

The Mental-Health Needs of Child Soldiers in Uganda:  
A Case Study of Structural Violence

By:

Kathryn C. Troyer

The University of Denver

Abstract

*An estimated 300,000 children under the age of 18 serve as soldiers in armed conflict in 30 different countries around the world. Wars in Africa involve approximately one-third of these children. This article explores the severity of child soldiering in Africa with a case study from Uganda. The term **child soldier** applies in no uncertain terms to both genders bearing arms and refers to the direct or indirect participation of children in armed conflict. Relationships are presented among the culture of war in Uganda, the social identity of child soldiers, and the consequential mental-health problems during armed conflict and its aftermath. Recommendations are offered to prevent the further use of child soldiers.*

This paper was originally published in *The Applied Anthropologist*, Volume 25, Number 2, Fall 2005, Pages 135-146.

## ***Introduction***

Between 1945 and 1990 the world experienced a mere three weeks without a war. About 15 million people around the globe died directly or indirectly from war between 1950 and 1990, and thousands more have died since then (Tshitereke 2003). War does not just result in deaths; it destroys nations, communities, families, and individuals. It affects everyone in its vicinity, either directly or indirectly. Children are deeply affected by war, especially since the use of child soldiers in armed conflict has become a common occurrence in many parts of the world. In 1998, it was estimated that about 300,000 children under the age of 18 served as child soldiers in armed conflicts in about 30 different countries around the globe. About one-third of those children were fighting in Africa (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004, 2005a,b,c).

Africa has been plagued by armed conflict for decades, varying from the wars of independence in the first half of the 1960s to anti-regime wars in the late 1970s (Teklu, von Braun, and Webb 1998). Since the 1990s, a new era of violent civil wars has spread across the continent, and this time child soldiers are being used to fight the wars of the adult world. Although many international initiatives have attempted to protect the rights of children during war, the use of child soldiers in armed conflict is still a common occurrence in several African nations. The focus of this paper is to (1) further investigate the occurrence of child soldiering in Africa with a case study from Uganda and (2) to assess the mental-health needs of child soldiers during the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Before discussing these main issues, the following topics are examined as they directly relate to child-soldiering problems in Africa:

- the causes of war in Africa
- the consequences that armed conflict has had on African society
- the current international initiatives in the fight against child soldiering

In conclusion, this paper makes policy recommendations to prevent the further use of child soldiers in armed conflict.

## **Causes of War**

In order to better understand why Africa has been plagued with conflict, it is necessary to study some different theories on the causes of war. Jessica Tuchman-Mathews (1995) argues that overpopulation causes resource inequities, internal migration, multiple ethnic groups, and incapable governments, which are all ingredients for war. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has found in its initial review that environmental scarcities and food security can also lead to conflict when accompanied with a natural disaster or economic crisis (Cohen, Marchione, and Messer 2005). Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that the causes of war can be viewed from three different levels of analysis involving the individual, the nation, and the international system. The individual level includes human nature and its tendencies toward aggression, as well as the beliefs, personalities, and psychological processes of individual political leaders. The national level focuses on governmental factors, such as the structure of the political system, and societal factors—like the structure of the economic system, ethnicity and nationalism, political culture and ideology, and the role of public opinion and non-economic interest groups. The international systemic level includes the following causes of war—the anarchic structure of the international system, the number of major powers in the system, the distribution of economic and military power among them, and patterns of military alliances and international trade. During the Cold War, conflict was caused by factors of the international

system. However, the majority of conflicts since the end of the Cold War can best be explained through the individual level of analysis. During the Cold War, conflicts in developing countries were characterized by anti-colonial struggles for national liberation. In contrast, post-Cold War conflicts in developing countries have focused more on internal arrangements within society itself such as overpopulation, a shortage of resources, the non-egalitarian desires of elites, and simple greed (Tshitereke 2003). In the case of Africa, all three of the theories presented by Tuchman-Mathews, the IFPRS, and Waltz are useful in determining the cause of armed conflict.

