

# **Reluctant Warriors?**

*A Comparative Analysis of Children in Armed  
Conflict in Colombia and Myanmar*

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## **Abstract**

The end of the Cold War has given rise to an increase in intrastate conflict between state and non state actors. The increase in intrastate conflict and the rise of armed opposition groups have had a significant impact on civilians, especially children. In response to violent intrastate conflict, children have been forced to develop new coping mechanisms and can no longer be viewed merely as victims of war. Either by voluntary or forced recruitment, there are an estimated 300,000 child soldiers participating in 33 conflicts worldwide.

The primary intent of this research is to understand why children take up arms and why adults are compelled to arm children. Also, during what situations are state and non-state actors more likely to engage children in armed conflict? With an estimated 70,000 child soldiers in Myanmar and 11,000 in Colombia, the extent of this problem in these two countries is revealing. The scope of this investigation outlines the history of child soldier recruitment in Colombia and Myanmar, and examines the motivating factors spurring their recruitment.

My findings suggest that several factors motivate state and non state actors to recruit children as armed combatants. The length of the conflict and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are two of the biggest motivating factors spawning an increase in the frequency of forced child soldier recruitment. Regarding voluntary participation in violent conflict, a child's living condition appears to be the significant greatest factor motivating children to take up arms. Finally, international humanitarian law has been successful in helping to mitigate the incidence of child recruitment in Colombia, but has made virtually no impact in Myanmar.

“More children and youth bear arms in internal armed conflict and violent strife than ever before.” State and non-state actors “have discovered that young impressionable children can be turned into the fiercest fighters through brutalization, exposure to and involvement in violence. (Goodwin-Gil and Cohn 1994, 168).

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## **Introduction**

Since the dismantlement of the Cold War paradigm, modern warfare has changed dramatically. Once, countries waged wars with each other, now intrastate conflicts between diverse ethnic and religious factions are the precedent. The increase in intrastate conflict has had a significant impact on civilians, especially children. In response to violent intrastate conflict, children have been forced to develop new coping mechanisms. They have taken up arms and demonstrate agency and volition in using those arms;<sup>1</sup> therefore, they can no longer be viewed merely as victims of war. Either by voluntary or forced recruitment, children have become the most recent weapon in the arsenal of state and non-state actors.

The primary intent of this research is to understand why children take up arms and why adults are compelled to arm children. Also, during what situations are state and non-state actors more likely to engage children in armed conflict? With an estimated 70,000 child soldiers in Myanmar and 11,000 in Colombia, the extent of this problem in these two countries is revealing. The scope of this investigation outlines the history of their participation, and examines the motivating factors spurring the recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia and Myanmar.

Using these cases, this analysis elucidates which factors have motivated state and non state actors to engage children in armed conflict; what factors have spawned an increase in the magnitude and frequency of the use of child combatants; and finally, if and how

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<sup>1</sup> Berry, Jo de. *The Annals: Children's Rights. Child Soldiers and the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Sage Publications, London, 2001,pg.94.

international humanitarian law is helping to mitigate the incidence of child soldier recruitment in Colombia and Myanmar.

### **Social Condition**

A child combatant is considered any child, boy or girl, under the age of 15 that is either forcibly conscripted or voluntarily recruited by state or non state actors. Protocols I and II Additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child set 15 as the minimum age for military recruitment. The Optional Protocol (ratified by all states except the United States and Somalia) bans all forms of recruitment of under-18s by state and non state actors. Brett and McCallin, two leading experts in the field, suggest that while the majority of child combatants are between 15 and 18 years of age, a large number are recruited as early as 10.<sup>2</sup> The most appalling reports indicate that children as young as 5 have served in armed forces.

While the history of children's involvement in armed conflict has always been infrequent in time and sporadic in location and scope, since the early 1990's we have seen a dramatic increase in the recruitment of child combatants.<sup>3</sup> In the past, children fulfilled minor or ancillary support roles and were not considered true combatants.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that at any given time as many as 300,000 children under the age of 15 are fighting in violent conflict throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> While this number is widely cited, there remains some uncertainty as to the accuracy of this estimate.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, p.9..

<sup>3</sup> Singer, Peter W. Children at War. [www.brook.edu/views/articles/fellows/singer20021101.htm](http://www.brook.edu/views/articles/fellows/singer20021101.htm). Accessed 12/16/03.

<sup>4</sup> Singer, Peter W. *Caution: Children at War*, Forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, Jo de. *The Annals: Children's Rights. Child Soldiers and the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Sage Publications, London, 2001 pg.93.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Brett indicated that this widely cited number was based on her best estimate. Interview November 5, 2003.

Calculating the exact number of child combatants worldwide is difficult, if not impossible. First, both children and recruiters either lie or deliberately conceal information about the combatants' true age. Second, the intensity of armed conflict fluctuates over time. Finally, armed state and rebel groups generally operate in the absence of domestic and international scrutiny.

