

Children - Casualties of war

Every child is entitled to grow up in a secure, nurturing environment safe from fear and physical danger. Yet for millions of children around the world these fundamental rights are casualties of the everyday reality of war.

Some have never known peace or a stable community. They have grown up in the midst of an occupation by a foreign army or in refugee camps far from their homes and families. They may be caught in the cross-fire of a civil war in which neither side is concerned for the safety of civilians. Or they may be deliberately targeted to instill terror or destroy a people. Some children, mainly girls, are singled out for sexual abuse.

More than 300,000 children are thought to be fighting in conflicts around the world, and hundreds of thousands more are members of armed forces who could be sent into combat at any time. Most child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years old, but many are as young as 10, and some are even younger.

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says no child should be denied a safe and nurturing childhood — not under any circumstances.

Amnesty International is campaigning to make this right a reality for the millions of children whose lives and well-being are jeopardized by war. Our members call on governments and armed opposition groups to respect the lives of civilians and stop recruiting child soldiers. We pressure governments to shelter the refugees of war, to bring to justice anyone responsible for attacks on children and other human rights violations, and to stop providing the weapons used to commit such atrocities. Join Amnesty International in our campaign for the rights of every child.

The rights of every child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, a landmark international agreement adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989, recognizes that all people under the age of 18 have certain needs in common, including health and safety, education and a nurturing environment in which they can grow to reach their fullest potential.

Because children are continuing to grow and to develop, the Convention says governments have a special obligation to ensure that their needs are met and to safeguard against any abuse of these rights.

The overwhelming majority of the world's governments have ratified the Convention — only the United States and Somalia have failed to do so.

Among the rights laid out in the Convention is the right to be shielded from the effects of war. Children under fifteen are not to be recruited into armed forces. Children who have

been uprooted by conflict have rights as refugees, and the right to be re-united with their parents. Children have the right to rehabilitation from the damage done by war.

Children at risk

Despite binding commitments made by the world's governments to international human rights legislation such as the Children's Rights Convention, armed conflicts continue to subject children to needless physical and mental harm.

Armies often operate with impunity, killing and torturing children and other civilians knowing they are unlikely to be brought to justice. In the aftermath of the August 1999 referendum in East Timor, Indonesian forces targeted student leaders in retribution for their role in the independence movement.

Casualty rates among child soldiers are extremely high. Amnesty has expressed grave concerns over the human rights abuses related to the recruitment of child soldiers in many countries including Angola, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

The majority of refugees from armed conflicts are children and women. Many governments treat refugees harshly and unfairly or turn them back when they try to escape from armed conflicts. During the NATO bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, neighbouring countries repeatedly closed their borders to refugees.

Global concerns

Thousands of young boys and girls have been abducted by an opposition movement called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and forced to fight the Ugandan army. Those caught trying to escape are killed or tortured, and both boys and girls are brutalized by being made to kill other children. Abducted children are owned by LRA commanders, with girls allocated to commanders in forced marriages.

In the Northeast of India, children, especially boys, are targeted by soldiers who believe that these boys might be supporters or future members of opposition movements. Under a Special Powers act, the security forces enjoy virtual immunity from prosecution.

In Colombia, internal warfare has displaced nearly a million and a half people, mostly women with children, over the last 12 years.

In April 1996 over a hundred civilians, including children, were killed in Qana, a UN compound in south Lebanon, when the compound was recklessly shelled by Israeli long-range artillery.

Following the rebel incursion into Freetown, Sierra Leone in January 1999, UNICEF registered some 3,400 children as missing: by mid-May 1999 only about 500 had been located and reunited with their families.

Call to action

Amnesty International calls upon governments to uphold their obligations to international human rights frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We also call on governments and armed opposition groups to respect human rights and not to deliberately or recklessly inflict harm on civilians. Amnesty International urges international peacekeeping forces to prioritize the protection of human rights and abide by international standards for law enforcement.

More specifically, Amnesty is calling for:

- impartial investigation and prosecution of grave human rights abuses committed by any party in a situation of armed conflict;
- fair and humane treatment of refugees, which includes not detaining children unnecessarily or separating them from their families;
- an end to the recruitment of people under 18.