



# UNDERAGE AND UNDER FIRE

## An enquiry into the use of child soldiers 1994–8

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This article attempts to identify under what circumstances some nations' armed forces or groups employ children in armed conflicts. Based on a multivariate analysis of 162 and 165 countries in the period 1994–8, the article concludes that child participation is primarily linked to repressive and unstable regimes, in addition to protracted conflicts. It also suggests that child employment reduces rather than enhances the recruitment of children, possibly because child labour works as a better and safer alternative to child soldiering.

### Introduction

Children under 18 participated in 45 conflicts around the world between 1994 and 1998, and as many as 35 of those disputes made use of minors under the age of 15 (Rädda Barnen, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). Their current estimate is 300,000 underage soldiers worldwide (Rädda Barnen, 1998: 1). However, finding the exact number of child soldiers is a near impossible task, and they have been called the invisible soldiers by some researchers as they are often involved in the thick of conflicts where they are difficult to discover and accurate information is hard to obtain (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 31).

The question of military recruitment of children has traditionally not been considered as a child employment issue by most researchers and organizations working to abolish child soldiers. However, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers<sup>1</sup> has urged for the inclusion of child soldiering as one of the worst forms of child labour in the ILO 182 Convention (Brett, 1998: 4–5). The ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was adopted by the General Conference of the ILO in June 1999 (ILO, 2000). The main objective of this convention is to prohibit the most hazardous forms of child labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflicts, and applies to all children under 18. There are a number of reasons why child soldiering ought to be considered from the perspectives of child labour (Wessells, 2000a). Child soldiering entails

heavy, gruelling work involving high risks of being hurt or killed. It is not uncommon to assign the most dangerous tasks to children. There are both physical and psychological hazards involved, and a large number of children suffer from the trauma of flashbacks.

Why do some armed forces or groups in certain nations submit their children to this particular demanding form of child labour? In this article I try to establish if certain circumstances make children more susceptible to recruitment by armed forces or groups. Most of the existing literature describes the phenomenon of child soldiers and the psychological impact war participation has on children. Examining potential reasons why some nations' armed forces or groups employ children is not an easy task, considering that a lot of the recruitment takes place covertly, and that most armies would not voluntarily admit that they are making use of minors as active combatants. I rely on the information from the case studies which have been collected and analysed in Brett and McCallin (1996) and information from the Swedish Save the Children child soldier project.<sup>2</sup>

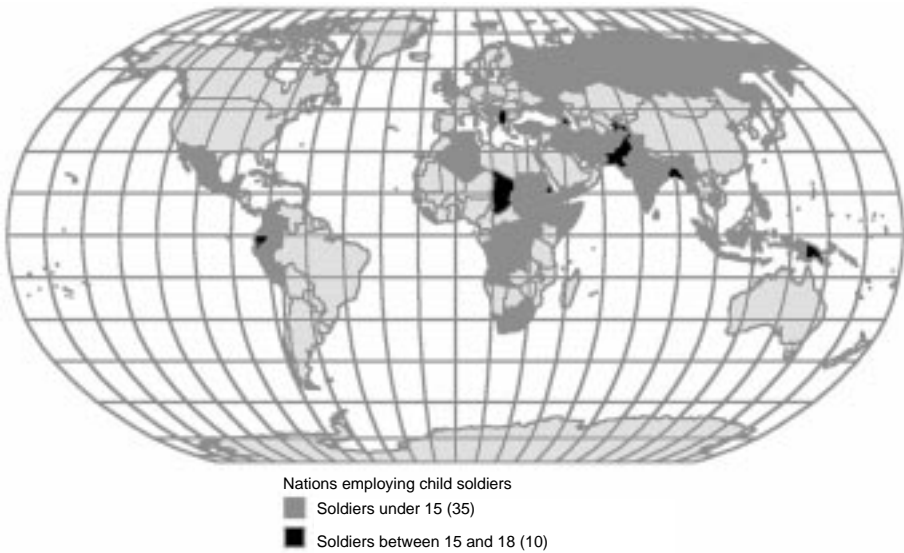
### **Who are the child soldiers and what duties do they perform?**

In their major contributions to the Save the Children child soldier project, Brett and McCallin (1996: 17) defined a child soldier thus:

The term 'soldier' is used for a member of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity and those accompanying such groups, even if not defined or identified as members, other than purely as family members; it therefore includes cooks, porters, messengers, and so on.

I characterize every participant under 18 as a child soldier, as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declares every person under 18 as a child (United Nations, 1991). In addition, 18, or slightly older, is the most commonly recognized age for voting in general elections (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1997: 185–208). Most of the literature on child soldiers also employs 18 as the age limit. However, I have also done some analysis with a more restrictive definition, where a child soldier is a person under 15 years of age.