While the majority of child soldiers worldwide are young boys, in many cases, girls often participate in armed conflict. "In case studies of child soldiers in El Salvador, Ethiopia and Uganda, almost a third of the child soldiers were reported to be girls."<sup>7</sup> Young girl combatants endure a dual trauma. In addition to fighting, many girls are abducted and are forced to marry or serve as sexual slaves to other soldiers. Once recruited, both boys and girls may experience sexual abuse. In addition to fighting on the front line, child soldiers may also perform other tasks in camp. Child soldiers may serve as porters, cooks, guards, spies or laborers.

Where child soldiers are currently fighting has constantly fluctuated over time. Cases in Africa are certainly the most well known, however no region of the world is free from this problem. Child combatants are currently fighting in Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East as well. While the geographic locations are diverse, these countries all share common characteristics. Brett and McCallin suggest:

The conflicts take place predominantly in poor rural areas, thus impoverishing them even more, making education and employment even less likely, destroying and displacing families and leaving the children even more vulnerable both to volunteering and to forcible recruitment (Brett and McCallin 1998, 26).

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<sup>7</sup> Barnitz, Larua. Youth who Participate in Armed Conflict. Booklet No. 1 in a Series of International Youth Issues. Youth Advocate Program International: Washington DC, 1997, pg. 2.

While some children are forcibly recruited, others are driven into armed forces by poverty, alienation and discrimination. Voluntary participation therefore, should be understood not necessarily as children exercising their own free will, but rather as responding to economic and social pressures. For others, joining an armed force can be empowering. In the midst of war, an army can represent camaraderie, security and protection.

The impact of violent conflict on society is profound. Violent conflict disrupts economic, health and education infrastructures. It also prevents social interaction and a sense of normalcy for all civilians, especially children. An organized school routine helps normalize daily life and also helps to provide a sense of security, in which children learn to trust others and maintain positive relationships with peers and adults. However, in an environment rife with conflict, without education or options for future employment, children lack options. This lack of educational infrastructure debilitates society in two ways; children who are not in school may be more susceptible to recruitment; and secondly, once child soldiers have returned home after the conflict, a lack of access to school and jobs prevents social participation and may breed future conflict. As combatants, children receive little or no education, and many times, the conflict destroys institutions intended to serve children, making it difficult for children to resume normal life post conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Without education, children's prospects for employment are limited and joining an armed group may be the only way children can contribute to the family's economy. The participation of children in armed conflict produces immediate and long term effects on society. The immediate loss is felt by the family members who deal with the child's absence.

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<sup>8</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 135.

The secondary loss is felt by the community as a whole. Their participation produces psychological scars which endure long after the conflict ends.

While children may have been indirectly involved in armed conflict for centuries, they appear as direct participants more often than ever before. Cohn and Goodwin-Gil suggest that this past decade has become the era of the child soldier.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon begs two main questions: why are children increasingly recruited to fight in adult wars and what factors have spawned this increase in recent history?

### **Literature Review**

Various organizations including Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Save the Children, Quaker United Nations Office, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and others have put considerable effort into examining the issue of child soldiers. The convergence of these organizations and the work of pioneers in the field such as Ilene Cohn, Graca Machel, and Rachel Brett to name a few, have developed an emerging body of literature dealing with the rights of the child and armed conflict. Existing literature suggests that two major changes have spawned an increase in child soldiers' recruitment.

The first change is that armed conflicts between states are rare and most internal armed conflict now takes place within the home country of the combatants.<sup>10</sup> The second key factor has been the change in weaponry. Some scholars point out that the increased participation of child soldiers can be attributed to proliferation of small arms and light weapons following the post-Cold War era. Peter Singer points out, "after the fall of the Berlin Wall, millions of weapons were declared surplus. Instead of being destroyed however,

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<sup>9</sup> Cohn, Ilene and Goodwin-Gil, Guy. Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts. Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p.3.

<sup>10</sup>Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweeden, 1998,pg. 21.

it was cheaper to dump them on the world market.”<sup>11</sup> Other scholars suggest that the recruitment of child soldiers may be related to the advance of technological weaponry. Rachel Brett notes, “as recently as a generation ago battlefield weapons were still heavy and bulky, {however} modern guns are so light that children can easily use them and so simple that they can be stripped and reassembled by a child of 10.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, there is no longer any physical barrier preventing children from serving on par with adults.<sup>13</sup> The international arms trade has made lightweight, easily operated weapons widely available to children.

In addition to changes in warfare and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, there may be many more factors contributing the global increase of voluntary recruitment. Child advocate, Joy Muller, of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies opined that while the list of factors may be inexhaustible, poverty, the destruction of existing social structures while living in violence and conflict, and children’s obedient nature all contribute to the global increase of child soldier recruitment.<sup>14</sup>

Also, it has been suggested that the observable increase in part may be related to the efforts and increased efficacy of NGO’s monitoring the recruitment of child soldiers.<sup>15</sup> In other words, better information sharing allows us to monitor emerging trends and the extent of the problem better than we were able to before. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers is an umbrella group of 5 NGO’s (Amnesty International, Defense for Children International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office -

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<sup>11</sup> Singer, Peter W. Caution: Children at War, Forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> The Defense Monitor. Volume XXVI, Number 4. July 1997. The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants. <http://www.cid.org/dm/1997/issue4/> Accessed 12/12/03

<sup>13</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweeden, 1998, pg. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Muller, Joy. Email correspondence. 12/16/03.

