

Child soldiers in front line of wars a

LONDON: Boys and girls as young as nine years old are in the front line of wars across the world, and even when the fighting has finished they are largely neglected in the peace process, a report said on Wednesday.

From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, governments and armed opposition groups have recruited children in their thousands and either trained them to kill and maim or used them as sex slaves, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers said.

"Children have continued to play a significant part in some of the world's most bitter and long-running wars," it said in its 2004 global report. "Governments killed, tortured and arbitrarily detained children suspected of being opposition combatants or supporters," it added.

The Coalition groups a range of human rights bodies including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Vision International and Defence for

Children International.

It said while some countries had instituted demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programmes aimed specifically at child soldiers where conflicts had abated, in many cases the young fighters were ignored in the reconstruction process.

"DDR programmes brought hope to thousands of former child soldiers, but girls were often excluded from them despite having frequently been recruited and abducted by armed groups for sexual purposes," the report said.

While Africa remained the worst offender in the use and abuse of child soldiers - particularly Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda - the phenomenon was also widespread in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

"Some share of the blame lies with the international community. Governments continued to provide military training and assistance

to armed forces using child soldiers or encouraging paramilitaries to do so," the report said.

Although some 40,000 child soldiers were demobilised as wars ended in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, the eruption of hostilities in places like Ivory Coast and Liberia drew 30,000 others into armed conflicts, the report said.

In Uganda the rebel Lord's Resistance Army had abducted an estimated 20,000 children, and militias recruited by the Ugandan government to fight them also used child soldiers, the report, covering 2001-2004, added.

But the Middle East was no stranger to the sight of children on the front lines, it said, noting child soldiers in Iran, Iraq, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Yemen and Sudan - where it said 20,000 children were in government forces and armed opposition groups.

It said armed Palestinian groups had used children as suicide bombers at least nine

times and, in response, Israeli armed forces shot at youths throwing stones and denied child detainees the right to even minimal human rights.

In the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir children were forcibly recruited into armed forces from as young as 13, the report said, while in Indonesia children again as young as 13 were being used by the Free Aceh Movement.

The United States did not escape criticism in the report which noted that several 16 and 17 year olds were still being held in the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba as "enemy combatants" - although three aged between 13 and 15 had been released.

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Daily Times
18/11/97

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Child soldiers in Africa: Governments and armed groups in Africa's troubled Great Lakes region continue recruiting and abducting child soldiers, despite international agreements meant to outlaw the practice, a rights group said

on Wednesday.

More than 100,000 African children are thought to have served as soldiers in the last four years, with more than 50,000 of them fighting in Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers said in a new report.

"Governments and armed groups in the Great Lakes are betraying both children and their own societies, and endangering long-term peace and stability in the region," Henri Nzeyimana, the coalition's Great Lakes coordinator, said in a statement.

Two days before an international summit on peace and security in the Great Lakes, the group called on the United Nations Security Council and African Union (AU) to enforce the ban on child soldiers and to rescue children from conflicts.

"It is not enough for the Security Council to

pass resolution after resolution, without ensuring that these are followed up with concrete action and progress in recruitment prevention and demobilisation of all child soldiers," Nzeyimana said. Presenting a report it said was the most comprehensive survey to date, the coalition said that by the end of last year there were more than 30,000 child soldiers in DRC alone. It said child recruitment there and in Burundi had actually escalated as peace talks aimed at ending civil wars in the two nations approached their decisive stages.

"In Burundi, new recruitment took place as former armed groups and new signatories to the peace agreements sought to enhance their negotiating positions by building up their fighting strength," the report said. Both Uganda and Rwanda recently used child soldiers in the war in eastern DRC, as well as supporting armed political groups there that continue to recruit and abduct children, it added. **REUTERS**