



A Sophocles once wrote, war prefers its victims young. Indeed, the indirect victims of conflict — the fatalities of starvation and disease — have always included a high percentage of children, especially infants, abandoned or neglected and unable to fend for themselves. That said, it can be supposed that the direct victims of conflict — the targets of murder, torture and rape — encompassed a comparatively small percentage of young children. But over recent decades, largely as a result of ever lighter semi-automatic weaponry — a child of 10 years can handle a Kalashnikov — and its almost unrestrained proliferation, this number is increasing as hundreds of thousands of

children have been unlawfully recruited, often by force, and used as soldiers.

The story of Emilio is a typical example. Emilio was only 14 years old when he was abducted by soldiers while travelling on a bus. He and the other young 'recruits' were constantly beaten, mostly for no reason at all, just to keep them in a state of terror. Emilio still has a scar on his lip and sharp pains in his stomach from being brutally kicked by the older soldiers. The food was scarce, and they made the younger soldiers walk with loads that were far too heavy for them. Emilio was forced to fight even though he didn't understand why the war was being fought.

Emilio is only one of more than 300,000

children, under the age of 18, who are currently involved in armed conflicts around the world. Although some are lawfully recruited, most are forced to join armed forces — the military or armed groups. The majority of child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years of age, although recruitment can start at the age of ten and the use of even younger children has been recorded. Even the United Nations accepts under-18s for the difficult task of peacekeeping, although efforts are under way to bring this practice to an end.

In addition to the obvious risks involved in taking part in hostilities, children are disproportionately affected by the rigours of military life. Physical and sexual abuse

Boy soldiers in FMLN guerrilla camp, El Salvador, 1993



PHOTO: AP/WIDE WORLD

# Stolen Childhood

Military training in Rwanda of boy soldiers, 1995



PHOTO: AP/WIDE WORLD

Girl with AK47 rifle, Cambodia



PHOTO: AP/WIDE WORLD



Girl soldier, Liberia, 1996

PHOTO: JEFFREY MAYER

of child recruits would seem to be common and the punishment for attempted desertion can range from beatings to imprisonment to summary execution. Emilio was one of the lucky ones, as he managed to escape.

The problem is not merely one of developing countries in armed conflict - although the worst excesses have certainly occurred there. Many countries in Europe and North America recruit children and have cheerfully proclaimed their intention to carry on doing so. As occurred with the global campaign against mines, society must take it upon itself to educate wayward governments as to what constitutes acceptable treatment of children. Demilitarising (in its broad sense) the environment in which children grow up will also help reduce conflict situations and violence.

Indeed, as recognition grows within the international community of the extent of the human and social tragedy, efforts are being initiated to tackle the problem of child soldiers. The Plan of Action endorsed by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has plotted a clear course towards greater protection and

assistance for children affected by armed conflict, notably by promoting the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of under-18s. In addition, a new movement of non-governmental organizations - the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers - has been recently formed to campaign in favour of the adoption and implementation of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, raising to 18 the international minimum age for military recruitment and use in hostilities.

And throughout it all, we must never lose sight of our ultimate goal - not merely a piece of paper, however high-minded and legally precise the language, nor simply the generation of new funding for more and better programmes, but a genuine change in the way children are treated in situations of armed conflict. Children like Emilio have no place in the army: their innocence should be preserved above all. Innocence should remain their most precious weapon.

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FMLN boy soldiers, El Salvador, 1993

PHOTO: JEFFREY MAYER

Young recruits, Dac Cong camp, Viet Nam



PHOTO: JEFFREY MAYER



Mujaheddin boy soldiers, Afghanistan, 1990

PHOTO: JEFFREY MAYER