

MEDIA EMBARGO GMT 0000 11 JULY 2000

COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA: A Peace Dividend for Child Soldiers?

10 July 2000

"Everyone was dying. You saw the legs or hands of your friends lying in front of you. It was so horrifying, you couldn't make sense of it. It was hell! Boys lay on the ground for three or four days without being buried. We were fighting around their corpses."

- Rashid, an Ethiopian high school student who fought on the Badme front in 1999.

"It was very bad. They put all the 15 and 16 year olds in the front line while the army retreated. I was with 40 other kids. My friends were lying all over the place like stones. I was fighting for 24 hours. When I saw that only three of my friends were alive, I ran back."

- Mohammed, a 17 year old Ethiopian soldier forcibly recruited at age 15, describing his experience in battle in early 1999

Child soldiers should be demobilised immediately as part of peace moves between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers urged today.

In a special appeal, the international NGO coalition appealed to the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea to ensure that children take no further part in this armed conflict by ending the military recruitment of children, demobilising those already serving in their ranks and releasing into safety child prisoners of war.

"This war has been fought in the fashion of the First World War with children literally being used as cannon fodder," said Rory Mungoven, London-based coordinator of the Coalition.

"Young Ethiopian recruits tell harrowing stories of being marched over minefields to clear a path for the regular army. Some who returned alive were ill-treated or charged with desertion; others who tried to escape were shot."

Under Ethiopian law, there is no compulsory military service and the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces is 18 years. Over the past two years, however, there have been credible reports that thousands of teenage boys have been forcibly recruited into the Ethiopian army, particularly during the build-up to the major offensive launched by Ethiopia in May 2000. The recruitment drive reportedly focused on Oromos and Somalis, ethnic groups that have traditionally been sources of political opposition to the government. The Ethiopian Government has in the past vehemently denied these claims.

In Eritrea, military service is obligatory for all Eritrean citizens between the age of 18 and 40. This lasts for 18 months, including six months of training and induction. It is widely acknowledged that

children were used as soldiers by Eritrea during the war of independence against Ethiopia, though it is not clear whether this practice has continued in the most recent conflict. The lack of systematic birth registration makes it impossible to know whether the minimum age of recruitment is being respected in practice and the intensive fighting of recent months has required increased military mobilisation. In April 1999, Ethiopian officials circulated a list of Eritrean prisoners of war under 18 years of age, the youngest being 15.

"The current ceasefire presents an opportunity to demobilise child soldiers on both sides and ensure no more children are subjected to this abuse," Mr Mungoven said. "As a signal of their commitment, both governments should sign and ratify the new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which prohibits the use of children under 18 as soldiers."

The Coalition calls on the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity and donor governments to ensure that child soldiers are explicitly addressed in any peace agreement and peacekeeping mission, and to support programs for their demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

"In August last year, the UN Security Council recognised the importance of dealing with the child soldiers problem in peace building efforts. Now is a golden opportunity to put that commitment into practice – and to save a generation of children from this kind of abuse."

Background

Ethiopia and Eritrea have been fighting over a disputed demarcation of their common border since May 1998. In mid-June, after months of intense fighting, in which tens of thousands of soldiers died and more than a million civilians were displaced, a breakthrough was achieved in negotiations, brokered by the Organisation of African Unity with the support of the United Nations. A high level team will visit Ethiopia and Eritrea in the coming weeks, with a view to the UN Secretary General making recommendations on a peacekeeping mission to the UN Security Council later in July.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was formed in May 1998 by leading non-governmental organisations to seek to end the military recruitment and participation in armed conflict of all children under 18 years of age. Its steering committee members currently include Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva, Rädä Barnen for the International Save the Children Alliance, Terre des Hommes and World Vision International and several regional NGOs from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Information on child soldiers and the Coalition's activities can be found on our website: www.child-soldiers.org

For a full briefing paper on Ethiopia and Eritrea or to arrange interviews, please call:
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Images available on request.

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