Child soldiers appear in European, African, Asian and South American countries, and include members of different races and religions (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 26–7). While some children are forcibly recruited, others join voluntarily for various reasons (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1997: 23–30). Even in the voluntary cases there are elements of compulsion. Children may join to protect their families or because they fear for their lives. Impoverished girls and boys sometimes see this as their only alternative because it can provide food and clothing. Others believe they are fighting for an honourable cause, after hearing glorifying tales from army leaders. Children living in a country at war might feel safer if they serve in the army, with at least a weapon for protection.



**Figure 1** States in which armed forces or groups employ children under 18 in violent conflicts, 1994–8

Source: Rädäa Barnen (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998)

The states in which armed forces or groups recruited child soldiers during armed conflicts between 1994 and 1998 are registered in Figure 1. Out of a total 45 countries which are related to child recruitment, as many as 35 of these make use of soldiers under 15 years of age. It is equally common for government forces to use underage soldiers as it is for non-government groups, and children are used by both sides in more than half of the cases (see Appendix for details). Children are involved in extensive wars as well as minor armed conflicts, although most children are involved in the highest conflict levels. The armed forces and groups which recruit children in times of peace are not included in the analysis, as it is impossible to assert if they would make use of these underage soldiers if an armed conflict arose.

A child soldier's duties are more or less the same as adult soldiers'. They work as cooks, cleaners, guards and spies, and they also participate actively in armed confrontations (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 123–9). Many children have been used as lookouts and messengers (Machel, 1996: 9–12). It is common for youngsters to start with comparatively easy tasks such as cleaning and cooking, but it does not take long before they are armed and active combatants. Girls and boys have many of the same duties (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 31–8). However, many girls are also sexually abused as 'wives' of the leading soldiers. They are expected to cook and provide sexual services, in addition to their duties as soldiers. Former child soldiers

from Uganda reported that young mothers were seen with babies strapped to their backs during combat (Eidsten, 1998). Underage soldiers often receive harsh treatment in the armed forces (Machel, 1996: 11–12). A large number of the children experience brutal induction ceremonies, which often involve beatings, humiliation, as well as being introduced to alcohol and drugs (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 118ff.). Severe beatings and other varieties of abuse are used to break the children's physical resistance, and psychological pressures, to break down their moral resistance.

### **Why children participate in armed conflicts**

There are few theoretical foundations in the work specifically devoted to child soldiers. Although, Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1997) presented a theoretical framework for exploring why children participate as soldiers, a lot of their explanatory factors such as class discrimination, children's enthusiasm and submission to authority, and an appeal to a sense of belonging are not easily quantifiable and not suitable explanations for a quantitative approach. In trying to account for the phenomenon of child soldiering, I therefore adopt several hypotheses from general theories of conflict. However, I first discuss the interaction between child labour and child soldiers.

#### *Child soldiering – a child labour issue?*

Some 250 million children from 5 to 14 years old are working in developing countries and half of these work on a full-time basis (Ashagrie, 1997: 2–10). These estimates do not include children engaged in non-economic activities such as domestic services for their parents. It has been estimated that more than two-thirds of working children are affected by various occupational hazards, often resulting in injuries and illness. International organizations differ as to how one most effectively can protect children from the negative aspects of child labour. ILO favours a total ban of all child labour, whereas other organizations like the Save the Children Alliance believe the children's best interests are preserved if one can eliminate the worst forms of child labour and improve children's working conditions. Myers (1999) argues that at this point it is best to focus on ending the worst forms of child labour, and to emphasize children's well-being rather than primarily ending all child labour. The ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour is a step in that direction, and lists serving in an armed force or group as a form of child labour.

I would like to raise the question if the general level of child labour is connected to the use of child soldiers. Nations with a high rate of child labour may be more likely to make use of children as soldiers. As these states already have a tendency to exploit children for employment purposes, they may well be likely to take advantage of children within a more hazardous form of labour. If a country has a lot of working children, there

may exist a lower threshold for the abuse of children, and it may be an implication of less respect for children's rights. If children are involved in a wide range of jobs and it is viewed as acceptable by a number of employers, children may have less objections to joining a hazardous form of labour. Working children have the opportunities of joining an armed group, as many of them do not attend school. A lot of child labourers may have to work in order to make a living whatever way they can because they are left on their own. With no parents to hold them back, they might also end up in an armed force or group. However, there is an important distinction between child labour in general and child soldiering, as the latter also involves an ideological aspect. Parents may even encourage their children to fight if they are in great need of their salary or if they believe in the cause of the dispute. Some children and their parents feel that martyrdom is a sensible motivation for fighting. Thus my first hypothesis is:

*Hypothesis 1: Children living in countries where child labour is common are more likely to participate as soldiers in armed conflicts.*

