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COMMITTEE: DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

ISSUE: PREVENTING THE MILITARIZATION OF CHILDREN IN
ONGOING CONFLICTS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

In the past 5 years, 118 million children in Africa have lived in proximity to conflict, constituting a ratio of 1:6 children being possibly recruited into military activities. The militarization of children is defined as the recruitment of children under the age of 18 by armed forces or groups. Children may be directly drafted into the military to be trained as soldiers, or obliged to work as spies, cooks, messengers and used as tools for further strategic exploitation.

The militarization of children in armed conflict is a direct infringement of international law and guidelines which prohibit the recruitment of children to be turned into hostilities, classifying such as war crimes. A 2021 report from the United Nations warningly highlighted Africa to have the highest rates of child recruitment from the 2010s until present day. Of the 105 000 children coerced into armed conflict globally, Africa represents a little less than 50% of militarized children.

Due to the severity of spread out conflicts, issues such as weak government authority, displacement, poverty, a lack of education and illicit arms trafficking have led to a slippery slope of utilizing children as military resources to control.

Rather than focusing on tackling all sources and causes of conflict in the region which would be overly complex, it is important to gain a brief understanding of the nature of the situation before mainly focusing on preventing children from being subject to dangerous military exploitation and facilitating victims' reintegration into society.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

CHILD SOLDIER

Any child under the age of 18 having been coerced into or recruited to join armed groups or forces, with the aim of serving the military or in any other capacity.

NON STATE ARMED GROUP

An organized group which participates in armed conflict but is not affiliated with state governments, working independently in order to achieve political, economic or ideological



goals. These groups are numerous in Central Africa and are the main actors challenging authority or resorting to the unethical militarization of children.

ARMED CONFLICT

Armed confrontation either internationally between the armed forces of States or in this case, nationally, involving government authorities combatting independent groups, according to the European Parliament.

RECRUITMENT

Any form of coercing, enlisting, forcefully abducting or even accepting any children into armed forces and assigning them any roles at all. This involves both the direct and indirect support of military operations.

PEACEKEEPING MANDATE

An official, binding authorization from the United Nations which defines the objectives, timeframe, area and actions to be taken by peacekeeping forces. This determines whether peacekeepers monitor child recruitment, engage with armed groups or install preventative measures.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The militarization of children being the most prevalent in Central Africa can be clearly linked to the region experiencing decades of recurring conflict, especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). Conflicts in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri in the DRC, for example, have reported hundreds of armed groups being interlinked due to a complex web of long established factors. Conflicts, having persisted for over 25 years and counting, often include extremely complicated links between numerous fragmented armed groups rather than a few large bodies. Non-state armed groups have emerged since the origins of wars, such as the M23 rebel group or the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), known to recruit children. Religious and ethnic tensions between groups have led to an extremely unstable political landscape in the region, dating back to historical conflicts such as the Rwandan Genocide. Conflict is also fueled by independent motives of territorial possession, mineral exploitation and gaining political leverage. Moreover, in the CAR, the government was overthrown by the



Séléka coalition in 2013 which led to rebel groups forming without regulation. Though major events at the root of conflict in the region, such as the 2003 Congo War and the Rwandan genocide, have long ended, the loss of government control over armed groups and child recruitment persists. In these cases, armed groups working independently often have a high turnover of fighters and lack resources to continue military endeavours for sustained periods of time. These internal disparities they face lead them to target children as an easy group to coerce, recruit and exploit.

Entering into the specifics, another extremely prevalent issue found in Central Africa is the displacement of a large number of its civilians due to conflict across the territory. Over 7.8 million people are displaced internally as of 2025, often moving into displacement camps or unstable housing without security. Armed groups have thus been known to exploit unstable areas and vulnerable individuals as a result of the conflict-ridden landscape. Children in extremely vulnerable conditions are directly abducted by force, without the need to be coerced. Armed groups find these individuals in Internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, along border regions attempting to flee or in remote villages unsupervised by state authorities. Apart from abduction, armed groups engage in the coercion of children as victims may believe that joining military operations will allow for protection from rival groups, food and living security for families and a sense of belonging to a group. Testimonies from previous child soldiers in the last decade report that recruitment often occurs after a massacre in their village, leading children to believe that joining armed groups is their only possibility for survival. On a social scale, continued child recruitment, in areas where violence is constant, may lead to its normalization within communities. Such may be justified as a means of survival or with the goal of defending their people, mindsets like such establishes a base for the issue to become unchecked and cyclical.

