

## Western militaries confront **child soldiers threat**

**P W Singer**

**Changing demographics and patterns of conflict, and the availability of light, easy to operate small-arms have allowed children to play an increasingly active role in combat. *P W Singer* investigates the trends that have contributed to the rise of the practice and the nature of the threat children pose on the battlefield.**

Underage soldiers have become a recurring feature of the modern battlefield, present in the majority of the world's conflicts and armed organisations. The global spread of child soldiers raises deep dilemmas for both policy and military strategy and tactics, and has worrisome implications for the extent, level and persistence of conflicts. In short, the 'soft' issue of children has become a 'hard' security threat that must be taken into account in war and security planning.

Juveniles have been present in armies in the past, most notably the Hitler Jugend in the closing weeks of the Second World War, but in general the use of children as combatants has been limited. However, this has changed radically in recent decades. There are now as many as 300,000 children under 18 years old presently serving as combatants in 40 per cent of the world's armed organisations (both non-state and state linked) and they fight in almost 75 per cent of the world's conflicts. An additional set of as many as 500,000 children serve in armed forces not presently at war.

While questions of differing cultural standards of maturity are sometimes raised, the youth in question cover a range considered underage both according to international law and by almost every state in its own legislation. Some 80 per cent of those conflicts where children are present include fighters under the age of 15 and 18 per cent of the world's armed organisations have used children of 12 years and under. The average age of child soldiers found by separate studies in Southeast Asia and Central Africa was just under 13.

The practice also differs from the past by including girls as well as boys. Roughly 30 per cent of the armed forces that use child soldiers also include girl soldiers. Underage girls have been present in the armed forces in 55 countries; in 27 of those countries, girls were abducted to serve and in 34 of them, the girls saw combat.

### **Why now?**

The appearance of children on the modern battlefield is due to a number of converging trends. First, a new, broader pool of potential recruits has emerged due to demographic changes, global social instability, the legacy of multiple conflicts entering their second and third generations and the wide range of near- and long-term catastrophes that act to both weaken states and undermine societal structures. For example, more than 40 million children will be AIDS orphans by 2010, while the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are more than 25 million up-rooted children in the world.

Second, while there have always been dispossessed and disconnected children, it is the enabling factor of changes in weapons technology that have allowed this wider pool to be tapped as a new source of military labour. In particular, the proliferation of light, simple, and cheap small-arms has played a primary role. Such 'child-portable' weapons as the AK-47 are not only far more lethal

than prior generations of battlefield weapons, but easy to learn to use. A 10-year-old can learn the basics within 30 minutes.

Third, the dynamics of security phenomena such as warlordism and failed states, has also contributed to the change. From Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan, local warlord leaders have realised the possibility and advantages in recruiting vulnerable, disconnected children and turning them into low-cost and expendable troops.

By using recruiting and indoctrination techniques that take advantage of children's gullibility and immaturity, otherwise unpopular armies and rebel groups have been able to field far greater forces than they would otherwise, through strategies of abduction or indoctrination. Indeed, many groups little larger than gangs are able to sustain themselves as viable military threats through the use of child fighters. For example, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda is effectively a cult with a core of just 200 adult members. Over the years, it has abducted over 14,000 children, and used them to fight a decade long civil war against the Ugandan army.

### **Children in combat**

When children are present, research has found conflicts tend to be easier to start, harder to end, and involve greater losses of life. They also lay the foundations for future conflicts, both within the state affected and through the spread of these now-trained and experienced fighters to other areas.

There is a wealth of evidence from battle zones demonstrating that children make effective combatants and often operate with terrifying audacity, particularly when infused with religious or political fervour or when under the influence of narcotics. In general, the presence of children on the battlefield adds to the overall confusion of battle and can slow the progress of forces, particularly when operating in an urban environment, as well as adding to casualty totals on both sides.

Conflicts where children feature tend not only to involve massive violations of the laws of war, but also higher casualties, both among the local population and among child soldiers in comparison to their adult compatriots.

Finally, the effect of plunging children into a culture of war can cause long-term trauma that can disrupt their psychological and moral development and hamper wider social development for years ahead. The case of Liberia is an example of how conversion of a generation of children into soldiers not only heightens the possibility for conflict recurrence within the country, but also endangers regional stability. Child soldiers from Liberia have ended up fighting in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and as far afield as the Democratic Republic of Congo.