<sup>15</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweeden, 1998, pg. 30.

Geneva, and Save the Children) is just one of organization that has been successful in informing the public and employing naming and shaming strategies intended to dissuade the recruitment of child soldiers. In spite of their efforts, child recruitment is still practiced today.

State and non state actors have learned that child combatants are attractive recruits. Children are cheap because they require few rations. They are easily brainwashed because they are young, malleable, and easy to intimidate. They are more obedient because they depend on their leaders for provisions and for this reason too, they are less likely to desert the armed forces. Children are small and can run risky missions. Rachel Brett adds, children are used in situations whenever “their small size and agility are seen as assets – for espionage, communications and de-mining.”<sup>16</sup> It appears therefore, that armed groups may seek under age recruits for a variety of reasons unique to children.

To address this global problem, the international community has established a clear set of international norms. The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (the Optional Protocol), as well as other international standards have provided the legal framework for protecting the rights of children affected by armed conflict. The Optional Protocol outlaws the involvement of children under 18 in hostilities, raising the previous standard of 15, set by the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. Since the adoption of the Optional Protocol in the United Nations General Assembly in 2000, it appears that the international community now recognizes the impact that child soldiers have on human security. While the international community has established clear

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pg. 20.

standards for the protection of children in armed conflict, atrocities and impunity against children continue unabated on the ground.

Current literature focuses on child soldiers as combatants who need to be disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated. This body of knowledge examines child soldiers as an existing social condition and tends to deal with them post recruitment. However, there is a conceptual gap in the body of literature which examines the root causes of the recruitment of child soldiers. While armed conflict may be deeply rooted in poverty, economic marginalization and social injustice, there are specific factors that motivate the forced and voluntary recruitment of child soldiers. Rachel Brett suggests that there are five major factors abetting a child's decision to join armed forces. These are: war, poverty, education, employment and family although ideology, ethnicity, the struggle for liberation, and friends may also play a part.<sup>17</sup> Only by understanding the rationale of both the child and the recruiter, can one make an impact in reducing and ending the involvement of children in armed conflict.

This analysis poses a few critical questions intended to fill the gap in literature between what is currently being done to reintegrate child soldiers and what should be done to understand the motivating factors encouraging child recruitment. We must ask, are children usually abducted and forced to fight by government forces and are they more inclined to volunteer to fight for non state actors, or vice versa? What impact, if any has international humanitarian law had on decreasing the incidence of child soldiers in those states that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol? Lastly, what factors motivate armed actors to accept or conscript the enlistment of children under 18 and what factors lead to a child's voluntary participation in hostilities?

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<sup>17</sup> Brett, Rachel. Why do adolescent volunteer for armed forces or armed groups? Paper for Spanish Red Cross International Conference "Adding Colour to Peace" (Valencia, Spain 5-7 November 2003).

## Hypothesis

As intrastate conflict is the most prevalent type of conflict involving children, these types of conflicts share similar traits, and thus can aid in explaining the forced recruitment and voluntary participation of children in armed conflict. I hypothesize that there are two correlational factors that contribute to the forced recruitment of child soldiers - the length of the conflict and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. When conflicts become protracted, forced recruitment into government forces can be a response to an immediate shortfall in manpower. Children are generally not recruited in peace time; they are primarily recruited during times of armed conflict. Most children get involved in war because it comes to them, their town, village, school, family and takes over their lives.<sup>18</sup>

Second, technology appears to be one the greatest enablers of child recruitment. Children are often physically coerced to join armed groups under the direct duress of having a weapon pointed at them. The accessibility and widespread proliferation of weapons has given armed forces more recruiting power. Experts estimate that there are 500 million small arms present in the world, or approximately one for every twelve persons on the planet.<sup>19</sup> The glut in the arms market has drastically lowered the price and has increased global access to automatic weapons. Now, both children and armed resistance groups have access to automatic weapons. The widespread proliferation of SALW has made children lethal, whereas before, their size and strength may have prevented participation.

Regarding the voluntary recruitment of child soldiers, I hypothesize that there is a correlational relationship between two main variables, the economic and educational conditions of that country. If a state has a poor educational infrastructure and limited

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<sup>18</sup> Brett, Rachel. Why do adolescent volunteer for armed forces or armed groups? Paper for Spanish Red Cross International Conference "Adding Colour to Peace" (Valencia, Spain 5-7 November 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Cobb, Charles. "Arms and Africa on UN Agenda This Week" AllAfrica.com. July 9, 2001.

opportunities for gainful employment, children are more inclined to volunteer to participate in armed conflict. I hypothesize that the presence of an active civil society is important and can be effective at reducing child soldier recruitment. The more active NGO's are in a country, the better equipped they are at anticipating and preventing the forced and voluntary recruitment of child soldiers.