### *Democracy*

Whereas it is disputed whether democracies are more peaceful in inter-state relations (Chan, 1984; Rummel, 1995), democratic nations tend to be internally peaceful both in terms of civil war, genocide and mass murder (Rummel, 1997). Democracy promotes tolerance and provides institutionalized means for the peaceful resolution of conflict, through a political culture which promotes negotiation and compromise solutions. I assume that in such a political culture, militaristic values will have less influence and will be more sharply curtailed by other considerations. Hence, I hypothesize that they will be less prone to recruit underage soldiers:

*Hypothesis 2: The more democratic a nation is, the less likely its armed forces and groups is to employ child soldiers.*

### *Stability*

Do all democracies provide a foundation for better treatment of and respect for children, or is this dependent on the stability of the regime? Whereas democracies tend to show a higher degree of respect for human rights, this applies mostly to consolidated democracies (Sørensen, 1998: 89–92). During periods of regime transition countries are more vulnerable to civil war and violence (Jakobsen, 1998: 66–7), and major regime changes involve more violence than minor ones (Hegre et al., 1999: 31–5). Inter-state conflicts, too, are more common among countries in regime change, including democratizing states, even though the long-term consequences of a higher level of democracy are positive for peace (Ward and Gleditsch, 1998: 59).

I therefore hypothesize that states in regime transition more frequently experience such chaos and disruption that norms against using children as soldiers break down:

*Hypothesis 3: Nations undergoing regime transitions are more likely to include underage soldiers than stable nations.*

### *Repressiveness*

In the post-Second World War era most wars have been internal, and not between sovereign states (Gleditsch, 1998: 11–15). In the period 1975–94 internal wars involved more casualties than the international wars, for the first time in the period covered by systematic data, i.e. since 1816. Some researchers claim that there is a new trend towards more violent conflicts in the last few years (Snow, 1996: 1–2), although the evidence for this thesis is more sketchy. In any case, civil wars tend to kill more civilians, and erode respect for human life. Recent civil wars have been described as ‘uncivil wars’ because they do not pursue political aims, but rather fighting and violence as a goal unto itself. The new warriors are generally not dressed in uniforms, and make difficult the application of the international laws of war. With less control and supervision of military forces, recruitment of children may become more common.

I assume that a breakdown in respect for legal norms facilitates the participation of children in warfare. More specifically, I argue that the more repressive a state is, the more likely it is that its armed forces or groups will employ child soldiers. Armed forces or groups of repressive states may use force and brutality in order to unlawfully recruit young people. States already known for their use of violence have no international reputation to safeguard. Armed leaders in highly repressive states may feel a need to make use of child soldiers to gain a large and strong army which can help to maintain a firm grip on the population. In open and less repressive states, children can more easily object to recruitment, since they have more channels which they can use to resist recruitment. In repressive regimes, there are also fewer opportunities for other people to protest against the use of child soldiers, whereas in an open society various organizations will take up the task of improving the lot of children. Children in repressive regimes may also volunteer for service because they want to take an active part in the fight for improved human rights conditions, or because they are ideologically motivated to fight. My fourth hypothesis is:

*Hypothesis 4: Armed forces or groups in states that show a low respect for human rights are most likely to include child soldiers in violent disputes.*

### *Child soldiers – a consequence of long-lasting conflicts?*

A country that has been in a state of war for an extended period of time will be affected in a number of ways, and a large number of grievances will accumulate. Protracted wars present a heavy drain on a nation’s resources, such as land, labour and capital (Thompson, 1993). A long-lasting conflict is also likely to result in lower respect for the parties involved and their human worth. A country where an armed conflict has been fought for several years

might experience national disruption, as well as a deterioration of moral standards. In such a chaotic situation, children are an easy prey and can easily be coerced to participate in hostilities. Children of war may lose faith in justice when they see people being killed and realize that criminal behaviour is not always punished (Kvamme, 1996). They also lose their sense of hope for the future, and this applies in particular to children who have experienced nothing but war and armed conflict during their entire childhood. These children's moral standard suffers, and they may have fewer scruples about joining the army.

A prolonged armed conflict inevitably leads to a great deal of losses. When a shortfall of adult soldiers occur, the armed forces may seek to recruit children. Forced recruitment by government forces may be caused by an immediate lack of mature soldiers (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 83–90; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1997: 24–8). If soldiers become scarce, it is easier to force children to participate than adults.

One of the impacts of war is a reduction in the state's resources (Keen, 1998: 46). The remaining resources are often used on security rather than on social services. The result of this may be that the population considers the war as turned against them, and thus feel compelled to resort to arms, young men in particular, as prolonged conflicts deepens poverty.

