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Children's Rights

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President Barack Obama [announced](#) on Friday that, for the second year in a row, it was withholding portions of U.S. military assistance from the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) because of its continued use of child soldiers. The U.S. also said it wouldn't train a Congolese light infantry battalion until Congo signed an action plan with the United Nations to end its use of child soldiers. U.S. officials have repeatedly urged the Congolese government to address the issue.

The pressure seems to be working. After seven years of foot-dragging, today Congo finally signed the U.N. plan, which will require Congo to end child recruitment, demobilize children in its forces and allow U.N. verification visits to its barracks.

For years, Congo has ranked among the worst countries for child soldiers. At the height of the conflict there, the U.N. estimated that as many as [30,000 children](#) were participating in the war. Today, hundreds each year are still recruited in eastern Congo, by both government and rebel forces. Children who have escaped or been released often fear they will be forced into service again.

The U.S. has withheld assistance from Congo under a landmark law, the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, which prohibits U.S. military assistance to governments using child soldiers. In contrast it has, often on national security grounds, allowed other governments using child soldiers to continue receiving such aid, without conditions. Three examples -- [Chad](#), [South Sudan](#) and [Yemen](#) -- show how the U.S. has missed opportunities to protect children from military service.

In Chad, government and rebel forces recruited thousands of children in a proxy war with Sudan that ended in early 2010. With U.S. pressure, the Chadian government signed a U.N. action plan in June 2011 to end child recruitment and demobilize all children from its forces. Child recruitment significantly dropped, with no new cases recorded in 2011. In June, the U.S. took Chad off its list of countries subject to possible sanctions under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, despite reports that children remained in Chad's forces.

Removing Chad from the list turned out to be premature. Child recruitment resumed this year, and the U.N. reports that at least two dozen children have been found in army barracks. U.N. officials say that Chad has [done nothing](#) to implement the U.N. action plan, and that the U.S. decision weakens their ability to press Chad to carry out its promises.

In South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) -- the former rebel army that is now the new country's armed forces -- recruited thousands of children during its 20-year conflict with Sudan. It has made various commitments over the years to end the practice, demobilizing hundreds of children, only simultaneously to recruit more. It signed a U.N. plan of action in March and issued military orders to release all children in the ranks, established child protection units within its divisions and allowed the U.N. unimpeded access to military barracks for verification.

Despite these efforts, child recruitment remains a problem. Last year the U.N. verified over 250 cases of new child recruitment by the SPLA, and children continue to be found in SPLA barracks. Officials reported an [increase](#) in child recruitment early this year during border conflicts with Sudan.

Although the U.S. has put diplomatic pressure on South Sudan, President Obama [stated Friday](#) that it was in the "national interest" of the U.S. to waive application of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act to South Sudan. South Sudan is slated to receive over \$60 million in U.S. military assistance this year, though only a small fraction could be withheld under the law. President Obama could have simultaneously addressed its national interests and done more to protect children with the same approach it used in Congo --

withholding portions of aid and training. Instead, the U.S. is left with little leverage to demand compliance.

Finally, consider Yemen, the country using child soldiers that receives by far the largest amount of U.S. assistance. The administration has requested over \$100 million for Yemen for 2013, including over \$20 million eligible for sanctions under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act. Children have been used by all sides during the uprising that forced out Yemen's abusive president this year, including in the government's elite Republican guard. But for three years in a row, the U.S. has given Yemen a "pass" on child soldiers, failing to sanction even a small amount of U.S. assistance.

Withholding or conditioning military assistance to countries using child soldiers is not a magic bullet. In countries like Yemen, the U.S. has legitimate national security interests it needs to take into account, and Congo will need additional pressure to fulfill the commitment it made today. But diplomatic engagement is not enough. The U.S. needs to use the leverage that U.S. law provides to ensure that its military allies fulfill their commitments to children.

On Friday, the Obama administration reiterated that ending the use of child soldiers is a priority for the U.S. In Congo, the U.S. has found a way to balance its national security interests with the interests of children. In other countries, it should do the same.

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