## **Variables**

The dependent variable in this research design is the incidence of child soldiers involved in violent conflict in Colombia and Myanmar. The independent variables explain variation in my dependent variable and clarify why state and non state actors choose to engage children in armed conflict. My variables are as follows:

### **A. Situational Variables**

1. Length of Conflict
2. Presence of Civil Society
3. Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons
4. Economic Conditions
5. Educational Opportunities

### **B. Policy Variables**

1. Ratification of CRC and other International Treaties on the Rights of the Child
2. Ratification of other Domestic Legislation Protecting Children

## **Operationalization of Variables**

Regarding the situational variables, to examine the length of the conflict, I evaluated whether the conflicts in Myanmar and Colombia are protracted, long standing internal feuds. Second, I explore whether there are active NGO's dealing with child soldiers in Colombia and Myanmar. Third, I examine the degree of proliferation of small arms and light weapons in these countries. Lastly, I investigate the economic conditions and educational opportunities in Colombia and Myanmar.

Regarding the policy variables, to examine the presence of international treaties on the rights of the child, I assess whether state has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol and whether the state is in compliance with the international treaties. Second, I examine whether the states have ratified domestic legislation regulating the use of child soldiers and whether they abide by those standards. Specifically, I operationalized these two variables by assessing reports by NGO's of non compliance of domestic and international law within these two countries. It appears that there is a severe double standard between what states say and what they do regarding their recruitment of child soldiers.

### **Case Studies**

For the purpose of this analysis, I compare Colombia and Myanmar, two developing countries currently engaged in intrastate armed conflict. Myanmar and Colombia represent interesting case studies as child combatants are employed primarily by non state actors in Colombia, while in Myanmar it has been estimated that 70,000 children are serving in the national army. While Myanmar has the most child soldiers worldwide, Colombia is number two with an estimated 11,000 soldiers fighting in the guerilla and armed paramilitary groups.

### **Colombia**

For more than 40 years Colombia has been under a state of siege. While civil war continues to be waged between the military, paramilitary and guerilla groups, civilians have been the biggest victims. After Sudan, Colombia has the second most internally displaced people (IDP's), approximately 3 million, in the world.<sup>20</sup> In Colombia, many of the displaced

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<sup>20</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council website  
<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewSingleEnv/ColombiaProfile+Summary> Accessed 12/17/03

people are children and orphans and to varying degrees, they have all have had disrupted backgrounds due to years of violence and insecurity.

Separated and internally displaced children are vulnerable to recruitment as they lack protective family and community relationships. Rachel Brett acknowledges:

Children's well-being and development depend very much on the security of family relationships and a predictable environment. War, especially civil war, destroys homes, splinters communities and breaks down trust among people – undermining the very foundation of children's lives.<sup>21</sup>

Without families and functioning support networks, children from the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder are at the greatest risk of being recruited by armed opposition groups. Affluent and more powerful families in Colombia are able to take direct steps to prevent their child's recruitment. They may be able to move away, directly challenge the recruitment, or buy their child's freedom whereas families from the most marginalized sectors of society cannot.

In a comprehensive report titled, *You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia*, Human Rights Watch released the first full report on child soldier's involvement in Colombia's civil war. Based on their findings, approximately one fourth of all irregular combatants in Colombia are children, most between 11 and 13 years of age.<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with 112 former child combatants who had either escaped or had been captured. Based on their estimates, of the 11,000 child soldiers in Colombia, 80% belong to one of the two guerilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the remainder belongs to the paramilitaries or the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

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<sup>21</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/colombia/childsoldiers/facts.htm#2>  
Accessed 12/12/03

The report determined that by and large, the majority of child soldiers in Colombia are not forcibly recruited. Human Rights Watch reports that 84% of former child combatants had joined voluntarily, while only 11% said they were forced to join.<sup>23</sup> In spite of these statistics it is difficult to assess to what degree a child's recruitment is truly voluntary, as many children join due to a general lack of opportunities. Most come from extreme poverty, and have little hope for education or personal advancement. Many have been abandoned by parents or family members. The anger and disillusionment that a child may feel is thus easily transferred into fighting against the national army.

Colombian guerrillas have discovered that children make attractive recruits. Guerrillas call child combatants "abejitas" or little bees because they are able to sting before their targets realize they are being attacked. Paramilitaries call children "campanitas" or little bells because they serve as an early warning system.<sup>24</sup>

The legal age of recruitment differs for each of the irregular armed groups in Colombia. Human Rights Watch reports that the official recruitment minimum age for FARC is fifteen, sixteen years of age for the ELN, and eighteen years of age for the AUC.<sup>25</sup> In spite of these standards, flagrant violations continue to be reported. For example, when the FARC attacked the Guatape hydroelectric facility in 1998, the employees at the power plant reported that some of the attackers were as young as 8 years old.<sup>26</sup> Also, in 2001, the FARC released a training video showing boys as young as 11 working with missiles.<sup>27</sup> These examples not only illustrate the blatant disregard for their own standards, but also for international humanitarian rights law.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/colombia/childsoldiers/facts.htm#2> Accessed 12/12/03

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org/press98/oct/childsold1008.htm>. Accessed 12/10/03

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/colombia/childsoldiers/facts.htm#2> Accessed 12/12/03

<sup>26</sup> Singer, Peter W. *Caution: Children at War*, Forthcoming.

<sup>27</sup> Mckirk, Jan. "Brutality of Child Army Shocks Colombia," *The Independent*, May 2, 2001.

