

Briefing note on child recruitment and use in Central African Republic (CAR)

14 March 2016

This briefing note is a summary of a longer report prepared by Child Soldiers International, which is still in draft form and will be shared with the Committee at a later date. Its purpose is to review actions taken to prevent the recruitment of children for military purposes and facilitate their demobilisation, recovery and reintegration, and to make recommendations.

The findings are based on research by two Child Soldiers International delegates in Central African Republic (CAR) in June 2015, supplemented by additional telephone interviews and desk-based research. The scope of this work did not include the documentation of violation incidents. Nor did it include the involvement of children in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has been active in eastern CAR for many years but whose activities have decreased since 2013.

Interviews were conducted with senior government officials from the ministries of Justice, Defence, and Social Affairs; the governmental High Commissioner for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR); representatives from UNICEF, MINUSCA (Child Protection, DDR and SSR sections); 13 child protection organisations and other actors working with children formerly associated with armed groups; and Muslim and Christian leaders.

Child Soldiers International is grateful for all the assistance it received from those who took time to participate in the research, and hopes to strengthen this cooperation in the future. It is hoped that this document will contribute to efforts to prevent the recruitment and use of children in hostilities in CAR, and to recover and reintegrate all those affected.

The recruitment and use of children for military purposes in CAR

- Children have been used extensively by all non-state armed groups involved in the latest conflict in CAR: armed opposition groups in the northeast, including members of the mainly Muslim "Séléka" coalition; and predominantly Christian self-defence, community-based militias called "Anti-Balaka", many of which had been used as auxiliaries to the armed forces under President François Bozizé.
- All groups recruited and used children prior to the current conflict which started in December 2012. Three groups had signed Action Plans with the UN or agreed to end the recruitment of children (APRD, CPJP and UFDR).

- UNICEF estimates that recruitment has affected 10,000 children (both boys and girls). Children as young as eight have been used as combatants, guards, human shields, porters, messengers, spies, cooks, and/or for sexual purposes.
- Children have commonly joined armed groups of their own accord or at the behest of their families – this does not amount to voluntary recruitment, which requires free and informed consent. Children's primary motivations appear to include revenge after bereavement; the need for protection; and/or a sense of duty to defend their communities. Poor access to education across the country has also been a contributing factor.
- Commanders routinely deceived children to persuade them to join; indoctrinated them by demonising the 'enemy'; and induced them to believe that they were impervious to harm. Commanders fed children drugs to encourage them to fight. Many children subsequently admitted to being disillusioned.
- A smaller number of children were forcibly recruited and retained by their commanders, some of whom have been known to threaten recruits with execution should they try to leave.
- As Anti-Balaka groups have turned to common criminality, children are now widely reported to be used by them to commit crimes including armed robbery.

Demobilisation challenges

- Commitments made by 11 armed groups at the *Forum de Bangui* (national reconciliation process), combined with successful advocacy with armed groups in 2014 and 2015, allowed UNICEF and partners to secure the release of approximately 5,500 children and to begin assisting their recovery and reintegration.
- Of demobilised children, the large majority (almost 90%) were released from the Anti-Balaka. The withdrawal of ex-Séléka groups to the country's north-east, without disarmament, has largely prevented safe access to their child recruits.
- An unknown number of children, thought to be several thousand, are believed to remain involved in armed groups across the country.
- Major obstacles to further progress include widespread insecurity, particularly in the north of the country; the stalling of efforts to disarm and demobilise adult combatants; extremely limited state capacities; lack of coordination between child protection actors and the government; and chronic underfunding of UN and non-governmental capacities to implement adequate, long-term recovery and reintegration programmes.
- There are concerns that untrained and inexperienced actors are resorting to potentially harmful practices as they step in to address the problem. For example, two actors reported having paid armed group leaders to obtain the release of children under their command.
- Children used in self-defence, community-based militias (Anti-Balaka) are particularly difficult to demobilise as they still live in the communities that recruited them. Some of these militias have turned to common criminality and continue to use children to carry out criminal activities such as armed robberies.

Novel approaches to recovery and reintegration

- Partly in order to address the challenge of demobilising thousands of Anti-Balaka children, UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Affairs developed a CAR-specific national

strategy on community-based reintegration. In theory, this approach has the potential to involve and benefit the whole community and contribute to peacebuilding, as it aims to address the socio-economic factors that led to child recruitment. Building on existing resources within the community, it is also more sustainable and less onerous than individual assistance.

