group: Children at War

Speakers: Dr. Peter W. Singer
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies, and
Director, Project on US Policy Towards the Islamic World
Brookings Institute

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Dr. Peter W. Singer, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute's Foreign Policy Studies, and Director of the Project on US Policy Towards the Islamic World discussed a disturbing trend in modern warfare: the recruitment, training and participation of under-aged soldiers. Unfortunately, the issue of child soldiers is often viewed as a soft security issue, if considered at all.

The idea that children serve as combatants of war was once unthinkable, mostly isolated occurrences in the past and never before at a global level. The statistics are staggering. According to Dr. Singer, more than 300,000 children are currently serving as soldiers. Roughly 10% of all active combatants in the world are underage. 76% of ongoing or recently-ended conflicts (37 of the 55) have children under 18 serving as combatants; 80% of these conflicts where children are present include fighters under the age of 15. Of the 366 armed organizations around the world, 157 (40%) use child soldiers; seventy-seven of the 129 (60%) non-state armed forces in the world use underage combatants. Eighty-four (or 23%) of these armed organizations use children 15 years old and under in combat roles, while 18% use children 12 years old and under. The first US casualty in Afghanistan was killed by a fourteen year old sniper. Child soldiers between 10-15 years old are common participants in the war in Iraq. Unfortunately, there are no formal means to track this phenomenon. Over 100 juvenile combatants under the age of 18 are held at Abu Ghraib, and five underage al Qaida terrorists have been held captive at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay (Cuba). All insurgent factions in Iraq use children in the frontlines.

Clearly, the systematic and deliberate recruitment of children indicates that this is neither an isolated nor a rare occurrence. There is a conscious violation of international law and accepted norms, and a doctrine transcending geographical borders that prescribe the active use of children combatants has been formed. There are several causes of this phenomenon, including: (1) the availability of a large pool of children (also called "the lost generation") who are entrenched in poverty, homeless, and orphaned by diseases, wars and natural catastrophes; (2) the proliferation of light weapons technology that are easy to use and more lethal, that now allow children to wield enough fire power to be disruptive; and (3) the ease in which children are recruited and mobilized in the context of failed state zones, whereby conflict group leaders and warlords utilize fear, hopelessness, and socio-economic hardships to leverage children into fighters for their own causes. The effectiveness of using juveniles in mobilizing a substantial force to help bring about a desired political result was demonstrated by Charles Taylor's use of child soldiers to beef up his army to establish a sub-state in Liberia named "Taylorland."

This world-wide occurrence have serious international security ramifications, including: (1) increase in violent conflict as individuals and groups find it easier to build armies and engage in civil wars; (2) ability of armed groups to regenerate faster and stave off defeat by recruiting large amounts of juveniles while maintaining a minimal number of adult leaders, thus making wars harder to end; (3) ideology replaced by greed and political agenda as a motivation for armed mobilization and the targeting of the civilian populace; (4) rise of fringe movements as a political force; (5) increase in human rights violations during the recruitment process (e.g., atrocities committed during recruitment raids), which involve willing or unwilling participation of child recruits; and (6) the lasting psychological effects of their violent experiences on children, and the destruction of the very fabric of civil society . This dark side of warfare needs to be dealt with by policymakers around the world, including the US Congress.

A thought-provoking discussion followed Dr. Singer's brief presentation. When asked to comment on why the issue of juvenile combatants has not been in the congressional agenda, Dr. Singer noted that not very many people know about this phenomenon, and those who do may look at it through a "filtered lens," not understanding the issue beyond the pure tragedy. As a result, policies of response have not been developed and soldiers in the field are unprepared to deal with their underage enemies before, during, and after confrontations. In addition, encounters with child soldiers often cause psychological trauma. When asked how pregnancy rates have already been affected, Dr. Singer explained that sexual abuse especially of women has been a mode for punishment and training of child soldiers, contributing to an increase in STDs and wider spread of disease. When asked if sending financial support to orphanages in affected parts of the world will help fight this phenomenon and encourage children to escape, Dr. Singer noted that many child soldiers have considered the escape option at some point. The lack of support networks to help these children once they escape is a deterrent though. Forces in the field must welcome escapees to encourage other child soldiers to try to escape. There is also a need for efforts that provide aid and protection to sites vulnerable to recruitment raids, e.g., orphanages and refugee camps, to break the cycle. When asked how several former child soldiers from Sierra Leone are doing, Dr. Singer noted that although a number are doing well because of the presence of strong support groups, many have not been as fortunate. Likewise in Afghanistan, a child soldier rehabilitation program did not exist until 2004, resulting in a divide between reality and need. When asked about religion's role in this issue, he explained that religion is one of the tools used by armed organizations to recruit and indoctrinate children into service. Lastly, when asked if children were used by the Vietcong during the Vietnam war, Dr. Singer explained that small numbers of children then were primarily used as messengers, spies, and to move supplies. However, there were no "child units" or forces comprised purely of children in Vietnamese forces. The global spread is a more recent trend that has particularly accelerated after the end of the Cold War.

Dr. Singer is the author of the recently-published book *Children at War*. Additional information is also available on the Human Rights Watch website (<http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>).

Security for a New Century is a bipartisan study group for Congress. Please direct any inquiries to Ms. Yna Moore by telephone (202.223.5956 x3489) or electronic mail (amoore@stimson.org).