In the past, both the Colombian military and armed opposition groups recruited and used child combatants. In fact, during the mid 1990's over 15,000 child soldiers fought in the Colombian army and National Police.<sup>28</sup> However, through domestic and international pressure, Colombia not only initiated policies to reduce the rate of recruitment by guerrilla forces, but also voluntarily changed its laws and practices on national military recruitment.<sup>29</sup> Colombia has not only signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol, but has also passed domestic legislation outlawing the recruitment of underage children. The Colombian government enacted Article 162 of Colombia's new criminal code in 1999, which has prohibited the national army from recruiting children under 18. Since this law was enacted, no credible reports of children in Army or Police have been verified.<sup>30</sup>

To reduce the rate of recruitment, the Colombian government has initiated certain preventative policies. According to the Colombian Government's Annual Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Report in 2001, they have attempted to create financial incentives encouraging child soldiers to abandon their armed groups. They have also created programs to guarantee emergency humanitarian aid, education and reinsertion possibilities. Since the government initiated these programs, about 300 young surrenderees have received training in the different specialized centers on vocational service and technical careers.<sup>31</sup> The Colombian government has also set up "safe houses" or shelters for child fighters who desert the guerilla forces.

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<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International News Release, AMR 45/003/200159001, April 5, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Brett, Rachel. Email correspondence dated December 11, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/press98/oct/childsold1008.htm>. Accessed 12/10/03

<sup>31</sup> Colombian Government. Executive Summary Annual Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Report 2001 [www.mindefensa.gov.co/.../summaryf.htm](http://www.mindefensa.gov.co/.../summaryf.htm) Accessed 11/23/03.

Due to surplus weaponry supplied to Central America during the Cold War, small arms and light weapons have gradually become accessible to Colombia's many armed opposition groups. Central America is the single largest provider of weapons to Colombia, with El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Costa Rica accounting for more than a third of all weapons shipped to Colombia.<sup>32</sup> In fact, because of this widespread proliferation, armed opposition groups are often better armed than the Colombian military.<sup>33</sup> Eduardo Marino, a researcher for International Alert based in Colombia, indicates that the highly regulated and lucrative narcotics trade in Colombia is used to purchase SALW in order to defend rebel held territory and the illegal drug trade.<sup>34</sup> The accessibility of lightweight automatic weapons allows children to participate in the civil insurgency in Colombia in ways that they had previously been unable 20 years ago.

The presence of civil society in Colombia appears to be moderate and emerging. This level is measured by existing NGO's in Colombia loosely dealing with rights of the child and armed conflict. Research indicates that groups such as the Youth Network (Red Juvenil) are active locally in Antioquia in promoting the rights of the child. The organization advocates for greater youth rights and encourages active participation by youth in finding solutions to the country's problems.<sup>35</sup> While just a decade ago there were few NGO's in Colombia. Now however, there are several organizations advocating for the rights of the child. Another such NGO includes Brazos Abiertos, out of Medellin which attempts to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers by providing children with options.

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<sup>32</sup> Cragin, Kim and Hoffman, Bruce. Arms Trafficking in Colombia. RAND National Research Defense Institute. California: Rand, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> United Nations and Small Arms: The Role of the Group of Governmental Experts [http://www.geneva-forum.org/Reports/salw\\_vol1/19990225.pdf](http://www.geneva-forum.org/Reports/salw_vol1/19990225.pdf) Accessed 12/17/03

<sup>34</sup> IANSA website "Building a Network for Small Arms Control in Mercosur." <http://www.iansa.org/regions/samerica/ba-consult.pdf> Accessed 12/17/03

<sup>35</sup> Children and Youth in Organized Armed Violence website <http://www.coav.org.br/> Accessed 12/17/03

In Colombia, education is compulsory through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. While Colombia reports that 92.5% of the population can read and write,<sup>36</sup> it is reported that three of the fourteen million children in Colombia do not have access to education and see the army as their only future. Clearly, a lack of educational opportunities leads to a frustrated and undereducated youth that are willing to take up arms.

While Colombia, is ranked 29<sup>th</sup> in the World with a GDP of 268 billion dollars,<sup>37</sup> this statistic however does not accurately measure the welfare of the average Colombian. There is a huge income disparity between the have and the have-nots. Economic uncertainty and a lack of options often lead children in Colombia to take up arms. Unlike in Colombia where the majority of child soldiers may join armed opposition groups voluntarily because of a general lack of opportunities, in Myanmar, the majority are forcibly recruited by the national army.

