

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Paraguay: No child's play -- Under-age recruitment in the armed forces must stop.**

Children as young as 12, illegally recruited into the Paraguayan armed forces and police, are routinely subjected to ill-treatment, Amnesty International said in a new report published today.

"Physical and psychological punishments against conscripts of all ages, resulting in both mental and physical harm, are commonplace in the Paraguayan armed forces and police," the organization said.

"A number of adolescent recruits are known to have died as a result of ill-treatment or in a series of, as yet unclear, shooting accidents," continued the organization, whose report details at least six cases of under-18 conscripts who died in 2000 alone.

"None of these youngsters should have been serving in the armed forces or in the police in the first place," Amnesty International said.

The recruitment of under-18s is criminalized in Paraguayan law, but in practice they constitute a large proportion of conscripts. Amnesty International has received reports of forcible recruitment of children and falsification of documents proving their age.

"The Paraguayan authorities should take immediate, concrete steps to eradicate this practice," Amnesty International said.

Such steps should include the establishment and maintenance of up-to-date child registration and documentation systems accessible to the public, and the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by Paraguay in September 2000, which sets 18 as the minimum age for conscription.

"At the same time, all incidents of ill-treatment of conscripts should be thoroughly and independently investigated," Amnesty International added, noting that investigations into the deaths of conscripts lack transparency and are hampered by the lack of cooperation of the armed forces and police.

The organization also expressed concern that cases involving the death or ill-treatment of recruits are dealt with by the military justice system and that families and their lawyers are allowed no access to the cases or to any information about them.

Following a typical pattern discouraging families to pursue the cases, the mother of 14-year-old Pedro Antonio Centurión -- an Argentinian national who died of gunshot wounds on 12 September

2000 -- was told by army officials not to speak to the press or anyone else about his death and not to disclose details about his age or nationality.

Amnesty International is putting forward a series of recommendations to tackle the issue of human rights violations against conscripts and unexplained deaths during military service. These include full investigations into all incidents of ill-treatment, the immediate suspension from duty of officials implicated in such incidents, the prosecution of those responsible and compensation for the victims of human rights violations during military service.

"It is time for the Paraguayan Congress to appoint a People's Ombudsman as set out in the 1992 Constitution, which would facilitate claims for compensation," Amnesty International said.

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