Children growing up during war may be used to seeing fighting and violence, and believe being a soldier is like any other job and can provide a needed salary. My next hypothesis discusses the effect prolonged wars has on child recruitment.

*Hypothesis 5: The use of child soldiers may be more common in countries where a conflict has been fought over a long time.*

### *War as livelihood*

Scholars seem to agree that a high level of economic development is an important factor in establishing domestic peace. Civil wars and poverty are strongly connected. This is in part because of the devastating effect of civil war on a nation's economy as capital and land are destroyed and people are displaced (Elbadawi, 1999: 1–28), but also because civil war may be triggered by poverty. Jakobsen (1998: 65–70) found that during the period 1945–92 almost no nations with high economic development experienced civil war, and similar findings have been reported by Collier and Hoeffler (1998), Hegre et al. (1999) and others. This might be due to the positive conditions a high economic level creates for the development of democracy, education and a free press. But how do economic factors affect the use of child soldiers?

Some child soldiers join voluntarily while others are forcibly recruited. Gathering facts about child combatants is not easy, and reliable sources do not want to be quoted for fear of reprisals (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 100–8). However, one characteristic of most reports on child soldiers is that

they tend to come from poor families. Brett and McCallin described the typical child combatant as poor, irrespective of the method of recruitment. Children who are forced to join the armed forces are often taken to a camp far away from their home. For underprivileged families it is difficult to raise enough means to try to locate their children and help them escape, which make the recruiters focus on disadvantaged children. Those who volunteer are also often destitute. They have the strongest motives to join, since they may be given food and shelter. Some studies claim that girls have been persuaded by their parents to join armed groups because their marriage prospects are poor, and their parents cannot afford to provide for them any longer. Children may also volunteer to provide for their families, to whom their salaries are sometimes paid. Children from impoverished or marginalized families are particularly vulnerable to recruitment (Machel, 1996: 10–11). Street children trying to make a living out of selling cigarettes, chewing-gum, or lottery tickets are a particular target. Economic pressures drive these underage soldiers, and hunger may also drive parents to offer their children for service.

In a country experiencing war, chaos and destruction, a lot of people may have difficulties finding a way to earn money. In such a situation there are those who will benefit from armed conflicts. Some youngsters find a sense of togetherness and purpose in war (Project Ploughshares, 1997: 7–9). In societies where it is difficult to make a living some may even develop a dependence on a continuation of the conflict, as they profit from the plunder of war. The combination of chaos and poverty may lead to even more crime, conflict and child participation. A number of ordinary people participate in hostilities because they feel compelled to do so, as they see no alternative way of securing their lives (Keen, 1998: 45–7). It could be more dangerous for young unemployed boys living in nations in armed conflict to stay out of an armed group rather than joining one. Therefore is the use of violence closely connected to the problem of providing enough food in these areas?

Due to lack of data at the individual level, I cannot actually measure if it is the poor children who are recruited. However, I assume that in countries with a low level of economic development there will be a larger number of poor children than in more well-to-do states. Thus, one should expect poor countries to have more child soldiers, as poor children are vulnerable to both forced and voluntary recruitment.

*Hypothesis 6: Children in poor countries are more likely to participate as soldiers than children from wealthy states.*

## **Method and data**

Information on the use of child soldiers is collected from the Swedish Save the Children child soldier project, which has recorded data on the use of child soldiers in 45 countries between 1994 and 1998. As the data only cover



a period of 5 years, I have chosen a cross-sectional approach. The population sample is all countries, whether in peace or at war, with available data for the years 1994–8. The dependent variable is dichotomous, 1 if the country has made use of child soldiers during the period, 0 if it has not. Since the dependent variable only has two values, I use logistic regression in the multivariate analysis. Regression analysis put in a dependent variable and controls for the effect of all the other independent variables at the same time.

The conflict data were collected by the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Uppsala University in Sweden (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 2000: 639–49). They define the following levels of conflicts: 0: no armed conflict; 1: minor armed conflict (above 25 battle-deaths in a year); 2: intermediate conflict (above 1000 battle-deaths altogether, but less than 1000 in a single year); and 3: war (more than 1000 deaths in a single year). Here, I use a dichotomous variable for armed conflict in the period 1994–8, regardless of the level of conflict.

Five nations' armed forces or groups recruit child soldiers without being in a state of armed conflict according to the Uppsala data (see Appendix for details). This is because Save the Children have a somewhat less restrictive definition of armed conflict. Indeed, their main aim is to put the issue of child soldiers on the international political agenda rather than providing a rigorous definition of armed conflict. However, I have chosen to follow the classification of the Uppsala project, which has a clearly defined set of criteria for inclusion.