Moreover, armed groups prey on social disparities rendering children vulnerable to recruitment. Academic journals often employ a supply and demand model to the issue of child recruitment. For supply, structural issues within society often lead to children being easily recruited. Due to conflict and a lack of development initiatives in the area, limited educational and employment opportunities stem from a lack of necessary infrastructure. This lack of fundamental resources in a society causes poor living conditions for the population, including poverty, the inability to obtain employment and have access to necessary functions. Again, this perpetuates the mindset that joining armed groups is a bridge to better future



prospects and overall quality of life. The dramatic rise in population in Africa by 2050 mean that child recruitment will be heavily facilitated. As for demand, armed groups particularly target children as a demographic as they are more easily manipulated psychologically. They desire a concrete sense of security and connection to a 'stable' group and have limited development cognitively, leading to coercion. Furthermore, armed groups may find children to attract less suspicion in military activities and more likely to remain loyal and follow orders.

Since the early 2000s until present, child recruitment has evolved with only mildly effective combative measures from state or international actors, and children have been seen to adopt numerous roles over this period. Thousands of cases of child recruitment are documented in the area every year, recording the world's highest rates of such. It is to be noted that these large statistics still only represent a partial amount of actual numbers as conflict zones remain inaccessible, with individuals adverse to reporting incidents out of fear or social pressure. Today, children participate in numerous roles serving armed groups, further hindering their integration into a productive society and endangering themselves on a daily basis. For combat, children participate in raids, aid military soldiers in ambushing areas, and keep watch as guards stationed at specific checkpoints. Other support roles include cooking and carrying heavy weapons or other supplies. Child labour is also prevalent through children being exploited economically as a large reason for conflict is a fight over Central Africa's mineral resources, children may be obliged to engage in labour in mines.

MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most affected countries when it comes to the militarization of children. It is at the heart of the conflict due to the ongoing violence happening in its eastern provinces. Armed groups move and control the area due to weak government authority over them, which facilitates the recruitment and targeting of children. Law enforcement has in the past attempted to criminalise child recruitment; they signed a UN Action Plan in 2012 which aimed to prohibit the involvement of children in the national army. Due to weak control over armed groups and their activities, outside major urban areas, this law is not effective. Armed groups continue to exploit displacement, poverty,



and the collapse of education systems, recruiting children through abduction, intimidation, or promises of protection and income. As a result, the DRC remains both a state attempting reform and a territory where child recruitment persists on a large scale.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)

The CAR is also an area consisting of high rates of child recruitment, again fueled by conflict and left to fester due to a lack of enforcement ability. The civil war in 2013 escalated and sparked the beginning of major conflict, both the armed groups engaging in fighting, so the Seleka factions and Anti-Balaka militias, recruit children to serve an abundance of positions in conflict, all problematic and worsening the issue. Without education or strained family situations, and to thus avoid dangerous conflict, children join positions of guards, fighters, messengers or porters to survive. Along with the DRC, these regions are extremely divided, government control is a major focal point to improve upon.

SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children is a major non governmental organization (NGO) involved in the issue, founded in 1919 in the United Kingdom. Its main goals are protecting children and helping victims reintegrate into society in Central Africa. Save the Children is a global membership organisation and is made up of Save the Children International and 29 national members. Save the Children works directly on the ground, with hands-on support in displacement camps and reintegration programs. Save the Children constantly publishes reports online documenting recruitment and former child soldiers' testimonies for insight. From 2017 to 2020, Save the Children rescued 357 children from armed groups in the South Kivu province in the DRC. Save the Children and its partners in affected areas focus on preventing recruitment by promoting access to education for children as safe spaces. They specifically attempt to identify children at risk of dropping out of school due to conflict or the need to perform labour, and provide support to avoid armed groups exploiting their fragile status. They also work with local communities to raise awareness about the risks of recruitment and provide economic support to families in need. As for reintegration, they provide vocational training in basic skills for children to earn a living post release and avoid relapse into recruitment. They also work to reunite children with families they were separated from while offering counseling services to help children recover from traumatic experiences.