### **Threat to forces**

Given the overwhelming balance of forces and technology advantage that Western militaries typically enjoy, the use of child soldiers by adversaries is unlikely to change the final strategic outcome of a conflict. Nevertheless, child soldiers present professional military forces with specific and unique difficulties.

Whenever professional forces face child soldiers, an immediate dilemma is raised by the fact that they are lethal combatants yet remain victims who have been illegally recruited, deliberately persuaded or even abducted into military service.

Experience has shown that engagements with child soldiers can be extremely demoralising for professional troops and also undermine unit cohesion. For example, while there was little controversy over Allied actions against the Hitler Jugend troops in 1945, the experience was so unsettling to those US Army forces that had to fight the units that, even with victory in sight, troop morale was brought to the lowest points of the entire war. Similarly, among British forces operating in West Africa in 2000/02, a number of incidents of clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder were reported among individual soldiers who had faced child soldiers. At the same time, fighting child soldiers presents a public affairs nightmare that adversaries may seek to exploit. A primary worry for militaries facing child soldiers is that a traditional measure of success in defeating their opponent may end up undermining their domestic support, as well as sway international opinion.

### **Close encounters**

As this trend has become global, Western forces are increasingly coming into conflict with child soldier forces. A notable early example was the British Operation 'Barras,' carried out by the Special Air Service (SAS) against the West Side Boys militia in Sierra Leone (2000) that had taken a squad of British troops hostage. After the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US, the prevalence of child soldiers in every zone of the war on terrorism is making the issue of designing Western policies for dealing with them increasingly urgent.

In January 2002, Sergeant Nathan Chapman became the first US serviceman to be killed by hostile fire in the war on terrorism. The sniper who shot the Green Beret trooper was a 14-year-old Afghan boy. US soldiers continue to report encounters with child soldiers in Afghanistan. On 9 August 2004, the Washington Post reported on the youngest child soldier faced so far in Afghanistan, a 12-year-old boy who was captured in 2004 after being wounded during a Taliban ambush of a convoy.

On 23 April 2003, the Miami Herald reported that at least six boys aged between 13 and 16 were captured by US forces in Afghanistan in the initial fighting and taken to the detainee facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. They were housed in a special wing entitled Camp Iguana. According to a Time article published on 8 December 2003, several more youths aged between 16 and 18 are thought to be held in the regular facility for adult detainees at Camp X-ray.

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq built up an entire apparatus in the 1990s designed to pull children into the military realm and bolster societal control. This included the Ashbal Saddam ('Saddam's lion cubs'), a paramilitary force of boys between 10 and 15 years old that acted as a feeder into the Saddam Fedayeen units, which proved more aggressive than the Iraqi army during the invasion. US forces engaged with Iraqi child soldiers in fighting in at least three cities (Nasariyah, Mosul and Karbala). In addition, a report by the UK Daily Telegraph on 4 April 2003 claimed there were many instances of children being used as human shields by regime loyalists during the fighting.

The implications of this training and involvement of large numbers of Iraqi youth in military activities was soon evident in the guerrilla war that followed. Beaten on the battlefield, rebel leaders sought to mobilise this cohort of trained and indoctrinated young fighters. A typical incident in Mosul just after the invasion is an indicator of the threat to come. Here, in the same week that President George W Bush made his infamous aircraft carrier landing proclamation that major combat operations had ended, the Washington Post reported that a 12-year-old Iraqi boy fired on US Marines with an AK-47 rifle.

Over the next weeks and months, incidents between US forces and armed Iraqi children began to grow, to the extent that US military intelligence briefings began to highlight the role of Iraqi children as both attackers and spotters for ambushes. Incidents with child soldiers ranged from

child snipers to a 15-year-old who tossed a grenade in a US truck, blowing off the leg of a US Army trooper.