The duration of the conflict is coded as a separate variable. I define a long conflict as one that has been fought for 5 or more years during the interval covered by the Uppsala data (1989–98). The conflict does not have to be fought continuously for 5 years. Even though these data cover a fairly short period of time, some conflicts may have short peaceful periods and renewed outbreaks of conflict.

Data on child labour were collected from World Bank figures on labour force structure and working children between the ages 10 and 14 in the years 1995–8. The data are available from World Bank.<sup>3</sup> I use the mean of child labour in 1995–8.

The data on ethnic composition were taken from Ellingsen (2000), who in turn collected them from three different sources: the CIA *Handbook of the Nations*, *Britannica Book of the Year* and the UN *Demographic Yearbook*. Among several indicators of ethnic fragmentation selected by Ellingsen, I have selected the largest ethnic group as a percentage of the total population.

The human rights measure was taken from an updated version of data used in Poe and Tate (1994), who coded the annual reports on human rights practices issued by the US Department of State into a five-point scale based on coding rules developed by Gastil (1980: 37). Mark Gibney (2000) has made a similar ranking to cover recent years, and I included his rankings of

Mauritania, France, Russia and Slovakia, as they were not included in Poe and Tate's data. I have recorded the Poe and Tate data to show the lowest score during 1994–6.

Democracy is measured by Tatu Vanhanen's Index of Democracy (ID) (Vanhanen, 2000), a multiplicative measure on the degree of political competition and electoral participation. Again, I use the lowest democracy score during the period 1994–8. Human rights theory indicates that there is a strong correlation between the level of democracy and respect for human rights (Dahl, 1992; Gurr, 1986; Howard and Donnelly, 1986). This relationship is taken into account by including an interaction term between democracy and the human rights variable. To measure regime stability I subtracted the lowest score on ID from the highest score during 1994–8.

Economic development is measured by GDP per capita in current US dollars, and were collected from the *Statistical Yearbook* (United Nations, 1997).

## Analysis

### *The results*

The results of the logistic regression are reported in Table 1. Coefficients for variables that are significant on a 10 percent level are marked in bold type. Child labour is seen to have a negative effect on the use of child soldiers. The beta coefficient has a negative sign and the odds ratio is less than 1. In other words, the impact of child labour is just the opposite of what I expected. The analysis also suggests that the use of child soldiers is closely connected with repressive and unstable regimes. The strongest finding is that children are most likely to participate in prolonged conflicts, which is indicated by a large odds ratio as well as a strong effect

Table 1 uses a dependent variable where the cutoff for child soldiers is set at 18 years of age. However, most existing international laws and conventions regulating the use of children as soldiers set 15 as the minimum age for recruitment. To ascertain if a nation's armed forces or groups recruit under-15 and under-18-year-olds under different conditions, I ran an additional regression with more restrictive dependent variable as shown in Table 2. The results were a little different, as GDP and the interaction term between democracy and human rights now became significant while the effect of child labour was no longer significant. Population and ethnic fragmentation were not significant in either of the two models,<sup>4</sup> and therefore left out from the model. The Nagelkerke  $-R^2$  was slightly lower (.75) for the second model.

### *Discussion*

The assumption that the existence of child labour in the country would be positively related to the recruitment of child soldiers was not confirmed. On

**Table 1** A multivariate model of the occurrence of child soldiers under 18, 1994–8

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Significance</i>	<i>Odds-ratio</i>
Child labour	-0.09	0.04	<b>.047</b>	0.92
Lack of human rights	2.66	0.76	<b>.001</b>	14.25
Democracy	0.15	0.12	.202	1.16
Democracy* human rights	-0.04	0.03	.182	0.96
Regime stability	0.23	0.09	<b>.014</b>	1.25
GDP per capita (log)	-0.19	0.42	.644	0.83
Duration of armed conflict	5.44	1.32	<b>.000</b>	229.53
Constant	-9.88	3.96	<b>.013</b>	
<i>N</i>	162			

Number of missing cases = 21, in addition Ecuador, Egypt and Eritrea were excluded in this model because they were outlying cases on the model as a whole,  $-2 \log \text{likelihood} = 43.93$ ,  $\text{chi-square} = 141.49$ ,  $\text{d.f.} = 7$ ,  $\text{significance} = .000$ . Nagelkerke  $-R^2 = .86$ .

