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What Marines Need to Know About Child Soldiers

by COL Charles P. Borchini, USA(Ret) and Erin F. O'Connell

Child soldiers are utilized throughout the world. Marines must be prepared for their presence on the battlefield.

The child soldier phenomenon has become a post-Cold War epidemic that has proliferated to every continent with the exceptions of Antarctica and Australia. The United Nations (U.N.) estimates that at least 300,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 are under arms fighting as soldiers and also serving as spies, informants, couriers, and sex-slaves in more than 30 conflicts around the globe.



Rebel child soldiers in Zaire.

Not only have U.S. forces faced child soldiers in the past in Germany, Vietnam, and Somalia, but they are facing them today in Afghanistan and Iraq. Saddam Hussein deliberately recruited and trained thousands of children as soldiers. (See sidebar.) It is nearly inevitable that U.S. Forces will face them again in the future.

If a 14-year-old points a weapon at a serviceman, what should he do? No Marine, soldier, sailor, or airman wants to kill a 14-year-old. But a 14-year-old with an AK-47 is just as deadly as a 40-year-old with an AK-47. If the serviceman hesitates, he and

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others in his unit might be killed; if he shoots, then he might have to deal with the potential psychological consequences of killing a child. This presents a terrible dilemma in terms of balancing the rules of engagement (ROE) and self-protection with traditional American cultural and social values concerning children. The question is, "How will U.S. forces deal with it?"

The Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO), a division of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, first looked at this issue in the spring of 2002 and subsequently conducted a seminar called "Child Soldiers: Implications for U.S. Forces" to help raise awareness throughout the Marine Corps about this emerging threat and to identify solutions to better prepare Marines for when they encounter child soldiers in the future. Since then CETO has conducted several professional military education classes and seminars on the topic and is working with the Marine Corps University to include this issue as part of the curriculum in its various schools.

This article summarizes the main issues surrounding the child soldier phenomenon, many of which were raised during the initial seminar. It explains why there are child soldiers, highlights issues that U.S. forces need to be aware of concerning the phenomenon and, most importantly for the U.S. military, suggests ways to deal with child soldiers on the battlefield.

Why and How Children Are Recruited

Children are vulnerable and easy targets for recruitment. They are a quick, easy, low-cost way to generate forces. They are expendable and can be used as decoys or cannon fodder for more seasoned fighting forces. Their small size gives them certain advantages, for example, by allowing them to take

Spotlight: Iraq

Child Soldiers in Iraq

- *Training programs.* Since the mid-1990s, the Iraqi regime has conducted yearly military-style summer "boot camps" for thousands of Iraqi boys. During these 3-week-long sessions, boys as young as 10 years old are run through drills, taught the use of small arms, and provided with heavy doses of Ba'athist political indoctrination. There has also been a series of training and military preparedness programs directed at the entire Iraqi population. Youths as young as 15 years old have been included in these programs.

- *Child soldier units.* The most important of the Iraqi child soldier units is the Ashbal Saddam or Saddam's Lion Cubs. The Ashbal Saddam involves boys between the ages of 10 and 15 who attend military training camps and learn the use of small arms and infantry tactics. The camps involve as much as 14 hours per day of military training and political indoctrination. They also employ training techniques intended to desensitize the youth to violence, including frequent beatings and

cover more easily when laying an ambush. In addition, children more readily follow orders and are less inhibited than adults.

deliberate cruelty to animals. The exact numbers of the Ashbal Saddam are not known, but there are an estimated 8,000 members in Baghdad alone.

Children frequently are recruited forcibly from schools, churches, and refugee camps. In Burma, for example, children often are told to either join the army or go to jail.

Not all children, however, are recruited by force. There are some who join of their own volition out of desperation. They may lack food or shelter, may be orphans, or may be politically indoctrinated. Once they become soldiers, some do not want to go home because they are well-fed, clothed, housed, and become “hooked” on the power of being a soldier and belonging to something.

As part of their training and conditioning, child soldiers often are forced to participate in attacks against their own villages after which they are told that they can never go home. They are kept “high” on drugs and alcohol, weakening their inhibitions and facilitating the entire indoctrination effort. They also are given amulets that they are told will make them impervious to bullets.



Saddam's "Lion Cubs" training at summer military camp in Iraq.