## **Myanmar**

Myanmar is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country in the world. While the situation in Myanmar is grave, reports indicate that the problem is growing.<sup>38</sup> Since gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar has been ruled by military dictators and has been torn apart by over 50 years of civil war. A junta, calling itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) seized direct control of Rangoon on September 18, 1988. One of its first acts was to massacre thousands of peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators on the streets of Rangoon, and in other towns and cities around Burma in 1988.<sup>39</sup> While several different armed opposition groups have resisted the

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/fields/2103.html>. Accessed 12/13/03

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html> Accessed 12/13/03

<sup>38</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Radda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.burmaproject.org/spdc\\_opposition.html](http://www.burmaproject.org/spdc_opposition.html) Accessed 12/17/03

military's stranglehold on the country for several decades, it was not until the uprisings in 1988 "that widespread recruitment of children by government armed forces began."<sup>40</sup>

Extensive forced recruitment of children occurs in the SPDC and the national army, the Tatmadaw Kyi. While an estimated 7,000 children do serve in Myanmar's various opposition groups - DKBA, KNLA, and KIA - the vast majority participate in the national army.<sup>41</sup> Rachel Brett points out that the difference in size may be attributed to a lack of information reporting the practice of armed resistance groups.<sup>42</sup> The army is considered to do most of the gang pressing, or forced recruitment of children in Myanmar. Recruits are often arbitrarily seized from the streets, from schools or even orphanages. "In Burma, whole groups of children from 15-17 years old have been surrounded in their schools and forcibly conscripted."<sup>43</sup> The national army also recruits children through its Ye Nyunt ("Brave Sprouts") camps.<sup>44</sup>

Because Myanmar is isolationist in nature, information detailing the realities within Myanmar's borders is often difficult to obtain. Official permission to interview child soldiers in country is sought, but rarely granted by the Myanmar government. Because of these difficulties, most evidence is taken on the Thai-Myanmar border. Based on this information, Human Rights Watch reports that 45% of its total recruits are under age 18 and 20% are under 15 years of age.<sup>45</sup> International NGO's such as Human Rights Watch and UNICEF report that the widespread recruitment of child soldiers continues in Myanmar. While Myanmar's official position is that their minimum enlistment age is 18, instead of recruiting

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<sup>40</sup>Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch. My Gun was as Tall As Me. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002, pg. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Brett, Rachel. Email correspondence. December 11, 2003.

<sup>43</sup> The Defense Monitor. Volume XXVI, Number 4. July 1997. The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants. <http://www.cid.org/dm/1997/issue4/> Accessed 12/12/03

<sup>44</sup> Singer, Peter W. Caution: Children at War, Forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch. My Gun was as Tall As Me. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002, pg. 46.

on this criterion, children are recruited by a minimum height. To serve in the national army in Myanmar a soldier only needs to be over 4'6”<sup>46</sup>

In the face of compelling evidence; the government in Myanmar continues to deny that they use child soldiers as combatants and that forced recruitment is taking place. In response to a report documenting injustices by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Myanmar's permanent representative to the UN U Kyaw Tint Swe said there is no credible evidence of recruitment of child soldier”<sup>47</sup> in Myanmar. He also said that the information was not valid because it was received from insurgents in neighboring countries. All available information indicates that underage recruitment continues unabated even though the Myanmar government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991.

In Myanmar, persons recruited into national armies are “accused of being guerillas or sympathizers, with dire consequences for the individuals or the village concerned. Children, in particular, often serve on behalf of their parents, other economically active adults, or old or infirm people from the local community.”<sup>48</sup> It is interesting that the action of government militaries may be responsible for the recruitment of armed opposition groups. “Perceiving the danger that children may be recruited into armed opposition groups, government forces attempt to pre-empt this, which is counter-productive, since it tends to increase volunteering into the armed opposition group.”<sup>49</sup>

The presence of Civil Society and the involvement of NGO's are low in Myanmar. According to a report titled “NGO's in the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion), only a few NGO's are operating in Myanmar and most of them have emerged since the 1990's. They

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Rachel Brett. November 5, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Asian Human Rights Commission Website. Asia Child Rights. Burma: Military Government Denies the Use of Child Soldiers. <http://acr.hrschool.org/mainfile.php/0113/70/> Accessed 12/12/03.

<sup>48</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Rädda Barnen, Sweeden, 1998,pg. 54.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pg. 78.

mainly work in the traditional fields of health and education. Based on all available research, there are no specific NGO's that deal solely with child soldiers in Myanmar. In Myanmar, the concept of NGO's is new and not clearly understood.<sup>50</sup> Because of these factors, NGO's have a minimal impact on reducing child soldier recruitment in Myanmar.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Myanmar is moderate. While this estimate is based on the number of armed insurgent groups in Myanmar, information indicating the rates of SALW proliferation is virtually nonexistent and needs to be researched further. The SPDC government has signed cease fire agreements with several armed insurgent groups in Myanmar; however, the Shan, Karenni, and Karen Ethnic groups are still active throughout Myanmar. These armed opposition groups resist the SPDC regime for ethnic and economic injustices.

