

Liberia: Demand justice for child soldiers

Photo caption

A child soldier with former government forces fires into the air, Monrovia, 19 December 2003. All parties to the conflict in Liberia have used child soldiers. ©AP

Extract

The Liberian people, including an estimated 21,000 child soldiers, must not be denied justice for the appalling human rights abuses they have suffered.

Action Text

The lives of Liberia's children have been blighted by 14 years of almost continuous conflict. They have been killed, made orphans, maimed, abducted, deprived of education and health care – and recruited and used as child soldiers.

Boys and girls, some as young as seven, have been forced to fight, carry ammunition, prepare food or carry out other tasks. Girls have been raped and forced to provide sexual services. Many were given drugs and alcohol and, with little or no training, sent directly to the front line where they were killed or wounded. Those resisting recruitment or refusing to comply with their commanders' orders were beaten or killed.

There are an estimated 21,000 child soldiers in Liberia.

The recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime. The international community and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) have, however, so far shown little will to bring those responsible to justice. A culture of impunity has been reinforced by a proposal in Liberia's peace agreement of August 2003 that the NTGL consider granting a general amnesty to all those engaged or involved in military activities during the conflict.

International law prohibits amnesty for crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law. Such an amnesty would deny justice to child soldiers and the thousands of other men, women and children who have suffered appalling human rights abuses during the conflict.

Justice, reconciliation and lasting peace will remain elusive unless those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

Take action

Write to the Chairman of the National Transitional Government of Liberia, urging him to rule out the possibility of any amnesty for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Sample letter instructions

You can copy and paste this sample letter a document to print out. If you are planning to write your own appeal please read our letter writing guide. [\[link to http://www.amnesty.org/actnow/letter_guide.html\]](http://www.amnesty.org/actnow/letter_guide.html)

Sample letter

Dear Transitional Chairman

I am writing to seek justice for the victims of human rights abuses during Liberia's conflict, which include an estimated 21,000 child soldiers in Liberia.

The recruitment and use of child soldiers violates children's rights and is a war crime. Many child soldiers have also suffered human rights abuses while serving with the fighting forces, including deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture, forced labour, rape and sexual slavery. These children have a right to see those responsible brought to justice.

I am concerned that you and other members of the National Transitional Government of Liberia have indicated that you would favour a general amnesty to all those engaged or involved in military activities during the conflict. International law prohibits amnesty for crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law. Justice, reconciliation and lasting peace in Liberia will remain elusive unless those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

I am therefore urging you to rule out the possibility of any amnesty for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law and to work with Liberian civil society and the international community to bring those responsible for these crimes to justice.

Yours sincerely,

Appeals to

Gyude Bryant
Transitional Chairman
National Transitional Government of Liberia
Fax: +231 22 80 26 / 22 67 89 *

*Communication with Liberia can be erratic. If you are unable to get through, please try again later.

Background

In 1989 an attack on the government of former President Samuel Doe by armed opposition forces led by Charles Taylor plunged Liberia into a complex and brutal conflict which continued until 1996. Charles Taylor was elected President in 1997, but sporadic fighting and widespread human rights abuses continued. Hostilities between the government and the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) broke out in 1999 and intensified in 2003, with LURD attacks on the capital, Monrovia, and advances by a second armed opposition group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), in the south and east of the country. Serious human rights abuses, including the deliberate killing of civilians, torture, the forced recruitment of children and sexual violence including rape, have been perpetrated by all parties to the conflict

A comprehensive peace agreement was signed by representatives of the parties to the conflict and political parties in Accra, Ghana, on 18 August 2003. The agreement declared an immediate end to the conflict and provided for the establishment of a National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) to hold power until the inauguration of a new government following elections no later than October 2005. The following month the UN Security Council authorized the deployment of a large UN peace-keeping operation in Liberia, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Although these developments provide hope of finally ending the conflict, many challenges remain: human rights abuses against civilians continue; the cease-fire has been repeatedly violated; the deployment of UN peace-keeping troops has been slow and has yet to reach all parts of the country; and the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) process is only now beginning to get under way after being aborted almost as soon as it started in December 2003.

Related documents

Liberia: the promises of peace for 21,000 child soldiers
(AFR 34/006/2004), embargoed until 17 May 2004.

There will also be a press release, index number tbc.

Article in the May 2004 edition of The Wire

Liberia: Recommendations to the International Reconstruction Conference, New York, 5 and 6 February 2004
(AFR 34/002/2004)

Liberia: Human rights must be priority at International Reconstruction Conference
(AFR 34/004/2004)

Liberia: "The goal is peace, to sleep without hearing gunshots, to send our children to school; that is what we want"
(AFR 34/024/2003)

Slideshow

A child soldier with former government forces fires into the air, Monrovia, December 2003.
©AP

All parties to the conflict in Liberia have used child soldiers, some as young as seven. "Government soldiers came and forced me and my father to join them," said P. K., now 13. "My father refused so they cut his throat. They beat me and tied me and forced me to join the fighters".

LURD child soldiers, Monrovia, July 2003. ©Martin Adler/Panos Pictures
Commanders have favoured recruiting children because they are perceived as cheap and expendable, easily conditioned into fearless killing and unquestioning obedience. Of an estimated 53,000 combatants in Liberia, 21,000 are believed to be children – almost 40 per cent.

Civilians flee mortar fire in Monrovia, July 2003. ©AP
Abduction and forcible recruitment intensified as the conflict worsened in 2003. "Our sons and husbands were dragged out of their camps into unmarked vehicles and taken away to unknown destinations", an internally displaced woman said at a gathering of women calling for peace in April 2003.



Internally displaced Liberians, Nimba County, November 2004. ©AI

Women and girls were also targeted; many were subjected to rape, sexual slavery or other forms of sexual violence. “I was going to school in Ganta when they captured me,” said Y.D., a 14 year-old girl abducted by government forces in March 2003. “When we slept, the men came over and took off our underwear and abused us. Several men abused us”.

UNICEF goodwill ambassador George Weah plays football with teams of children associated with fighting forces, January 2004 © UNICEF/ HQ04-0032/Christine Nesbitt
UN, other international and Liberian child protection agencies have begun the long and complex process of rehabilitating child soldiers and helping them to reintegrate into their families and communities. “Many children are traumatized, with nothing in their minds and no skills” explained M.M. a former child soldier. “They want to be a part of society, but must be trained to be capable of taking part”.

A child soldier hands over a revolver to UN peace-keeping troops. ©Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures

The disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration program devised by the UN and other agencies includes specific arrangements for children, ensuring health care, education, skills training, family-tracing and reunification and responding to the particular needs of girls. These arrangements must be implemented in full.



A mural subtitled “keeping children from war”, Monrovia, 2003. ©AI
Education is particularly important, and is invariably the priority of children themselves. Without the prospect of eventually earning a living, children will remain vulnerable to recruitment in the future, or be forced into other hazardous and exploitative means of survival such as prostitution, theft and drug-dealing.



Children at an unofficial internally displaced people’s camp in Monrovia housing former government militia and others associated with them. ©AI

The plight of Liberia's child soldiers demands an urgent and sustained response. Lasting peace – which all of Liberia's children deserve - will not be achieved unless the needs of child soldiers are met and those responsible for their recruitment brought to justice.