**Table 2** A multivariate model of the occurrence of child soldiers under 15, 1994–8

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Significance</i>	<i>Odds-ratio</i>
Child labour	-0.01	0.03	.722	0.99
Lack of human rights	2.32	0.69	<b>.001</b>	10.21
Democracy	0.12	0.10	.210	1.13
Democracy* human rights	-0.04	0.03	<b>.100</b>	0.96
Regime stability	0.15	0.08	<b>.055</b>	1.16
GDP per capita (log)	0.69	0.40	<b>.090</b>	1.99
Duration of armed conflict	3.25	0.81	<b>.000</b>	25.80
Constant	-15.72	4.48	<b>.001</b>	
<i>N</i>	165			

Number of missing cases = 21,  $-2 \log \text{likelihood} = 60.97$ ,  $\text{chi-square} = 109.56$ ,  $\text{d.f.} = 7$ ,  $\text{significance} = .000$ . Nagelkerke  $-R^2 = .75$ .

the contrary, an increasing level of child labour was related to a lower probability of child soldiers under 18. This might be accounted for by the fact that working children are already provided for economically and thus do not need to volunteer for service, and that work provides a safer alternative to child soldiering. As mentioned earlier, ILO and Save the Children had opposing views on child employment. ILO favoured a total ban, whereas Save the Children found this to be unrealistic and undesirable. If non-hazardous work is available, children may be kept away from even more dangerous work, such as mining, prostitution and serving in armed forces or groups.

The hypothesis relating human rights violations to child soldiering was strengthened in the empirical analysis, irrespective of the age of the child soldiers. Strongly repressive states do violate children's rights. They may also provide the sense of injustice needed for young combatants to sign up voluntarily. The theorizing about the effects of regime instability was supported in the analysis. Unstable regimes are indeed more likely to employ underage fighters, regardless of whether the movement was towards democracy or autocracy.

The analysis also confirms that the employment of child soldiers under 15 is closely connected to poverty at the national level. This is consistent with the interpretation of current armed conflict as a question of livelihood.

Finally, the analysis supported the hypothesis that children are more liable to participate in protracted armed conflicts.

### *Armed conflicts without child soldiers*

Ten states were involved in armed conflicts during 1994–8, but did not make use of child combatants: Cameroon, Comoros, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Is there any common feature among them? Some are democratic, others semi-democratic or autocratic. There are stable as well as unstable nations among them. The identifiable shared characteristics were that all of them had a medium rate of economic development, none of them were among the states which show most respect for human rights, all made use of child labour and nearly all of them had a low conflict level. This suggests that economic development might have a curvilinear effect on child soldiering. To test this notion, a squared GDP per capita was used in the overall model. However, it was not found to be significant, and was therefore excluded in the final model. The most striking common feature was the low conflict level. All nations, except for Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, experienced a minor armed conflict in the period 1994–8 according to the Uppsala data (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 2000). This indicates that children are more likely to be involved in high-level conflicts as well as prolonged disputes.

Of course, some of these countries' armed forces or groups may in fact use child soldiers but this simply was not uncovered. The data on child soldiers were collected by a non-governmental organization with limited resources. It may have been particularly difficult to compile information on the use of young fighters in Cameroon, Nigeria and Egypt, since there are high levels of serious human rights violations in these countries (US Department of State, 2000). Brett and McCallin (1996: 30–1) pointed out that they were not convinced that the armed forces or groups of nations not appearing on their 'blacklist' in fact do not make use of underage combatants, merely that they currently have no reliable information available claiming they do. In fact, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Nepal and Nigeria appear on Save the Children's blacklist for the year 1999. Thus, abuse of children by armed

forces or groups was eventually uncovered in four of these nations (Rädda Barnen, 2000a).<sup>5</sup>

### *Preventing recruitment of children as soldiers*

The most important existing and planned laws and conventions regulating the use of child soldiers are: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol; the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocols of 1977; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour; and the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 1999). The CRC, the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocol and the ICC set 15 as the minimum age for recruitment, whereas the proposed Optional Protocol to the CRC, the African Charter and the ILO Convention (applies only to compulsory or forced participation) states that children under 18 shall not participate in hostilities. The African Charter entered into force on 29 November 1999, and the Optional Protocol to the CRC was adopted by the Security Council on 11 August 2000. The ILO Convention and the ICC are not effective at the time of writing.

A check on how many of these conventions the child-recruiting states have signed reveals many of the countries that employ underage combatants have not yet signed the relevant treaties. Apparently it is more problematic to convince nations to set the minimum age at 18 rather than 15. If Brett (1999: 57) is correct in her claim that a majority of the child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, the majority of them are not protected by existing and ratified international legislation. No fewer than 35 of the 45 states with child-recruiting armed forces or groups included in this analysis are believed to employ soldiers under 15 (Rädda Barnen, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). An increased effort to convince all nations to ratify the Additional Protocols of the Geneva Convention, the Rome Statute of the ICC and the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, as well as the Optional Protocol to the CRC, may lead countries at war to try to abolish the use of minors as combatants. However, that most nations which recruit child soldiers to their armed forces or groups are in violation of their own laws (CIA, 2000; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1997: 185–208; Rädda Barnen, 2000b), and the employment of child soldiers is a rising problem, would indicate that treaties may not be sufficient to ensure the banning of the use of children in violent disputes. States that recruit children into armed forces or groups do not respect human rights in general, and must be expected to ignore or to break international humanitarian laws and regulations generally. It is therefore unlikely that they will respect legislation regulating children's rights even if they are persuaded to sign them. Coercive measures to stop the use of child soldiers such as economic sanctions are not a good solution as children may be among the ones to suffer most from the consequences of sanctions. The international community should rather reward those who

refrain from using minor combatants. Development aid to the nations where armed forces or groups employ children under 15 should be encouraged.

