



Vision GRAM international

Groupe d'actions contre la marginalization – Group of actions against marginalisation

CHILDREN ARE NOT WEAPON OF WAR



The use of children by terrorist organizations destroys their
future



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Context

Children have extensively been used by armed groups throughout the world as expendable weapons of war. These armed conflicts have transformed children into war machines, sex slaves and domestic laborers by terrorists. The non-existence of an inclusion in regards to child soldiers in the current Arms Trade Treaty leaves vulnerable children, the world over, open to atrocities no child should have to endure.

The Arms Trade Treaty includes a ban on the proliferation of illegal weapons and serious violations of human rights in which the international community and the responsible states take measures to reduce, combat and put an end to armed violence.

Due to the alarmingly increasing rate of terrorist acts around the world the Arms Trade Treaty is in need of adding a clause that protects children from the illegal recruitment into war by terrorists.

Child soldiers have been forced into armed rebel factions (Kurdish fighters, Free Syrian Army) and terrorist groups (Boko Haram in Nigeria, Islamic State Israel or Syria), and are now incorporated into the national armies (Sudan, Somalia) or even in police forces (Afghanistan), the terrorist group of the Islamic State Daech (Middle East, Syria, al-Shabab in Somalia, Bok-Haram in Nigeria (Africa).

Currently, Boko Haram is active in Cameroon, where children, especially girls are used to carry bombs in order to carry out suicide bombing mission causing mass casualties.

Faced with feelings of ambivalence, these children are not hesitant to commit atrocious terrorist acts. The brutal sectarian war transforms their lives forever creating a non-existent childhood. These forced activities create overwhelming obstacles once the children return home both in their family units as well as in their communities. A persistent violent ideology has already transformed their childhood

thinking and destroyed their innocent vision of the world where adults are there to protect and provide for them. These terrorist groups advocate the glorification of violence and horror with intense media coverage through social networks. They do not hesitate to show the pictures of the children in action. The media is fraught with explosive cannon flashes, reports of suicide bombers who blow themselves up in Nigeria, "young lions of the Caliphate" as they call them, who kill hostages at close range or attend to the executions.

Wherever there is armed conflict there is no respite. Children are present and thousands lose their lives. If they are not directly with weapons in hand, they suffer with the trauma if they are fortunate enough to be returned to their families.

Major and important action must be taken to protect vulnerable children who live in war zones.

Vision GRAM-International believe in education, as a strong weapon to prevent armed violence. Everyone should give them pen instead of gun and balloon instead of bomb or grenades.

Giving children weapons and bombs does not give children the chance to study, to be with their families and live in a world where their rights are respected.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

Terrorist organizations operating in parts of Africa and the Middle East are making news headlines with increasing frequency. The organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al- Sham, also known as ISIS or ISIL, and Boko Haram in Nigeria have practically become household names. These organizations openly commit heinous atrocities against innocent civilians, and shamelessly use children as tools for war.

The most recognizable of the above mentioned terror organization is ISIS. ISIS, in its quest to build an Islamic State, also known as a Caliphate, has openly kidnapped, murdered, sold, raped and indoctrinated children. The children that have become captives of ISIS are often religious minorities, most notably those of the Yazidi ethno-religious group. The atrocities committed against the Yazidi children, particularly young girls, have shocked the world. ISIS recently released a pamphlet



describing how to treat enslaved women of all ages, and it explicitly states that the enslavement, sale, and forced rape of prepubescent girls are permissible so long as they are not Muslim. It is hard to know for sure how many young girls have

been raped and enslaved, but that number is easily placed in the thousands.

In addition to the sexual slavery, ISIS is also indoctrinating young boys to become future soldiers. In February of 2015, ISIS released a propaganda video showing roughly eighty young boys wearing military uniforms and standing in military formation. The video states that they are the next generation of fighters, and will receive both religious and military training at their schools. In ISIS's de facto capitol of Raqqa, Syria, all boys age of fifteen and under are conscripted into these schools.

The children that have become victims of ISIS's brutality have no protection and no basic human rights. The governments of Iraq and Syria have lost control over considerable amounts of their land, leaving terrorist organizations like ISIS to fill the void.

The only way to save the children is to remove ISIS from the areas that it controls. The Iraqi government, the Kurdish government in northern Iraq, and Shia militias are fighting to reclaim lands from ISIS. It has been concluded that the only way to remove ISIS is with force, which is always to be used as a last resort.

A Human Right Watch report states that, "Extremist groups like ISIS recruited children by mixing studies and training in handling weapons and giving them dangerous tasks, including missions- suicide." This report is based on the experiences of 25 child soldiers activities inside Syria.

