

FORUM:	Human Rights Council
ISSUE:	Measures to Prevent the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in the Central African Republic
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Introduction

The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups continues to be a grave human rights and humanitarian concern in the Central African Republic. The years of political instability, armed conflict, displacement, poverty, and lack of schooling have left many children vulnerable to child recruitment. Children who are affiliated with armed groups are coerced to join forces or are encouraged to do so. They may also be recruited as messengers,



Child associated with an armed group in the Central African Republic

Even with concerted efforts to release and reintegrate them by various government bodies and the international community, those associated with armed groups remain at risk of recruitment. The United Nations has identified the recruitment and use of children as one of six grave violations against children in armed conflict. Efforts to prevent recruitment need to go beyond extracting children from armed groups to address the factors that put them at risk of recruitment in the first place.

Background

Long term political instability and conflict has afflicted the Central African Republic (CAR), involving government forces, armed groups and community-based militias. These armed conflicts have established a context in which child soldiers recruitment is widespread. This condition, which includes displacement, extreme poverty, separation from families, lack of education, and absence of basic services, has increasingly rendered children exposed to be recruitment or use by the armed groups.

Not all children are abducted directly to join armed groups. According to the United Nations, children may become associated with armed groups because of poverty, a desire to protect themselves or their communities, fear of retaliation, or a lack of other opportunities. Others may be kidnaped or forced



to join. Once recruited, children may be exposed to violence and be used for both combat and non-combat duties.

The scale of the problem remains significant. A UN report covering July 2021 to June 2023 verified 713 children recruited and used in the Central African Republic, 544 boys and 169 girls.

Recruitment and use were the most verified grave violation against children in that reporting period. The



Abduction is the most common method by which child soldier recruitment takes place

UN also reported that the greater number of the verified violations were committed by armed groups. More recently, UNICEF continued to cite recruitment by armed groups, separation of children from their families, absence of civil documentation, psychosocial distress, and restriction on access to education as key child protection threats in CAR. These continuing vulnerabilities indicate that interventions to prevent recruitment will require long-term investment in communities and child protection mechanisms, not military or security mechanisms alone.

Problems Raised

Poverty and Lack of Access to Education

Children are particularly vulnerable to the risks of recruitment when conditions of poverty and inaccessibility to education prevail. For children who have little chance of benefiting from education or obtaining work, the risk that they are swayed or compelled by groups of armed combatants, is increased. Child recruitment can occur after they have been displaced from their communities and lose contact with the school system or their parents. Providing access to school can thus be a critical means of prevention. But factors such as conflict, violence directed at schools, displacement and resource constraints mean children may not be able to continuously access quality education.



Inadequate classrooms in a primary school in CAR

Weak Governance and Law Enforcement

Enforcing law across the country can be problematic for the Government of the Central African Republic. Institutional capacity, lack of security, and challenges in reaching areas can pose problems with identification of child recruitment, prosecution of perpetrators, and even with the enforcement of the existing protections. Even if international law forbids recruiting children for use in armed conflicts, any protections have no bearing when there is no capability in monitoring armed groups or in bringing the perpetrators to account. The UN has insisted on having investigative, judicial accountability and prosecution for child recruiters.

Difficulties with Release and Reintegration

Simply disengaging children from armed groups will not ensure that they will be safe from future re-recruitment. Former child soldiers may return to communities in which many of the same pressures of



Reintegration support for children formerly associated with armed groups in CAR

poverty, insecurity, family separation and absence of education still exist. Children may suffer from trauma and social stigmas when they exit armed groups. Without education, job skills, psychosocial assistance, family reunification, and community involvement, they are likely to face future recruitment. The UN states that reintegration is a long process of assisted return and needs to involve continued support services.

International Actions

United Nations Initiatives

The United Nations has carried out extensive activities to address the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in CAR. In CAR, the Secretary-General Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict monitors and reports on all types of abuses of children and on the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) contributes to generating and verifying information on grave violations against children and the UN uses this data to identify violators and inform action. The United Nations has worked with armed groups in CAR in establishing action plans outlining the commitment of armed groups to ending child recruitment and use, as well as other violations, but continued child recruitment is a sign that implementation and enforcement remain a challenge.



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Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR)

The government in the Central African Republic and international partners use Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR) programmes to assist members of armed groups to quit conflict and go back to civilian life. Children who have been recruited by armed groups are identified and separated from them. Children are then sent to child protection agencies, which may offer family reunification, as well as access to



Disarmament efforts under DDRR in the Central African Republic

education, and training and vocational opportunities. Children who have been linked to armed groups often find it challenging to reintegrate successfully as many are released into communities marked by poverty, displacement and lack of access to education and basic security, placing them at continued risk of recruitment and exploitation.

UN Security Council and Sanctions

The UN Security Council has developed tools and mechanisms to address serious violations against children in armed conflict. It has developed a system to identify the Parties that recruit and use children for inclusion in annual Secretary General reports to Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict. It has also supported peacekeeping and child protection efforts through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). These steps put international pressure on armed groups and individuals who recruit child soldiers. However, in the setting of weak state institutions, the effect of international sanctions and pressure is likely to be limited. The UN can identify and sanction the perpetrators, but the Central African government may not be able to implement these sanctions in areas under the control of armed groups. In other words, although the international community can condemn and penalize perpetrators, limited state control may allow armed groups to continue recruiting children with little consequence.