Still, there are quite a few children who are recruited in peacetime (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 51–65), and this would not be registered as a war crime that the ICC can rule on. So increased efforts should also be placed at raising the national recruitment levels, so that no armed force can recruit children either voluntarily or compulsorily, as armed groups are not bound by certain international laws that bind states.

Within the existing legal framework the minimum age for soldiers could be raised to 18 as a clear sign of the importance of protecting children from the hazards of war. Laws may change awareness and behaviour towards child soldiers over time, and it is important to state the 18-year limit clearly in all international treaties. This applies to the Geneva Convention as well as the Rome Statute of the ICC. The USA, the only industrialized country which has not yet ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, will probably come under increasing pressure to do so. As one of the world's most powerful nations, and as a nation which has recently been involved in military interventions in the name of protecting human rights, the US may find its position on this issue increasingly anomalous.

When the ICC becomes effective it will have the power to convict perpetrators of war crimes, including those who unlawfully recruit underage children in times of war, but not recruitment in peacetime. The organizations working to improve children's rights should encourage all states to ratify the ICC Rome Statute. Large proportions of the child soldiers are forcibly recruited into government forces (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 83–90). These governments are not likely to take legal action against this practice themselves, and the ICC could form an independent party using existing laws as its guiding force. The African Charter outlines the foundations not only for laws regulating children's participation in violent disputes, but also sets up a committee to monitor and investigate violations of children's rights. As this Charter has just recently entered into force, it is too early to comment on its effectiveness. During prolonged conflicts traditional norms and social codes of behaviour break down (Otunnu, 1998). Emphasis should be placed on reintegrating these local norms and value systems, and on strengthening the different institutions and networks which have traditionally tried to protect civilians from the hazards of war.

My research shows that respect for human rights is closely related to the non-recruitment of child soldiers. Redoubling international efforts to monitor and penalize human rights violations could provide an effective means to limit the use of child soldiers.

More controversially perhaps, my work indicates that child labour has a restraining effect on the involvement of children in hostilities. The ILO's Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour represents a pragmatic approach to this problem. It is extremely difficult to abolish poverty every-

where in the short term and to make sure that every child is provided for by its family or by the authorities. Therefore, elimination of the worst forms of child labour seems much more realistic than the elimination of all child labour. Governments should consider putting the emphasis on the improvement of working conditions and the proper payment for child labour in general. Child soldiering is rightfully considered a form of hazardous labour by the new ILO convention, and made illegal for small children and adolescents.

International legislation by itself is unlikely to ensure a peaceful world without child soldiers. Prolonged wars are likely to encourage further violence and to increase the likelihood of involving children as active combatants. The international community should look for ways to assist countries in terminating armed conflicts at an early stage, by sponsoring peace talks and assisting in negotiations between the parties to the dispute. Using child soldiers may plant the seeds of future violence and armed conflict (Wessells, 2000b). Poor children with low education who are trained to kill are a threat to continuing peace after a peace accord has been signed. Peace agreements should deal with the demobilization of former child soldiers, a problem ignored in all existing peace accords (Brett and McCallin, 1996: 10).

Several scholars agree that the increasing involvement of children in today's conflicts is also due to the easy accessibility of lightweight weapons (Barnitz, 1997: 9–10; Brett, 1999: 57). Many such weapons can be carried and operated even by young children. This is not an issue that my research sheds any light on, as no satisfactory data are available yet. However, if there is something to this hypothesis, nations which do not employ child soldiers may consider refusing the sale of such arms to countries that do, or even to other countries in the same region.

While it would clearly be helpful if more countries would ratify existing treaties, a major problem lies in the little respect shown by many regimes for human rights and international legislation. Improvements in the legal regime and increasing ratification is not enough if one cannot ensure compliance with the legal provisions. The International Court of Justice has no jurisdiction over human rights violations committed by a state against its own citizens. As most recent conflicts are internal, the creation of an International Criminal Court is an important step in the direction of bringing individuals to trial, including government officials and others who encourage the recruitment and use of child soldiers and other gross human rights violations. Only time can show whether such a court will be effective. In the long run, only improved economic and political factors can lay the groundwork for a peaceful society in which the very idea of a child soldier will seem completely outmoded.