MARCH 23 MOVEMENT (M23)

M23 is a non-state affiliated armed group which is based in the eastern regions of the DRC, specifically centering its activities in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu. M23's goals include integrating their fighters into the national army and controlling mineral resources. M23 was established in 2012 by a rebel group consisting of Rwandan-Congolese fighters. It has resurfaced majorly in 2022 through expanding their control over territories in North Kivu, such as has led to the displacement of thousands of people in the area. Due to their vast control of territory including checkpoints, villages and transport routes, M23 and affiliated local militias have recruited children during conflict. They engage in tactics such as abduction as they raid villages or the recruitment of displaced children in camps. Where state forces are weak and have little dominion, armed groups are able to avoid accountability for their unethical and dangerous practices.

ARMED FORCES OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (FARDC)

The FARDC is the official national military of the DRC, created in 2003 during the Second Congo War, with the goal of defending the nation in times of rising conflict. Though it signed a UN Action Plan in 2021 to end child militarization as such is criminalized. Since the army is rather divided especially within troupes in rural areas and due to the integration of former militia members, child recruitment still persists. Cases of child recruitment have been decreasing within the national army over the years, and the government still focuses its efforts on non-state armed groups as the main perpetrators. However, it still is important to recognize child recruitment in the national army in order to create further reforms.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

Date	Description of the event
26 June, 2000	The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was proposed and put into action by the UN General Assembly. What this protocol directly impacted was a raise in the minimum age for direct participation in war and violence or other hostile activities to 18 and condemned the forced recruitment of children.



30 July, 2002	The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court officially recognizes the recruitment of children under the age of 15 into any form of conflict as a war crime. This is a significant advance as it allowed for militia or political leaders to be prosecuted and thus criminalized for child recruitment in Central Africa, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
26 July, 2005	UN Security Council Resolution 1612 was a resolution that was adopted through unanimous vote, it created the body of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on children and armed conflict. This allowed for the documentation and recording of issues, including child recruitment, in order to estimate the gravity and scale of the situation in Central Africa.
4 October, 2012	The Government of the DRC signed an Action Plan with the United Nations to end the recruitment and use of children by the national armed forces (FARDC). This instance of cooperation between the government and the United Nations shows how effective collaboration can be, as this led to the release of hundreds of children from within the Congolese army. However, simply working alongside the government is not sufficient as they are limited in reach, armed groups which are non-state affiliated still conduct child recruitment independently.
24 March, 2013	The outbreak of large-scale violence in the CAR following the Seleka coalition's takeover of Bangui is a main cause of a rise in child recruitment. Both militias recruited children to fill various positions from soldiers to messengers. This is an example of children being stationed to watch and participate in wars further emphasizing how the situation can deteriorate during unplanned conflict.
6 February, 2019	The Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic was signed between the government and 14 armed groups. Though cooperation is rare, especially in times of conflict where armed groups may behave unpredictably, taking concrete and strict measures to end child recruitment and help their release may prove effective through diplomatic agreements. However, it is important to monitor recruitment levels after agreements, as they often do not last.
15 January, 2025	Save the Children published a report documenting the recruitment of over 400 children in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo within the first two months of 2025. Even with attempts to improve the situation through diplomatic agreements with both governments and armed groups, numbers of children recruited have multiplied in



	numbers over the years with the rise of internal conflict. This signifies a need for a more structured approach, with organizations needing to monitor groups closer.
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RELEVANT UN TREATIES, RESOLUTIONS AND EVENTS

Numerous forms of international legal framework exist in order to oppose and condemn the militarization of children and any subsequent recruitment practices. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted in 2000, this raised the minimum age for participation in any form of conflict to 18, it thus required states to criminalise forced recruitment. This internationally relevant solution helped establish a global precedent against the rise of child soldiers beginning to spike in the 2000s in Central Africa.