In the summer of 2004, during the revolt led by radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in southern Iraq, observers noted multiple child soldiers, some as young as 12-years-old, serving in Sadr's Mahdi Army who fought pitched battles with US and British forces, particularly around Najaf. In the UK Daily Telegraph, Sheikh Ahmad al-Shebani, Sadr's spokesman, publicly defended the use of children: "This shows that the Mahdi are a popular resistance movement against the occupiers. The old men and the young men are on the same field of battle." The same report quoted a 12-year-old fighter as having said: "Last night I fired a rocket-propelled grenade against a tank." Coalition forces have faced child soldiers in the Sunni Triangle as well. Marines fighting in the battle to retake Fallujah in November 2004 reported numerous instances of being fired upon by "children with assault rifles".

The overall numbers of Iraqi children involved in the fighting are not yet known. But the indicators are that they play a significant role in the insurgency. For example, British forces have detained more than 60 juveniles during their operations in Iraq, while US forces have captured 107 Iraqi juveniles determined to be high-risk security threats, holding most at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

### **Children and terrorism**

Children have also been used in various terrorist operations. Captured Al-Qaeda training videos reveal young boys receiving instruction in the manufacture of bombs and the setting of explosive booby traps. Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas have recruited children as young as 13 to be suicide bombers and children as young as 11 to smuggle explosives and weapons. At least 30 suicide-bombing attacks have been carried out by youths since the fighting in Israel-Palestine sparked up again in 2000. One tragic example involved a mentally handicapped 16-year-old, who was convinced by Hamas to strap himself with explosives. CNN reported that Israeli police caught him in the town of Nablus, just before he was to blow himself up at a checkpoint.

It is important to note that it is not a uniquely Muslim or Middle Eastern phenomenon for children to be involved in terrorism. For example, the Real IRA, a coalition of dissident Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorists in Northern Ireland, began to recruit boys in the 14 to 16-year-old range in the late 1990s, according to a Guardian Weekly report published on 29 November 2000. The US Department of State says that the youngest terrorist on record was a nine-year-old boy in Colombia, sent by the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) to bomb a polling station in 1997. A 10-year-old was later used by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) to bomb a military checkpoint in 2003. Likewise, when Muslim groups began to use child suicide bombers, they were not actually breaking any new ground. Instead, they were following the lead of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, which has consistently been one of the most innovative of terrorist groups. The LTTE, which has utilised suicide bombers to kill both the Indian prime minister and the Sri Lankan president, even has manufactured specialised denim jackets designed to conceal explosives, specially tailored in smaller sizes for child suicide bombers.

### **Conclusions**

The deliberate recruitment of children into armed units may be a clear violation of the laws of war, but it is also a global reality that policymakers and soldiers cannot avoid. Regardless of the location, the consequence of almost any intervention is the high likelihood of facing armed juveniles.

Action to end the use of children in conflict is therefore not only a moral obligation, but also a strategic priority. Those seeking to end the practice must alter the underlying causes and motivations that enable its spread. The key is to affect both the recruiting pool and groups' willingness and ability to access it. These include investment in heading off global disease and conflict outbreaks; greater aid to special at-risk groups, such as refugees; criminalising the doctrine by prosecuting those leaders who abuse children in this way; taking the profits out of the practice by sanctioning companies or regimes that trade with child-soldier groups; providing increased aid to programmes that seek to demobilise and rehabilitate former child soldiers to prevent their return; and helping to curb the spread of illegal small-arms to rebel and terrorist groups who bring children into the realm of conflict.

Much like the presence of non-state groups or the increased setting of urban environments, child soldiers are now a regular feature of the modern battlefield. The only question is whether troops will be properly equipped and trained to deal with this change in contemporary warfare. In the interim, the onus is on leaders, in government and the military, to do all that they can to reverse the doctrine's spread and end this terrible practice.

### **BOX: Policy responses to child soldiery**

Given their prevalence in conflict, military forces must be prepared to encounter child soldiers on the modern battlefield, aware that they are facing real and serious threats from opponents whom they generally would prefer not to harm.

It is incumbent upon mission commanders to prepare forces for the tough decisions that they will face in order to avoid confusion over rules of engagement or to prevent the potentially lethal microsecond hesitations due to shock at the makeup of their foe or uncertainty on what to do.

Historical and contemporary experience has demonstrated a number of effective methods to handle situations when professional troops are confronted by child soldiers.