## **Current Conflicts**

The current conflicts in Africa are caused by a combination of historic, political, and economic factors at the international, national, and individual levels. First of all, when Africa was colonized and divided into countries, the chosen boundaries divided tribal lines, separating members of the same ethnic group. This created ethnic minorities and majorities within the same state, which has resulted in tension and often violence between rivaling ethnic groups. During civil wars, minorities are often at risk of total annihilation, such as during the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsi by the Hutu-dominated government in 1994. Secondly, the role of the African nation-state is very important in determining the cause of war. If the state delivers services and provides reasonable economic conditions, the people will respect its authority. However, if the state fails to abide by this social contract, either owing to a corrupt government or an administration's inability to meet its domestic responsibilities and international demands, violence and social disorder will probably occur. The breakdown of this contract leads to the third cause of war, a combination of greed and grievance. People often use violence to demonstrate their grievances against the government, which could include systemic discrimination and human-rights violations, inequalities in wealth and political power, or a scarcity of food and water. The greedy behavior of corrupt governments, or warlords who control the natural resources or have a desire to control them, can also lead to violence. When natural resources like diamonds and timber are poorly managed by the state, rebel organizations are able to extract the resources and use the profits to launch civil wars. Finally, with easy access to illegal weapons, warlords are able to take over an area and fight the central authority with armed resistance (Tshitereke 2003). Tension between ethnic groups, the state's inability to meet its people's needs, greed and grievances, the mismanagement of natural resources, and the availability of arms all contribute to armed conflict in Africa.

## **Consequences of Armed Conflict**

Armed conflict disrupts the ordinary life of Africans, forces Africans to find alternate means of survival, affects the functioning of society, and is especially detrimental to children. Conflict reduces resources and organizational capacity for public services. Educational and health systems are often closed due to a lack of safety, supplies, and workers, or restricted transportation in a conflict area. The food supply is often disrupted, as crops and other agricultural infrastructures are destroyed, and the military's food-consumption needs take priority. The likelihood of famine, in addition to economic vulnerability, increases during armed conflict (Machel 2005). Unemployment, food and water scarcity, and safety concerns force people to leave their homes and communities to seek refuge in other areas of the country, such as in refugee camps. Families are often separated during the fleeing stage, leaving women and

children more vulnerable to danger. The refugee camps ideally are places of safety, but they are also breeding grounds for disease, and many women and girls have been raped by refugee men or by soldiers who are supposed to be protecting them (Teklu, von Braun, and Webb 1998). Once the conflict is over or has subsided, people return to destroyed communities with few resources to help them rebuild their lives. There is often distrust among members of the community, so social bonds in addition to infrastructure—such as schools and health centers—are also adversely affected by the conflict.

Armed conflict affects the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of child development. Bullets, bombs, knife wounds, and landmines kill thousands of children each year during wars, but more die from the indirect results of conflict, such as malnutrition and disease in refugee camps. Girls are vulnerable to gender-based violence during the war. Many have been raped while fleeing or staying at refugee camps or have been forced into prostitution due to economic circumstances. This results in the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases like the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and unwanted pregnancies at an early age. A child's education also suffers during a war because safety issues or economic conditions may prevent children from attending school. During armed conflict, a child's family support system breaks down along with other forms of protection, such as government and community support systems. When children are exposed to traumatic events like war, they often experience nightmares, increased anxiety, decreased appetite, or withdrawal from people around them. Older children and adolescents may feel anxious or depressed, develop aggressive behavior, or lose hope about the future (Machel 2005). Children increasingly participate in war as child soldiers, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, and are at heightened risk of being harmed physically, mentally, and emotionally. Child soldiers are perhaps the most afflicted victims of armed conflict, especially in Africa.