Besides ISIS, they fought in the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Islamic Front, the Al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, as well as the Kurdish forces.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is a terrorist organization with goals similar to those of ISIS. It was founded in 2002 by a cleric named Mohammad Yusuf in northern Nigeria. Its name loosely translates to “western education is forbidden.” Northern Nigeria used to be part of the Sokoto Caliphate until 1903 when the British seized and dismantled it in 1903. Nigeria has struggled to convince the all the people in northern Nigeria to conform to Nigerian laws and go to secular schools. Boko Haram provided many people with the religious education they were longing for.

However, in 2009 some of Boko Haram’s followers launched a series of attacks on government buildings in the northern city of Maiduguri. The attack provoked a strong response from the Nigerian government, which eventually captured and killed the Mohammad Yusuf.

The government of Nigeria claimed that it had defeated Boko Haram, but the group reorganized under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau. This new leader has successfully transformed Boko Haram into a much more deadly force. The group’s main goal is still to create an Islamic state in Nigeria, and has become known for its violence against anyone that seeks a Western style education, as well as anyone who is seen as a supporter of the government.

Small groups of gunmen often perpetrated Boko Haram’s early attacks, but now they have grown into an army numbering in thousands. They have wreaked havoc on small towns that they loot and subjugate. Large portions of Boko Haram’s victims are women and children who have little to no means of defending themselves.

The Nigerian government under the leadership of President Goodluck Jonathan has long condemned the actions of Boko Haram, but has only recently taken affirmative action against the group. Since the second rise of Boko Haram, the Nigerian government has seemed to be lacking both the confidence and military power to stop their insurgency.

It was not until 2015 that the Nigerian military began making substantial gains against Boko Haram. As of early April 2015 the Nigerian military, along with the help of a small amount of South African mercenaries, has pushed Boko Haram back into a mere fraction of its former territory. The government offensive was largely in

response to the massacre of civilians in the northeastern town of Baga, where an estimated 2,000 people were killed. The years of Boko Haram acting with impunity will come to an end if the government continues its offensive.



Part of what makes Boko Haram so notorious is its treatment of children, particularly young girls. There have been series of mass kidnappings of young girls in northern Nigeria. Sometimes several hundred girls would be taken hostage after attacks on unprotected towns. The girls were then sold into sexual slavery and some were taken as wives of the fighters.

The blame for these attacks falls on Boko Haram, but the government of Nigeria also shares a great deal of this blame.

Boko Haram has gone almost entirely unchallenged since 2009. Until, the government of Goodluck Jonathan has largely responded to Boko Haram's attacks with empty rhetoric. The Nigerian government allowed Boko Haram to grow from a small group of fighters, to a powerful army that has killed thousands of men, women, and children. Had it responded swiftly to the initial sporadic attacks, Boko Haram would not have been able to unleash such a reign of terror.

Vision GRAM- International condemns the murder and enslavement of innocent women and children by Boko Haram. The Nigerian government must continue to wage is offensive against this terrorist organization that uses violence against women, children and other civilians.

UNICEF estimates that about 743,000 children have been uprooted by the Islamist insurgency for six years, including 10,000 who were separated from their families.

Al-Shabaab Child Soldiers

Al-Shabaab started as a religious group resisting Somali warlords, and the Ethiopians during their occupation from 2006 to 2008. At that time, al-Shabaab was actually supported by many Somalis (now it is estimated that perhaps 2% of Somalis support Al Shabaab). It was during the Ethiopian occupation that Al-Shabaab became what we now know as a terrorist organization. They claim loose affiliation with Al-Qaida, and have borrowed suicide bombing technologies from them, but they are not actually a cell of Al-Qaida.

Al-Shabaab is notorious for, among other things, the use of child soldiers. The UN credited al-Shabaab with over 1,500 cases of child recruitment. Faced with increasing military pressure from the African Union and UN troops, al-Shabaab's numbers are dwindling and in their desperation more and more children are being



either kidnapped or brainwashed into enlisting on their own. They use their child soldiers primarily for their most dangerous missions, on the front lines, and for suicide bombings.

The young boys are made to fight on the front lines because they have little concept of when they are winning or losing, so they will continue to fight no matter what. Al-Shabaab kidnaps and recruits more boys than they do girls but they do force young girls into marriages with Al-Shabaab militants. A report on child soldiers done in Somalia, explains the process of recruitment (or, in most cases, brainwashing):

« When al-Shabaab captures a town, their first action is typically to "remake" the town into what it claims to be a better place to live...What the community often does not realize is that, at the same time, the insurgents have turned the town into a training camp. They accomplish this, in part, by removing all the current teachers from the

schools and madrassas and replacing them with al-Shabaab's own instructors. These instructors, then, indoctrinate the children in the al-Shabaab ideology, which focuses on jihad and fighting against what the insurgents call infidels; those enemy forces who operate on Somali soil.