Facilitators for the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

Failed states. Many of the countries and regions where children are soldiers have suffered years of social strife and civil war. Their governments have collapsed, their economies are ruined, they are unable to enforce law and order or provide basic services, and they are beset by poverty, disease, and broken families.

Totalitarian regimes. A common means for totalitarian regimes to maintain control is to set their countries on a constant war footing and to militarize their societies, much like what has been done in Iraq. The recruitment, training, and indoctrination of children as soldiers enable regimes to further strengthen their hold on society.

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Demographics. In some areas of the world, such as in Africa and the Middle East, there is a large youth population. Some countries use this deep pool of potential military recruits to expand the base of support for their regimes.

Advances in technology. Among the greatest enablers that facilitate the use of child soldiers are advances in modern technologies. Light arms are indeed light, making it possible for young children to carry them. Furthermore, they are relatively easy to handle and use and are extremely powerful. There is no extensive or complicated training necessary to teach children how to operate these weapons.

Small arms trade. The uncontrolled flow of arms into countries with ethnic tensions and civil war exacerbates social disparities and fuels discontent.

Implications on the Battlefield

Increased lethality. On the battlefield, children add confusion and ultimately drive up the death toll. They should not be underestimated. In many cases they have years of combat experience and are more battle hardened than their older adversaries, having literally grown up fighting. Professional military forces are reluctant to fire upon children, giving the children a greater advantage, especially if they are trained to shoot first and accurately.

Laws of war. Child soldiers do not respect the laws of war or follow any specific ROE; children do not even know what these things are. Units that contain child soldiers carry out a much higher number of human rights violations making conflicts much harder to resolve. Child soldiers normally do not take prisoners of war, and if they do, it is usually to kill them as a training or motivation example for new recruits.

Demoralizing effects. Battles that involve killing children often have a very demoralizing effect on professional combat forces from countries where children are protected and their rights are valued.



Child soldiers of the Zairian rebel army.

Reuters/News Picture Service photo by Corinne Dufau.

What Can Be Done—International and Local Initiatives

While military efforts are largely tactical, the international community can undertake a wide range of initiatives to eliminate the use of child soldiers. For example, countries can implement the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict that makes it illegal to forcefully recruit children under the age of 18 and prohibits their participation in armed conflict, the United States became a formal state party to the protocol on 23 December 2002. Other actions could include supporting the International Criminal Court that will treat the forceful recruitment of children under the age of 15 as a war crime, and enforcing arms embargoes and trade sanctions against countries or groups using child soldiers.

At local levels, officials could attempt to gain rebel army cooperation by emphasizing traditional values and appealing to their sense of honor that in no society or culture are young children traditionally sent into wars to fight. Officials could also work with local governments to register children at birth so that there is official proof of their ages.

What Can Be Done—Military Initiatives

Military commanders must think strategically and consider a combination of traditional and nontraditional ways to best engage forces with child soldiers. These include:

Recognize the threat/Focus intelligence. Efforts should be made to understand everything possible about child soldiers, such as how they are recruited and trained, how they are organized and how they fight, their combat experience, and who the leaders are and where they are located. Force protection measures might include changing the practice of letting children mingle around checkpoints and guard posts, and giving them candy.

Develop clear ROE. U.S. forces inevitably will be placed in the position of having to fire on child soldiers for their own protection. Military leaders must anticipate this and clearly communicate ROE guidelines to their troops. An important point highlighted during the CETO seminar is that international law authorizes the use of necessary force to defend against legitimate threats, including children.

Removing adult leadership. The center of gravity is the hold leaders have over children. The key is to break that link by targeting and removing the leaders. It is important to note that sometimes the leaders are only slightly older than the children

themselves.

Fighting at a distance and firing for shock, not for effect. Planners should consider the option of initially holding the child soldier threat at a distance and firing for shock, not for effect. This could be done through the use of demonstrative artillery fires and helicopter gunship passes in order to break up the child units. Helicopter gunship passes and fires proved to be particularly intimidating and effective in stopping the child-based Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone.

Elimination of recruitment zones. Every attempt should be made to secure the most likely locations where child soldiers are recruited such as schools, refugee camps, churches, and demobilization sites. Controlling these locations also could be effective in indirectly defeating an enemy by denying them a source for new recruits.