### **Preparation and Intelligence**

Official policies and effective solutions should be developed to counter the dilemmas that child soldiers raise. Better to deal with them in training, rather than making ad-hoc calls in the middle of a crisis. At the same time, the intelligence apparatus must become attuned to the threat and ramifications of the child soldier. This is not only important in forecasting broad political and military events, but knowledge of the makeup of the adversary is also a critical factor in determining the best response. Intelligence should be sensitive to two aspects in particular: what method of recruitment the opposition utilises and the average child soldier's period of service. Those using abduction techniques or with recent cadres will be more prone to dissolving under shock than those with voluntary recruits or children who have been in service for many years.

### **Recognise the threat**

When forces deploy into an area known to have child soldiers present, they must not underestimate the threat they pose. All children are not threats, and certainly should not be targeted as such, but force protection measures must include the possibility and likelihood of child soldiers and child terrorists. This includes changing practices of letting children mingle among pickets and putting children through the same inspection and scrutiny as adults at checkpoints.

## **Fear supplements firepower**

When forces face engagement with child soldier forces, best practice has been to hold the threat at a distance and, where possible, initially fire for shock. The goal should be to maximize efficiency and prevent costly externalities by attempting to break up the child units, which often are not cohesive fighting forces. In a sense, this is the micro-level application of effects-based warfare. For example, demonstrative artillery and mortar fires (including the use of smoke), rolling barrages (which give a sense of flow to the impending danger) and helicopter gunship passes have been proven especially effective in breaking up child soldier forces.

## **The leader is the linchpin**

When forced into close engagement, forces should prioritise the targeting and elimination of any adult leaders if at all possible. Experience has shown that their hold over the unit is often the centre of gravity and units will dissolve if the adult leader is taken out of a position of control. As forces seek to mop-up resistance, they should focus their pursuit on the adult leaders that escape. Failure to do so allows their likely reconstitution of forces and return to conflict, as has become a recurrent theme in child soldier-fuelled conflicts, such as those in Northern Uganda and Liberia.

## **Non-lethal weaponry**

An important realisation is that total annihilation of the enemy in these instances may actually backfire and so, wherever possible, military commanders and policy-makers should explore options for using non-lethal weapons in situations that involve child soldiers. The availability of non-lethal weapons provides troops in the field with added choices and options, which may save lives on both sides and prove more effective to meeting mission goals. Unfortunately, development and distribution of such weaponry has fallen well behind pace. Indeed, out of the mere 60 non-lethal weapons kits in the entire US military, only six were deployed to Iraq and many international peacekeeping operations lack even one kit.

## **Employ psyops**

Psychological operations (psyops) should always be integrated into overall efforts against local resistance, including being specially designed for child soldier units. Their aim should be to convince child soldiers to stop fighting, leave their units and begin the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. At the same time strategy should be developed that ensures that adversary leaders know their violations of the laws of war are being monitored and the dire consequences they will face in using this doctrine. Psyops should also seek to undercut any support for the doctrine within local society by citing the great harms the practice is inflicting on the next generation, its contrast to local customs and norms and the lack of honour in sending children out to fight adult's wars.

## **Follow-up**

Forces must be prepared to take special measures to deal with child soldier escapees and prisoners of war quickly, so as to dispel any myths on retribution and induce others to leave the opposition as well. This also entails certain preparations being made for securing child detainees, something US forces have had no doctrine or training for - even down to not having proper sized handcuffs. Once soldiers have ensured that the child does not present a threat, any immediate needs of food, clothing and/or shelter should be provided for. Then, as soon as possible, the child should be turned over to health-care or non-governmental organisation professionals rather than detained in prisons and camps designed for dealing with adult combatants.

## **Force protection**

Forces must be ready to deal with the psychological and social repercussions of engagements with child soldier forces. Units of professional soldiers may require special post-conflict treatment and even individual counselling. Otherwise, the consequence of being forced to kill children may ultimately undermine unit cohesion and combat effectiveness.

## **Public awareness**

Public affairs specialists must prepare in advance for the unique repercussions of such engagements. In explaining the events and how children ended up being killed, they should stress the context under which they occurred and the overall mission's importance. The public should be informed that everything possible is being done to avoid and limit child soldiers becoming casualties (such as the use of non-lethal weapons, psychological operations and firing for shock effect). At the same time, the public should be made aware that child soldiers pose a serious threat to personnel and that the blame should fall on leaders who exploit children in this way, rather than on the forces they confront.

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