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The OPAC provides a global framework and establishes international norms for preventing and protecting children from involvement in armed conflict. It calls on States Parties to adopt measures to prohibit the conscription of children below the age of 18 into their armed forces. It is designed to allow



and require the voluntary enlistment of those aged 16 or 17 only under specified safeguards, and the recruitment or use of anyone under 18 by armed groups which are not State forces is outlawed. This is a major framework of international law for the protection of children, but its success relies on the capacity and political will of States Parties to implement and enforce it nationally.

Key Players

Government of the Central African Republic

The government of the Central African Republic is one of the key actors in the fight against the recruitment of children. It is in charge of implementing national legislation regarding child protection, strengthening security and justice institutions, and ensuring that state security forces do not recruit or use children. It is also crucial for the implementation of DDRR programs and collaboration with international entities. Due to limited state presence and capacity in some parts of the country however, monitoring and prevention efforts may be challenging. The government has an interest in strengthening its authority and security capacity while reducing the influence of armed groups. It is likely to support international assistance, funding, and training that strengthen national child protection and DDRR programs, while emphasizing respect for national sovereignty and government-led implementation.

United Nations and MINUSCA

The United Nations and MINUSCA play an important role in monitoring violations, protecting civilians, supporting the peacebuilding process, and assisting the government of Central Africa. UN agencies furthermore assist local NGOs in identifying children linked to armed groups and assist in their rescue and reintegration programs. The UN could contribute more to the negotiation process with armed groups and in the implementation of an action plan to end recruitment of children.



MINUSCA peacekeepers engaging with children in the Central African Republic

UNICEF and Humanitarian Organizations

UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations work to directly assist children affected by armed conflict through education, psychosocial support, child protection, and reintegration programs. Local associations are particularly important as they are able to reach communities that are not as easily reached



out to by governmental bodies and international organizations. However, funding constraints and security issues frequently limit the scope and continuity of programs by humanitarian organizations. These groups are strongly committed to the safe release of children from armed groups, as well as their long term integration on release. They are likely to call for increased humanitarian aid, greater access to conflict areas, better protection for aid workers, and more resources to be spent on education and psychosocial programmes to prevent re-recruitment.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Child Protection and Education

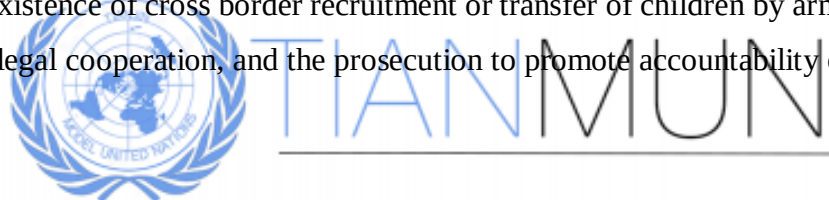
Improving child-protection networks and expanding educational access may help mitigate children's vulnerability to recruitment by governmental and international actors. Temporary learning spaces could be established in displacement camps and remote communities where schools have been destroyed, closed, or are inaccessible due to conflict. Such spaces could provide basic education, school supplies, psychosocial support and allow children to continue learning when they are displaced. School meal programs and targeted financial assistance could also relieve the economic pressures that may drive vulnerable children into the arms of armed groups. The child-protection networks will also enhance the detection of children at risk prior to their recruitment, with special consideration given to displaced and remote rural communities that are severely lacking in educational and governmental opportunities.

Improving Reintegration Programs

More than just programs aiming to remove children from armed groups, reintegration programs should also focus on the long-term support. This includes making available education and/or vocational training to children and their communities as well as providing psychosocial support, reuniting families, and offering support to communities receiving former child soldiers. Helping former child soldiers continue their studies or acquire employment skills may minimize re-recruitment rates. Programs should also address the stigma faced by former child soldiers so that they can return to their communities safely.

Strengthening International Cooperation and Accountability

Increased cooperation between CAR and its neighbours should be implemented to prevent the recruitment or cross border transfer of children by armed groups. Enhanced action by the states, the law enforcement agencies, the humanitarian agencies, and the UN could contribute to security and sharing of information on the existence of cross border recruitment or transfer of children by armed groups. Enabling sanctions, legal cooperation, and the prosecution to promote accountability could deter the



perpetrators from continuing to commit the violations. International agencies should cooperate with the concerned governments to establish efficient.

Glossary

Child Soldier

Any person under 18 who is recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity.

Recruitment

The action of enlisting new people in the armed forces.

Armed Group

The armed or military wing of a non-state party to a non-international armed conflict

Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)

Processes for providing the systematic gathering of accurate, timely, objective and reliable information on six grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict

Six Grave Violations

The Six Grave Violations refer to six serious violations of children's rights during armed conflict: killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children by armed forces or groups, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. The United Nations monitors and reports these violations to protect children affected by armed conflict and hold perpetrators accountable.

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