Non-lethal weapons. U.S. military commanders and policymakers should explore options for using non-lethal weapons in situations that involve child soldiers. Non-lethal weapons may be more effective and humane for dealing with child soldiers than other, more traditional, lethal means. Using non-lethals also may build political and public support for ongoing operations and long-term efforts.

Psychological operations (PsyOp). PsyOp should be integrated with other efforts to convince child soldiers to stop fighting, leave their units, and begin the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Public affairs. Public affairs implications of killing child soldiers, even in self-defense, can become a real problem. In responding to any child soldier engagement, military spokespersons should place the blame for child soldier casualties on regimes or individuals who have illegally forced children to be soldiers. The public should be informed that everything possible is being done to avoid and limit child soldiers becoming casualties, such as firing for shock, using non-lethal weapons and PsyOp, etc. At the same time the public should be made aware that child soldiers are just as lethal behind an AK-47 as adults, and often are more ruthless.

Prisoners and escapees. U.S. forces should welcome child soldier prisoners and escapees, as this could promote desertions.

Demobilization. U.S. forces should assist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in

demobilization and should be attuned to security aspects concerning this effort, such as protecting them from local populations seeking revenge or from armed groups seeking to increase their ranks.

Communicate agreements. Military officials should take the message directly to the frontlines about signed agreements not to use children as soldiers. In many countries, detailed information concerning agreements and subsequent steps to be taken are not passed down the chain of command in a timely fashion; and often what is passed down is very different from the actual agreement.

Postconflict treatment. Upon returning home from operations in which U.S. forces encounter child soldiers, they may find it difficult to cope with normal life and may go through a period of posttraumatic stress disorder. They should go through the process of discussing and understanding what they were exposed to and should receive medical treatment as appropriate. Similar support should be offered to the family members of returning servicemembers.

More Challenges

Reintegration. It is very difficult to reintegrate child soldiers into society because of the violence to which they have been exposed and the fact that many children only know how to kill. After disarmament, there is no set timeframe in which children recover, but the psychosocial demobilization process usually takes many months.

Human immunodeficiency virus/Acquired immune

deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Many of the conflict countries with child soldiers are afflicted by high HIV/AIDS rates. Those who are infected also may have a “nothing to lose” attitude that encourages them to commit violent acts.

Want to Know More?

- [U.N. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict.](#)
- [U.N. Children's Fund.](#)
- [Human Rights Watch.](#)
- [The Brookings Institution:](#)
<http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/views/articles/fellows/20011203singer.pdf>.
- CETO: Seminar report, videos, and other related materials may be found at:
<http://www.ceto.quantico.usmc.mil/childsoldier.asp>.

Recommendations on Future Efforts

Doctrine. Doctrine should describe the child soldier phenomenon as it exists around

Doctrine. Doctrine should describe the child soldier phenomenon as it exists around the world and highlight the probability that Marines will encounter child soldiers during future operations. More importantly, it should address ways to deal with child soldiers.

Training. The topic of child soldiers should be included in training for officers and noncommissioned officers, especially those at the training base, but also in units during professional development training. This training should familiarize Marines with the phenomenon; examine countries, regions, and conflicts where Marines may encounter child soldiers; identify tactics, techniques, and procedures that will best help them deal with child soldiers; and inform Marines of relevant international law, including obligations under the Geneva Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Some of this training already has begun. For example, the Command and Staff College now includes the topic in its curriculum, while the Marine Corps Combat Development Command and Marine Forces Atlantic have conducted professional military education classes for their officers and noncommissioned officers.

For units that are in training and preparing to deploy to a specific country or region where they may encounter child soldiers, exercise scenarios should include situations involving child soldiers. These units also should receive cultural intelligence seminars on this issue with experts such as those who participated in CETO's seminar. Additionally, they should be given points of contact for U.N. Children's Fund or NGO-run demobilization and/or rehabilitation programs within these countries.

Child soldier-related issues should be inserted into wargame scenarios to help leaders and decisionmakers determine how best to respond to the challenges child soldiers will pose to Marines.

Finally, in situations where the Marine Corps conducts combined or foreign military training with other nations, the issue of child soldiers should be included as a topic. This training should highlight relevant international law, the importance of proper recruitment procedures, and the need to verify ages to ensure that children are not enlisted.

>Editor's Note: A seminar report and other related materials may be found at <http://ceto.quantico.usmc.mil/>. Copies of the video recording of the seminar are available by contacting CETO at 703-784-0450/52.

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