### **Child Soldier International Initiatives**

In 1977, the international community specifically addressed the issue of child soldiers for the first time. Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 added an agreement to take all feasible measures to prevent children under the age of 15 from participating directly in armed conflicts; and Protocol II prohibited children under the age of 15 from indirect and direct participation in hostilities. Later, the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 declared that the state was responsible for the special care and protection of children, and thus must guarantee the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of any child who has been a victim of war (Druba 2002). To date since 1989, all 194 participating countries except for the United States and Somalia have ratified, accepted, acceded, or succeeded the convention (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2005). The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 2000 on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography prohibits all recruitment of children 18 and younger by armed groups. But it does permit governmental forces to recruit volunteers that are 16 years of age or older. As of November 17, 2004, 88 out of 117 signatory countries, including the United States, had ratified or acceded the Optional Protocol. Other local agreements such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of 1990 and the International Labour Organization Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182 of 1999 have also addressed the issue of child soldiers. For example, Convention 182 requires state parties to take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor

including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict. The African Charter sets the age of recruitment at 18 years and prohibits the direct participation of minors in armed conflict; but it does allow minors to participate indirectly in hostilities (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2005a,b,c). As of March 2004, the African Charter had been ratified/acceded by 35 of the 53 members of the Organisation for African Unity (African Union 2005). For this paper, the term child soldiers will refer to all children under the age of 18 who engage in hostilities, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hill and Langholtz 2003). Although not all countries have ratified treaties that ban child soldiers, this practice is considered illegal by the United Nations and other international organizations because it violates the human rights of children and has a profound negative impact on their development.

### **Child Soldiers in Africa**

In 1998, an estimated 100,000 child soldiers participated in armed conflict across the African continent. The number today likely is higher. Evidence of child soldiers either in the state military or rebel armed forces has been discovered in the following 15 African countries: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Mozambique, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. Six of these African countries (the Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Sudan) still have not ratified either the Optional Protocol or the African Charter, while the other nine countries have ratified at least one of the two treaties (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2005a,b,c). Thus, ratification of a treaty to ban child soldiers does not itself assure the protection of children during conflict.

Across the continent of Africa, children as young as eight years are participating in armed conflict, whether being "voluntarily" recruited or forced to serve as combatants. In many instances children have been kidnapped from their homes, orphanages, schools, or on the roads, and forced to fight in armed conflict or be killed. Others are coerced to join the armed forces for reasons of self-protection or protection of their family, a lack of economic resources or access to an education, or to attain the societal status of a soldier (Brett and Specht 2004). Children from lower economic backgrounds and rural areas, or those who have been separated from their families, are more likely to become child soldiers. Children may first serve as porters, cooks, messengers, and spies; but almost all children eventually are forced to be combatants. Their lack of training and inexperience makes them vulnerable on the battlefields. Girls often become sex slaves for other soldiers, especially ones at higher ranks (Machel 2005). Child soldiers may be preferred to adult soldiers for the following reasons: They are seen as easily replaceable, they can hide in small places, they might seem innocent to the enemy, they are more submissive and loyal to their commanders, they can be easily indoctrinated, and they can be less remorseful and more brutal than adults. In addition, the availability of low-cost, small, lightweight weapons has increased the prevalence of child soldiers because children can easily carry and learn to load such weapons (Boyden 2003). Uganda is a good example of how child soldiers have been used extensively in the state military and the rebel forces within the last two decades.

## Uganda as a Case Study

Uganda won its independence from the British on October 9, 1962, and since then it has experienced little peace. Regimes like those of Idi Amin and Milton Obote I and II were characterized by civil unrest, human rights violations, mass murders, displacement, and disappearances. These regimes created a culture of violence in which successive governments sought revenge on soldiers and civilians associated with the ousted regimes. Leaders did not foster national identity or national reconciliation, but instead used political and military power to repress alternative ideas and groups and to reinforce ethnic and geographic divisions among ethnic groups—such as between the Bantu-speaking tribes in the south and the Acholi in the north. Historically, the Acholi people are a Nilotic-speaking pastoralist tribe residing in the northern and eastern parts of Uganda. The Acholi people are traditionally more mobile and have a less formal political organization, one that is based on kinship and decision making by kin-group leaders. On the other hand, the Bantu-speaking tribes to the south are agriculturalists and are more politically organized with a powerful king, army, and institutional structures like that of a modern state (Anderson, Sewankambo, and Vandergrift 2004). Ethnic divisions between the Acholi and the Bantu-speaking tribes existed prior to colonial rule; however, they were exacerbated during the period of British colonial administration, when the northerners were primarily recruited into the armed forces and the southern Ugandans primarily served in the civil service. Since then, the south has become more developed, containing the majority of Uganda's educated elite, while the north contains much poorer people, who rely on cattle and military service for income (Ehrenreich 1997). The current president, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, came to power with his National Resistance Army (NRA) in January of 1986 when he took power from General Tito Okello Lutwa, an Acholi from the north. Afterward, Okello's ousted army troops and its civilian supporters formed a rebel force called the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA).

