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Opinion piece: United Nations steps up action on child soldiers By Casey Kelso, Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

In a recent diplomatic dance to confront those governments and armed groups using child soldiers, the United Nations took both a firm step forward and a small side-step.

The challenge to act came in 2001 when the UN Security Council (led by France) adopted a ground-breaking initiative to compile a list of those using or recruiting children as soldiers in armed conflicts on its agenda. Non-governmental organisations campaigning against the use of child soldiers welcomed this landmark UN Resolution 1379. The Security Council member states had created a powerful tool to hold governments and armed groups responsible when they used children in war by explicitly naming them in a list presented to the world. But would they follow up on it?

In his follow-up report in December, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan did spotlight five country situations: Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Somalia. He identified a total of three governments (Burundi, DRC and Liberia) and 20 armed opposition groups using or recruiting children in an armed conflict. Now that the names of some governments and armed groups abusing children are public, the Security Council's challenge is to enforce accountability through concrete action.

Throughout most of January 2003, public debate and the heated backroom discussions simmered among the Security Council countries. Some such as France and the United States - which weeks earlier had ratified the principal UN treaty on child soldiers - backed tough measures against offenders. Other nations, such as Pakistan, seemed to be more worried about sovereignty than stopping child abductions, forced conscription and political enticements that lure children into armies and armed opposition.

Finally, at the end of January, the Security Council decided to "consider taking appropriate steps" to deal with those in the five listed countries who fail to end their appalling form of child abuse by continuing to recruit or use child soldiers. The ambiguous language side-stepped the issue on what exactly those steps would be.

The triumph of the Security Council, however, was to decide to widen scrutiny from only five countries to some 20 other past and present armed conflicts, in which the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates tens of thousands of children have been used as front-line fighters or in support roles. This year, under the new Security Council resolution, the UN will review the use of child soldiers in northern Uganda and Northern Ireland, the Republic of Chechnya of the Russian Federation, Sudan and Sri Lanka.

Making up for lost time, UN experts will formally examine the progress made in ending child soldiering in Myanmar. There, an estimated 70,000 children some as young as 11 are in the state army after being forcibly conscripted by kidnapping or threats of prison. The next UN "list of concern" will include Colombia, where the Coalition's research indicates that up to 14,000 child soldiers - some boys and girls under 10 years old -- are now in armed groups, militias and paramilitaries. And in Nepal, the Secretary-General is now authorised to investigate allegations that as many as 30 percent of the Communist Party of Nepal's fighters are children, with that number growing each month.

The Security Council clearly opened the way to scrutinize countries that were not on its agenda last year. This decision is appropriately timed to coincide with the first anniversary of another UN child rights success: the "child soldiers treaty". On 12 February, the world will celebrate the first anniversary of the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

So far, 111 governments have taken the first step of signing the Optional Protocol that curtails the use of child soldiers. More than 45 nations have gone further to make a binding legal commitment to enforce the new treaty. By identifying those using child soldiers in five countries, the Security Council is in step with growing world opinion. When it next meets in nine months' time to discuss again children in armed conflict, hopefully the Security Council will take more concrete action to make sure that the rest of the world's child soldiers are not forgotten.

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