THE PERFECT WEAPON

THOUSANDS OF CHILD SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN FORCED INTO BATTLE IN SOME OF AFRICA'S MOST VIOLENT CONFLICTS

By Jeffrey Gettleman in Nairobi, Kenya

YOUNG SOLDIERS fighting with a rebel group in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2002
When he was 13 years old, Ishmael Beah was given an AK-47, drugged up, and taught to kill. It was 1993, and his native country, Sierra Leone, was in the midst of a civil war. Rebel soldiers had attacked his village and Beah was separated from his parents. After spending months fleeing danger and wandering through his war-torn country, he was forcibly recruited into the Sierra Leone army.

“I shot at everything that moved,” Beah recalls of the two years he spent fighting rebel forces.

Now 26 and living in New York City, Beah is one of the lucky few to have escaped.

At 15, he was rescued by UNICEF workers and sent to a rehabilitation clinic in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital. Two years later, after a difficult recovery from drug addiction and trauma, he came to the United States, went to the United Nations International School in New York, and then graduated in 2004 from Oberlin College in Ohio.

Now, he’s the best-selling author of A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier, a chilling first-person account of his life as a child soldier.

EASILY MANIPULATED

All around the world, from Sri Lanka and Colombia to Afghanistan and Uganda, children like Beah are being swept into armed conflict, robbed of their childhoods, and used to fight for greed and power.

To rebel commanders, children are the perfect weapon: easily manipulated, intensely loyal, fearless, and, most important, in endless supply.

Today, according to human rights groups, there are some 300,000 child soldiers (defined as under 18) worldwide. Experts say the problem is deepening as the nature of conflict itself changes, especially in Africa.

Africa didn’t invent the modern underage soldier. The Germans drafted adolescents when they got desperate during World War II. So did Iran, which used boys as young as 12 to clear minefields during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Young people have fought in religion-driven or nationalistic conflicts in Kosovo (a largely Albanian breakaway province of Serbia), Afghanistan, and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, where children have been sent into Israel as suicide bombers.

GREED & POWER

In Africa, however, the problem is especially severe. In one country after another, conflicts have morphed from cause-driven struggles—like ending colonial rule—to criminal drives led by warlords whose goals are plunder, greed, and power.

“There might have been a little rhetoric at the beginning,” says Beah. “But very quickly the ideology gets lost, and then it just becomes a bloodbath... a war of madness.”

The typical rebel leader, operating from deep in the bush, doesn’t care about winning the hearts and minds of his soldiers or gaining the support of the public.

“These are brutally thuggish people who don’t want to rule politically and have no strategy for winning a war,” says Neil Boothby, a professor at Columbia University in New York who has worked with child soldiers around the world.

Few adults want to have anything to do with these rebel commanders, and so manipulating and abducting children becomes the best way to sustain the organized banditry.

As this kind of lawlessness spreads through parts of Africa, armed movements that rely on children as young as 9 are flourishing. Somalia, the Democratic Republic of

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Congo, and Uganda are examples.

In Somalia, thousands have been killed in Mogadishu, the capital, in a complex civil war involving armies of teenagers. The war traces back to 1991, when the central government was brought down by clans fighting over old grievances. But soon it became a contest among warlords for control of airports, seaports, and access to international aid. (American efforts to restore order failed during the infamous 1993 battle depicted in the movie *Black Hawk Down.*). Today, 16 years later, they’re still blasting away.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), a drugged-out gang living in the jungle with military-grade weaponry and 13-year-old brides. Its ranks are filled with boys who have been brainwashed to burn down huts and pound newborn babies to death.

Children are often drawn into these movements, and kept there, with magic and superstition. They are taught that life and death depend on spirits, which are conjured up by their commander and distilled in oils and amulets. And leaders of these rebel groups use magic to demand supernatural respect.

“The commanders would wear certain pearls and said that guns wouldn’t hurt us,” says Beah. “And we believed it.”

By the time child soldiers in Congo were being told that eating their victims made them stronger in the late 1990s, the world had started paying attention.

**WORLD REACTION**

The United Nations has since taken up the child soldier issue and passed protocols calling for the age of combatants to be at least 18. (The United States, which allows voluntary enlistment with parental consent at 17, and the United Kingdom, which sets the minimum age at 16, are among the countries that have not signed.)

But renegade armed groups continue to be a stumbling block. And as lawlessness spreads through parts of Africa, armed movements are spreading from the bush to urban-area slums.

“It’s ridiculous to appeal to human rights with these groups because they are so far on the criminal end of the spectrum,” says Victoria Forbes Adam, director of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in London.

Beah and other child-rights advocates are trying to draw attention to the plight of children in warfare—and are asking the world to intervene.

“No one is born violent,” Beah said during a conference in Paris on child soldiers earlier this year. “No child in Africa, Latin America, or Asia wants to be part of war.”

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**CHILDREN AT WAR**

Conflicts in these nations are notable for their brutality and the participation of child soldiers.

**RECENT WARS...**

- SIERRA LEONE: Young soldiers terrorized civilians by hacking off hands and arms.
- IVORY COAST: Child soldiers have been used during a civil war.
- LIBERIA: Many children were abducted to fight for Charles Taylor, a warlord who became the country’s President. The war lasted 14 years.
- MOZAMBIQUE: Children fought by the thousands in a long civil war.

**...AND THOSE STILL RAGING**

- SOMALIA: War profiteers, including teenage gunmen for hire, are fighting to prevent the formation of a stable government.
- UGANDA: An army of kidnapped children led by a messianic rebel leader has brutalized thousands.
- DEM. REP. OF CONGO: Warlords using boy soldiers keep conflicts alive in regions far beyond government control.