Economic policies implemented by the government in Myanmar have impoverished the country. As a result of deteriorating economic conditions in Myanmar, more than 1.6 million people have fled Myanmar and an estimated 1.5 more remain inside Myanmar as internally displaced people.<sup>51</sup> USAID reports that approximately 13 million out of a population of 48 million live below the subsistence level of one dollar per day, while 10% of children are severely malnourished and 20% are moderately malnourished.<sup>52</sup> Also, USAID lists Myanmar as one of the forty nine least developed countries.<sup>53</sup> These statistics merely hint at the extent of poverty, as it has been difficult to gain access to information measuring the welfare of the average person in Myanmar. It is difficult to gain a clear picture of the

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<sup>50</sup>NGO's in the GMS Greater Mekong Subregion Report [http://www.mekonginfo.org/mrc\\_en/doclib.nsf/0/701758103E203932C725682D000E44C2/\\$FILE/FULLTEXT.html](http://www.mekonginfo.org/mrc_en/doclib.nsf/0/701758103E203932C725682D000E44C2/$FILE/FULLTEXT.html) Accessed 12/13/03

<sup>51</sup> USAID website. Burma Annual Report. [http://www.dec.org/pdf\\_docs/PDABW167.pdf](http://www.dec.org/pdf_docs/PDABW167.pdf). Accessed 12/17/03

<sup>52</sup> USAID website. Burma Program Briefing. [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia\\_near\\_east/countries/burma/burma\\_brief.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/countries/burma/burma_brief.html). Accessed 12/17/03

<sup>53</sup> USAID website. List of Least Developed Countries. <http://www.usaid.gov/policy/ads/200/221maa.doc> Accessed 12/17/03.

problem as Myanmar restricts interaction, both social and economic, with the Western world.

While official estimates in Myanmar suggest that 81% of the population can read and write, estimates of functional literacy are closer to 30%.<sup>54</sup> According to the UNICEF report, child soldiers had only attended school for an average of 1.3 – 1.9 years before joining the military.<sup>55</sup> A lack of education is a definite problem in Myanmar and appears to be one of the aiding factors for child recruitment. If schools which otherwise may occupy the time of children are closed or destroyed, children in Myanmar become more susceptible to forced recruitment.

While the majority of child soldiers in Myanmar are forcibly recruited, some join to avenge past grievances by the national army. In Myanmar, “young boys are raised to revere military leaders of the past, and to look on military induction as a sign of manhood. To be a soldier is to occupy a position of great honor and self-sacrifice. The emotional pull of such prestige should not be underestimated.”<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The evidence indicates that a child’s living condition is a significant factor motivating children to take up arms. Where conflict has persisted for many years the conflict zone will inevitably be devoid of a functioning economy and educational and medical facilities. Failed economies and nonexistent educational infrastructures encourage undereducated, unemployed and frustrated youth to take up arms.

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<sup>54</sup> CIA World Fact Book Website <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/fields/2103.html>. Accessed 12/13/03

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch. *My Gun was as Tall As Me*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002, pg. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Rädä Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 118.

Besides gaining access to food, clothing and shelter, children may join armed groups as a last means of survival. A weapon may give children a sense of protection and a voice, which had previously been silenced. Because of these factors, if the child was not forcibly recruited, we should not automatically assume that the child necessarily wants to abandon his or existing reality. Although it is brutal, children may not always want to return home.

It appears there are several different reasons a child may join an armed opposition group. They may be motivated by political, ideological or patriotic motivations. Also, because military activities may be culturally esteemed, they may be persuaded to fight by their parents. In spite of these factors, “The single biggest factor for children volunteering into armed opposition groups is their personal experience of attack, ill-treatment or harassment of themselves or their families by government armed forces.”<sup>57</sup> Children, who have experienced torture, loss of home or family members understandably, may have a desire for revenge.

We must not assume that because child soldiers have now been addressed on the international agenda that the issue will go away. On the contrary, perhaps now more than ever diligence is required to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law protecting the rights of the child. It appears that unfortunately, the international ban on the use of child combatants may have been the easy part. Ensuring compliance is the final and most important step.

For example, by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, Myanmar recognized the illegality of recruiting children under the age of 15. In spite of their written commitment, the national army continues to forcibly recruit children. Rachel Brett points out, “Even where laws are in place to punish those engaging in under-age

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, pg. 202.

recruitment, these may never be applied, and thus be ineffective.”<sup>58</sup> While the majority of the child soldiers in Myanmar fight in the national army, there are children fighting in opposition groups. Non compliance is clearly an issue in Myanmar, as it is harder to hold armed opposition groups to international humanitarian law if the state does not abide by that law.

Compared to Myanmar, Colombia has been successful in reducing the number of child soldiers within its borders. Two years before ratifying the Optional Protocol in 2001, Colombia actually ratified domestic legislation outlawing the recruitment of child soldiers in the national army. Since 1999, then no credible reports of children in the Army or Police have been verified.<sup>59</sup> While Colombia may be considered a success story to Myanmar, there are still an estimated 11,000 child soldiers participating in armed opposition groups in Colombia. When a government regulates recruitment in its own forces, the legislation only applies to the national army and not to armed resistance groups.

In the case of Colombia, perhaps the first goal should be to talk to the leaders of the armed opposition groups. “Since most of the recruitment is carried out directly or indirectly by the armed forces and armed opposition groups themselves, without their cooperation it will not be possible to eliminate child recruitment.”<sup>60</sup> Another question, by negotiating with armed opposition groups, does this not provide legitimacy to their cause? Also, how do you gain access to their employment records, especially considering that reports indicating the ages of their recruits are likely to be falsified or missing? Without proper identification and a home to return to following the conflict, child combatants, are nameless, ageless and essentially invisible.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pg. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org/press98/oct/childsold1008.htm>. Accessed 12/10/03

<sup>60</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 172.