In 1987, Joseph Kony reorganized the UPDA into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Joseph Kony claimed that he was spiritually commissioned to fight for the Acholi people against the Ugandan government. Kony's reasons for fighting are political, but his group's ideology is based on a syncretism of religions that include traditional Acholi beliefs, Christianity, and Islam. Kony has been able to create a religious mystique that allows him to control people through spiritual rituals, psychological fear, and physical violence—convince his cult-like army to fight against the Ugandan government and its supporters. In 1994, the military junta ruling Sudan, the National Islamic Front (NIF), began supporting Kony in response to the Ugandan government's alleged support of a southern Sudanese rebel movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The LRA received safe haven, training, weaponry, and volunteer recruits from Sudan to fuel their fight against the Ugandan government. Eventually, the Acholi grew tired of Kony's abuse of their traditional beliefs and rejected the LRA. From that point on, the LRA's objectives were twofold—fight the Ugandan government and terrorize the Acholi people who had turned against him. The passage below best explains how Kony turned his cause into the punishment and correction of the Acholi people:

[The LRA] does not believe that they kill people, but that the gods (spirits) are the ones who use them, believers in the spirits, to punish those who disobey the commands of the gods. Hence, Kony's command to kill all the Acholis ... the sons and daughters of the captive mothers who are forced to be sex slaves or "wives," will rise up to create a new

generation of Acholi. Kony believes these will follow his spiritual way and not betray him.... (Anderson, Sewankambo, and Vandergrift 2004:13).

In the past 18 years, the LRA has killed and tortured innocent people, mostly Acholi, and abducted about 20,000 Ugandan children to serve as combatants. About 90 percent of LRA recruits are children. There are now over one million internally displaced people in the northern part of the country who are living in government protection camps. Peace efforts between the LRA and the Ugandan government have failed, so the cycle of violence has continued. The military has been able to kill many members of the LRA in its counter attacks, but many have been child soldiers. Few people in the northern part of Uganda are safe from the LRA's violence. Buses have been hijacked; cars have been ambushed, villages are looted and burned; schools have been raided; women and girls have been raped; health clinics workers and humanitarian aid workers have been killed, and children have been kidnapped to serve as LRA combatants.

After being kidnapped or recruited by the LRA, child soldiers are transformed into killers and forced to plunder their own villages and even kill family members. They are also commanded to murder recaptured child soldiers or children who were unable to keep up with the unit. Many are forced to participate in cannibalism or the drinking of their own urine as a punishment. To survive, they must kill or be killed. They may or may not receive military training, but all live under harsh conditions. Most girls are given to LRA commanders as servants and sex slaves, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Smith 2004). Below is an account of a Ugandan girl's experience as a child soldier with the LRA (Broekaert et al. 2004:863):

I was abducted at night from my home. ... On the way to Sudan, an abducted boy tried to escape. He was recaptured and I had to kill him, by beating him to death with sticks. One day I was beaten seriously because I dropped a water container during a gunfire. In Sudan, I received military training for one month. I learned how to assemble and dismantle a gun. After that, I had to fight both UPDF [Ugandan People's Defence Forces] in Uganda ... Several times, I went to villages to loot food and abduct other children. One day, I was given to a commander as his wife. I got pregnant and delivered a boy. In a fight with the UPDF, I managed to escape, but I had to leave my child in the bush. I don't know what happened to him.