The Al-Shabaab instructors are able to attract and brainwash the youths by presenting a caring demeanor and by (falsely) instilling in their students a sense of purpose and self-worth. In serving with the militia, the children are led to believe that they will be an important part of society and that their country will love them and God will bless them. Al-Shabaab also changes the imams (mosque leaders) of the mosques and replaces them with their own imams who then talk to the community about their joining of the militia.

The new mosques leaders give lectures at Friday prayers and after every prayer in mosque about the good side of al-Shabaab group, which attracted children below the age of 18 whose minds were not yet fully developed. In addition to academic and religious changes, al-Shabaab-controlled towns were also required to make other changes.

One such change was the banning of playing sports for all young men. Many young men enjoyed playing football and other sports, as did younger children who would often play football after arriving home from school and madrasa in the afternoon. Al-Shabaab also aggressively prohibited viewing movies in cinemas, DCTVs, and would threaten or kill anyone who attempted to open a cinema or watch a DSTV.

With the loss of these "free time" distractions, many children and young people were left without any healthy, normal things to do. As a result, an in an example of the cleverness of al-Shabaab's strategy targeting Somali youths, the young people would then be drawn to those places where the insurgents' senior officials were speaking. This led directly to the indoctrination of many youths, leading to their joining al-Shabaab. »

So what can be done?

The only two countries that have not signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child are the United States and Somalia. Getting the United States to sign on will be difficult as the US is infamous for being a perpetual non-signer of international treaties. Unfortunately, the US's signature is an important step in legitimizing and implementing these important treaties. In the case of Al-Shabaab, Somalia's signature is also important because once the government signs, it will be easier to hold it accountable for taking action against the recruitment of child soldiers. NGOs and activists should be putting an immense amount of pressure on these two states to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Naming and shaming is often a good way to apply political pressure. Application of pressure will need to be different for the US and Somalia, of course.

Right now the US's argument for not signing is weak: they don't like that it interferes with the way that countries treat children within their own borders. Unlike Somalia, the US has nothing to hide when it comes to the treatment of children - American children are negatively impacted by low quality education and poverty in the US, but they are certainly not being enlisted into the army. There is no good reason for the US not to sign, except that it would set a precedent for other treaties it doesn't want to sign, like the Rome Statute (which governs the ICC).

Activists in the US need to use shaming tactics, as well as personal testimonies from children (organizations should, for example, come together to bring former child soldiers to the US for Senate hearings), to pressure the Obama Administration. In his last year as President, Obama has been rushing to push through the changes he has talked about for 7 years. Now more than ever his administration is susceptible to political pressure to sign the Convention.

As for Somalia, it will require a completely different type of pressure, especially since the Somali government has also been found to be using child soldiers (in much smaller numbers than al-Shabaab, but still). Naming and shaming will of course be

important, but threats from donor countries and organizations to withhold aid from the government could also prove effective. For this to work, NGOs will need to be applying pressure not only to Somalia but also its donors. Donors should redirect their aid dollars to civil society groups or other capable NGOs so that the government feels the pressure of the aid-sanctions but the people do not suffer.

It is hard to prevent child soldiering in a vacuum. Working to end the use of child soldiers is really just a part of working for peace and ending impunity for war crimes, crimes against humanity, etc. Strengthening justice mechanisms like the International Criminal Court and continuing the great work being done by hundreds of development NGOs and peace-loving communities around the world are both essential to the fight against child soldiering. In Somalia specifically, governance and accountability need to be strengthened. The government must be encouraged to actually implement the programs and initiatives that had Somalis so excited when the government first came to power.

Reintegration is incredibly important for former child soldiers. Working for the release of children from militias like al-Shabaab is very important, but making sure the children are not just dropped back into their old communities after release or escape is even more important. Having centers or even just locations where children who are released are sent and children who escape is the first step.

These places must be well protected and staffed with experts (especially child psychologists). Despite Unicef and other organizations, Vision GRAM-International is among those which take care of former child-soldiers, but they need to do more. Community members need to be prepared to help the children reintegrate as well. Communities will face the problem of reintegration of those children from terror-sites groups if they are still alive.

Arms Trade Treaty, to save lives

Organizations working on the issue of child soldiers should reach out to community leaders, like teachers and religious leaders, but also to mothers, as the caretakers of children in most countries where child soldiers are used.

The adoption, the signature and entry into force of the Arms Trade Treaty is part of the answer to end this phenomenon. The political will of States in the universalization of the treaty will help to save lives. This is a major response to their responsibility to protect civilian, countries and the world against the atrocities caused by non-controlled arms.

Vision GRAM-International believe that by making real the Arms Trade treaty, Internatioanl community gave the chance to children, but they should respond forcefully to these terrorist threats. By controlling arms, respecting the principles of responsibility to protect and fight against terrorism, States gives hope to children and save civilian's lives.

Terrorist activities expose children to the destruction of their lives through brainwashing and exposure to suicide actions.

To replace guns by pen is a true gift to help those children to rebuild their lives and to contribute to the peacebuilding.

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