Colombia and Myanmar have been under a state of civil war for over 40 years. In both of these conflicts, the second generation combatants are currently psychologically and physically preparing themselves for violent conflict. In this type of protracted conflict, “children have grown up surrounded by violence, and often see it as a permanent way of life.”<sup>61</sup>

Opposition groups generally have political motivations and rely on popular support. As such, it is in their best interest to treat their recruits well. Children who volunteer usually try to escape from poverty or ethnic/political repression and would be less inclined to join an opposition group should they face receive same treatment they are fleeing. Regarding those children that are forced to fight, children are vulnerable because of their physical and emotional immaturity. They are easily manipulated by ideologies that they are too young to resist or understand.

### **Recommendations**

It is evident that international law, as currently devised, is imperfect. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol have not eliminated the recruitment and participation of children in armed conflict. Further research is needed to investigate whether international humanitarian rights law is mitigating the magnitude and frequency of child soldier recruitment world wide. While international law has been successful in motivating some states to cease the recruiting child soldiers, we need efforts to ensure compliance with state and non-state actors alike. The question then emerges, how to oblige other parties to comply, and how to do so with a coordinated, coherent strategy?

Regarding noncompliance, the most effective tool is a delicate balance of incentives and disincentives. While name and shame strategies have been employed in the past, a more

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<sup>61</sup> Singer, Peter W. Caution: Children at War, Forthcoming.

aggressive approach is needed. It may be necessary to sanction groups that trade with groups that recruit child soldiers. However, sanctions raise ethical questions on whether suffering inflicted on vulnerable groups is a legitimate way of inflicting pressure on political leaders. Therefore, ‘smart’ sanctions such as targeted financial transaction, travel restrictions, arms and commodity embargoes and diplomatic restrictions may be more effective. Also, the international community could make an impact by regulating the flow of automatic weapons, small arms and military aid to war torn corners of the world.

To deal with the participation of child soldiers in armed opposition groups, governments could also put pressure on these groups’ leaders and other key decision makers by becoming parties to the Statute of the International Criminal Court. By becoming a party to the ICC or other international humanitarian treaties, armed opposition groups may change their recruiting practice once they realize that they may become accountable for the enlistment of children. By the practice and prosecuting leaders such as Charles Taylor, a precedent can be established. The potential prosecution of child recruiters by international justice systems can become a deterrent for the recruitment of child soldiers.

While the international community may have established clear legal norms, perhaps the more difficult task is how to help rebuild moral norms and strengthen cultural value systems. Greater effort is also needed to investigate and mitigate the causes of social conflict. Also, “the most effective ways for Governments to reduce volunteerism into opposition groups are: not to attack or subject to violent harassment, children themselves, their families and homes; to provide access to education and vocational training for all children; and to address the economic, social and political causes of the conflict.”<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> Brett, Rachel, & McCallin, Margaret. Children: the Invisible Soldiers, Rädda Barnen, Sweden, 1998, pg. 182.

obvious action which governments can take is to outlaw the recruitment of children in all armed forces and comply with their own laws.

There are both short and long term consequences of a child's participation in hostilities. First, "as members of both government forces and armed opposition groups, children's deaths are the result of active involvement in combat where their inexperience and, frequently, lack of training results in high casualty rates."<sup>63</sup> If the child does manage to survive the conflict, he or she may be left psychologically scarred or physically disabled. The long term impacts on society are equally as profound.

Child soldiers are deprived of family support, education and the other resources required to prepare them for adulthood. Children who spend their time holding pistols instead of pencils are unfortunately denied the education and skills needed to make meaningful contributions to their societies. Besides their noticeable physical absence, child soldiers are also unable to contribute to their family's welfare which effectively dismantles the social fabric of their societies. Collectively, these conditions breed insecurity, and make development difficult if not impossible. In fact, the extensive involvement of child soldiers may be a significant factor in prolonging conflicts.

In many ways children can be considered the measuring stick of a society's well being. If there are high levels of infant mortality, it is symptomatic that the society's access to health care is limited. Likewise, if children are volunteering or being recruited to fight adult battles, most likely, the society in mention has poor economic and educational infrastructures.

If international law is to ever move from being an international charter of idealism, to a functional, worthwhile, and complied with agreement, the rationales and motivating

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, pg. 194.

factor of both the child and the recruiter must be considered. Prevention strategies need to reflect the complex ways in which children come to participate in violent conflict. Only by understanding these motivations can efforts be made in changing their behavior.

## POLICY ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Situational Variables

Policy Variables

Dependent  
Variable

CASE STUDIES	LENGTH OF CONFLICT	PRESENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY	PROLIFERATION OF SALW	ECONOMIC CONDITIONS	EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES	RATIFICATION / COMPLIANCE WITH CRC AND OPTIONAL PROTOCOL	RATIFICATION OF OTHER DOMESTIC LEGISLATION PROTECTING CHILDREN	INCIDENCE OF CHILD SOLDIERS ENGAGED IN VIOLENT CONFLICT
Colombia	+40 Years	Moderate	High	Low	Low	Yes/Yes	Yes	Yes
Myanmar	+50 Years	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	Yes/No	No	Yes

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