Moreover, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which was established in 2002 strengthened regulations and restrictions. It classified the recruitment of children under the age of 15 to be a war crime. This provision is particularly relevant to Central Africa, where several cases have involved armed leaders accused of recruiting children. However, limited prosecutions and weak enforcement have reduced its ability to serve as a deterrent.

Then, importantly, the UN Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005) created the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on children and armed conflict. This system made it possible to document recruitment and other grave violations on a more concrete and official scale, attempting to pressure armed groups while increasing visibility and accountability globally. While these resolutions have improved reporting mechanisms and transparency, they are not sufficient to stop recruitment in areas of active conflict due to a lack of more targeted, concrete enforcement within Central Africa.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE

Efforts to address child militarization in Central Africa have had mixed results. UN-led Action Plans with governments, particularly in the DRC, succeeded in reducing recruitment



within state armed forces and led to institutional reforms. However, these agreements had little impact on non-state armed groups, which remain the primary recruiters of children.

Peacekeeping missions have helped secure the release of thousands of children through negotiations and military pressure. Yet, many of these children return to communities affected by poverty and insecurity, which makes long-term reintegration difficult. NGO-run reintegration programs have shown positive results at the individual level but are often short-term and underfunded, limiting their broader impact.

Overall, previous attempts demonstrate that while legal frameworks and solutions focused on reporting or documenting are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Without addressing the root causes of conflict and instability, child recruitment continues to rise.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In order to deal with the situation of child militarization, delegates should envision implementing a mix of both immediate action for children affected and long term reforms in Central Africa.

Possible solutions include strengthening prevention and protection methods in order to stop recruitment in the first place in conflict zones. Learning from NGOs like Save the Children and aiming to achieve their goals on a larger scale, we can consider the implementation of educational and community based programs. These programs can help children access education and address systemic social disparities in Central Africa such as the educational gap. Children enrolled in school are able to gain skills to add to the workforce, potentially tackling the issue of poverty in the region, while gaining a sense of stability and security in their daily lives. We must also consider the conflict-ridden nature of these areas and ensure that educative and other zones are safer for children or the general population. Areas can be protected by peacekeeping forces or through partnerships with NGOs who currently work in affected zones. Community awareness campaigns can also be useful to educate families on how child recruitment poses threats to safety and is criminalized. Monitoring and reporting methods should also be put in place to increase transparency and global awareness.



Implementing enforcement and accountability measures is also necessary as armed groups operate outside the state's control and bypass its authority, especially as governance is weak to begin. In order to deter recruitment, we can envision establishing targeted sanctions and restrictions onto groups in order to limit the resources they can use for recruitment. We can consider negotiating agreements that support the protection of children and age verifications of such. It is also important as previously stated to strengthen legal prosecution and mobilize national courts and international tribunals for accountability.

Lastly, reintegration and rehabilitation efforts are a last step to help current children escape from armed groups. It is useful to put in place psychological and counseling services to address the impacts of militarization on children's mental health. Vocational training is also important for reintegration into society in order to develop skills which promote economic stability and income generation. Systems also need to be put in place to allow children to be reintegrated into their family post release or be put into community foster systems.

Ultimately, a large part of these solutions are already beginning to emerge on small scales with NGOs, thus establishing partnerships with them would be beneficial to maximize impact in the region.

OTHER RESOURCES

As delegates looking to read more on the issue, you can refer to a multitude of UN and independent organisations who provide formal updates on the situation. The UN Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict is useful for official UN data and reports (<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org>). UNICEF is also a tool which provides detailed updates on child protection and reintegration programs (<https://www.unicef.org/protection>). Save the Children publishes reports from Central Africa (<https://www.savethechildren.net>). The International Crisis Group provides broader conflict analysis relevant to understanding in a more in depth way the causes and methods of recruitment. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org>).



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