To conclude, there are little reliable data available on the recruitment of child soldiers, and I would recommend an increased effort to monitor the

use of child soldiers and supply reliable data. Only through consistent and accessible information, will we be able to work towards prevention and respond to the phenomenon of child soldiering in an appropriate and successful manner. My research has merely been a limited study and sheds light on a few relevant aspects of underage recruitment. The UN Special Representative for Children in War has encouraged all organizations to create databases containing their information on the use of child soldiers. Save the Children in Sweden has produced an online database on the use of child soldiers (Rädda Barnen, 2000b), and Essex University has created a web-based database on armed conflicts, their impact on children and international law documents and reports, to continue the work of Graça Machel, the former UN expert on the impact of armed conflict on children (Essex University, 2000).

## Notes

This article draws on my thesis in political science (Halsan Høiskar, 2000). A more detailed description of the data and methodology can be found in the thesis. I thank my colleagues at PRIO, Nils Petter Gleditsch, Scott Gates and the anonymous *Childhood* referees for useful comments. I also thank Steve Poe and Neal Tate for supplying me with the data on human rights practices. My work on the article was supported by PRIO projects on 'The New Security Environment' (funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence) and 'Civil War' (funded by the World Bank). The data can be downloaded from the PRIO website at [www.prio.no/cwp/datasets.htm](http://www.prio.no/cwp/datasets.htm)

1. The Coalition's Steering Committee comprises Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance (represented by Rädda Barnen), Jesuit Refugee Service and the Quaker UN Office, Geneva.
2. See [www.rb.se/childwardatabase/](http://www.rb.se/childwardatabase/).
3. Available by request from: [info@worldbank.org](mailto:info@worldbank.org)
4. Using countries as a unit of analysis is not totally ideal. I have therefore tried to include the total population and ethnic fragmentation as control variables to see if the effect were different according to the size of the nation and the degree of ethnic fragmentation. As these data had no effect on the odds ratio, they are not included in the analysis.
5. As an updated human rights variable is not available, I have not included the latest data on child soldiers in this analysis.



## Appendix

<i>Country</i>	<i>Age of child soldiers</i>	<i>Conflict level</i>	<i>Recruiting party</i>
Afghanistan	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Albania	Under 15	Low intensity	Non-government
Algeria	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Angola	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Azerbaijan (Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh)	Between 15 and 18	War	Non-government
Bangladesh	Between 15 and 18	Low intensity	Government
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Burundi	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Cambodia	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Chad	Between 15 and 18	Minor	Government
Colombia	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Croatia	Under 15	Intermediate	Government
Democratic Republic of Congo	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Djibouti	Between 15 and 18	Minor	Non-government
Ecuador (Peru)	Between 15 and 18	Minor	Government
Eritrea	Between 15 and 18	War	Government
Ethiopia	Under 15	War	Government
Former Yugoslavia	Between 15 and 18	War	Government and non-government
Guatemala	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
India (Kashmir)	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Indonesia (East Timor)	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Iran	Under 15	Low intensity	Non-government

**Appendix cont.**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Age of child soldiers</i>	<i>Conflict level</i>	<i>Recruiting party</i>
Iraq (Kurdistan)	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Israel (Occupied Territories)	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Lebanon (southern)	Under 15	Low intensity	Government and non-government
Liberia	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Mexico (Chiapas)	Under 15	Minor	Government and non-government
Myanmar	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Pakistan	Between 15 and 18	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Papua New Guinea	Between 15 and 18	Minor	Government and non-government
Peru	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Philippines	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Republic of Congo	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Russia (Chechnya)	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Rwanda	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Sierra Leone	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Somalia	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
South Africa	Under 15	Low intensity	Non-government
Sri Lanka	Under 15	War	Non-government
Sudan	Under 15	War	Government and non-government
Tajikistan	Between 15 and 18	Intermediate	Government
Turkey (Kurdistan)	Under 15	War	Non-government
Uganda	Under 15	Intermediate	Government and non-government
United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)	Under 15 <sup>a</sup>	Intermediate	Government and non-government
Yemen	Under 15	War	No information

<sup>a</sup>Rädda Barnen lists this case as a borderline case. For more information see [www.rb.se/childwardatabase/](http://www.rb.se/childwardatabase/)

## Appendix: Descriptive statistics on the variables

Variable	Mean	Variance	Range
0–18 child soldiers	0.24	0.184	1.00
0–15 child soldiers	0.19	0.154	1.00
GDP per capita	7.304	2.936	10.40
Child labour	11.354	216.038	53.90
Democracy	13.669	157.036	42.50
Human rights	2.7069	1.862	4.00
Interaction term	28.3497	890.192	149.00
Stability	3.541	20.929	32.90
Duration of conflict	0.18	0.147	1.00

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