- In keeping with this new strategy, UNICEF has already started by establishing or strengthening child protection networks (or “RECOPE”) at local level, in order to involve community members in demobilisation, recovery, reintegration and prevention activities.
- UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Affairs are also trying to systematise the use of foster families for the temporary care of children separated from armed groups. This model allows children to recover in a familiar social and cultural environment. It is also less costly than the institutional model which relies on transit centres. During the day children are meant to attend day centres where psychosocial activities facilitate their transition to civilian life. This model was tested in 2014-2015 but it has been criticised for being under resourced and potentially counterproductive: some families lack sufficient funds, training and support to manage children’s complex psychosocial needs. Further, this model does not permit close follow up of children who do not attend day care centres and thus remain vulnerable to recruitment.
- All armed groups responsible for child recruitment have socio-economic grievances which persist today. Child protection actors are therefore also piloting economic reintegration projects in which training and income-generating activities aim to benefit the entire community – not only former child soldiers. This approach may be particularly apt for Anti-Balaka communities, which are highly militarised and continue to use children in criminal activities. Lessons learnt so far indicate that insufficient funding and staffing can be counter-productive, with some children becoming disengaged and returning to the armed group.
- In part due to the dearth of psychologists in CAR, UNICEF and its partners plan to involve communities in psychosocial programming for children affected by the conflict. Although a large number of children may require specialised clinical support, effective psychosocial relief can be provided through the delivery of basic services, and the strengthening of key family/community support structures (schools, churches, etc.) However these structures are still weak or untapped, and state-supported services are almost non-existent.
- Inclusive education for all children can make a major contribution to children’s psychosocial well-being and to the reconciliation process. CAR’s extremely poor education system has been further weakened by the crisis and requires massive investment.
- Community-based release, recovery and reintegration strategies have the potential to deliver immediate and substantial results, as well as long-term societal gains. However, they call on fields of expertise that extend far beyond the child protection sector (e.g. health, education, food security, economic strengthening, peacebuilding, etc.). In addition, since few child protection donors will fund multi-sectoral projects that involve actors outside their own field, their potential remains unexplored.

Key recommendations

To the CAR government

- i. Urgently ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.
- ii. Explicitly criminalise in domestic law the unlawful recruitment of children or their use in hostilities.
- iii. Take steps to ensure the urgent implementation of armed groups' commitments on child recruitment: work with the UN to accelerate the demobilisation of all child soldiers, and facilitate to signature of time-bound Action Plans to end child recruitment.
- iv. Continue to work with the UN and child protection agencies to develop community-based approaches to child DDR, paying particular attention to girls, self-demobilized children, and children associated with self-defence militias.
 - a. Ensure that children, parents and communities are consulted and involved extensively in the design, implementation and evaluation of reintegration projects;
 - b. Take immediate steps to establish or reinforce local community structures including schools, churches, child protection networks and youth clubs;
 - c. Hold a national workshop with all DDR actors and donors to promote an integrated and multi-sectoral approach to reintegration.
- v. Drastically increase funding in education in order to provide formal, inclusive, free and quality education to all children in CAR. Education should be free in law and in practice.
- vi. With the support of UNICEF, MINUSCA and child protection agencies, conduct a nation-wide awareness-raising campaign on children's rights and child protection, including at government and community level.

To armed groups

- i. Immediately and unconditionally release all children by handing them over to child protection agencies.
- ii. Take steps to conclude Action Plans with the UN in order to plan and implement actions needed to prevent recruitment and use of under-18s. Seek assistance from the government and the UN on how to comply with the prohibition on child recruitment and use.
- iii. Cease indoctrinating children by encouraging religious and ethnic hatred.

To the UN Country Team

- i. Continue to support and advise the government in monitoring the implementation of the armed groups' commitments, in developing a community-based reintegration strategy, and in conducting a nation-wide awareness-raising campaign on children's rights.
- ii. Seek and secure resources required to demobilise and reintegrate all children associated with armed groups as quickly as possible.

- iii. Build the capacity of NGO, civil society and government actors on child DDR, improve coordination among these actors, harmonise standards and conduct trainings in order to promote good practice.
- iv. Accelerate demarches towards the conclusion of Action Plans with armed groups and militias. Ensure that armed groups that had signed and repeatedly violated Action Plans on child recruitment are subject to increased scrutiny.
- v. Engage in a regular dialogue with the government in order to share information on child rights violations, and advise/support the government to take appropriate steps to act on this information.

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