In July of 2003, it was estimated that about 20,000 children were seeking safety at night in the larger cities of Gulu, Pader, and Kitgum in order to avoid being abducted. On July 14, 2003, about 20,000 children marched in Kitgum in protest against continued abductions, and a similar march took place in Gulu a month later. Nevertheless, as of March 2004, the LRA was still abducting children on a massive scale and had spread from the northern part of Uganda into the eastern part. The problem is not just contained within the LRA: the Ugandan military and the UPDF also reportedly have used child soldiers.

In 2004, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers reported that the Ugandan government was also recruiting children into the UPDF and local defense units (LDUs). LDUs are supposed to provide security to local villages but reportedly have been used to fight with the UPDF against the LRA. Children serving in the UPDF were often deployed to units in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to Sudan. Often, children who had escaped the LRA were recruited by the military or forced to take part in operations against the LRA. Uganda's national recruitment legislation in the 1995 constitution protects children under the age of 16

from work that could harm their development in any way and states that military recruits must be between 18 and 30 years of age; however, children as young as 13 are being recruited by the army or participating in military operations. The Amnesty Act of 2000 offered immunity and resettlement packages to all armed enemies who turned in their weapons, but it includes no provisions for child soldiers. In 2002, two boys aged 14 and 16 who had been abducted by the LRA were charged with treason; the older one was reportedly tortured by soldiers after his arrest. The boys were released on bail to a women's organization in Gulu, but as of April 2005 they were still waiting to receive amnesty. In 2004, President Museveni denied that children were being recruited into the UPDF and instead blamed parents for lying about their children's age in order to earn a military salary (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004). The problem of child soldiering in Uganda is multidimensional, because child soldiers are fighting in both the LRA and the UPDF; the government denies its part in using child soldiers and has failed to protect the rights of former child soldiers.

### **Structural Violence in Uganda**

Uganda's history of conflict is a good example of Paul Farmer's theory of structural violence. Farmer (2003) argues that violence is often structured by historically given and economically driven forces that conspire to constrain human agency through routine, ritual, or the hard surfaces of life. In a structurally violent society, a person's choices—both small and large—are limited by racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of oppression. Structural violence influences the nature of adversity, suffering, and marginalization in a society. Violence can sometimes be so structurally and institutionally imbedded into a society that its leaders, governments, and emerging groups will continually perpetrate it. For example, human-rights abuses in a structurally violent society are not random in distribution and effect but instead are symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are intimately linked to the social conditions that determine who suffers abuse and who is shielded from harm (Van Arsdale 2005). The world's poor are the chief victims of structural violence because the poor are more likely to suffer and less likely to have their suffering noticed (Farmer 2003).

Uganda's vast history of structural violence begins with colonialism. The colonials reinforced ethnic rivalries by creating a divided country in which the south became more developed than the north. Since Uganda's independence, corrupt regimes from both the north and south have used violence to repress rival ethnic groups in their country. Today, the LRA and the UPDF combat each other and inflict violence on innocent civilians like child soldiers, which only further helps perpetuate structural violence in Uganda. Thus, child soldiering is both a result of structural violence and a cause for additional structural violence in Ugandan society.

### **Mental-Health Needs of Child Soldiers**

Even if child soldiers escape from the armed forces or are rescued alive, they will still face mental-health problems due to the severe trauma and tragedy they experienced during the war. Their mental health needs must be systemically addressed before they can be successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. Rehabilitation centers are specific to child soldiers, because they offer a safe haven for children, meet the children's basic needs, offer psychological counsel, and begin the reintegration process. The reintegration process includes helping former combatants return to civilian life and readjust both socially and economically.

Armed conflict can profoundly impact a child soldier's mental health in many ways. The following problems encountered by former child soldiers all impinge mental health in some capacity; however, most were not categorized as mental-health problems by the indicated sources. In fact, Sue Estroff (1993) states that there are dangers in categorizing mental-health problems, especially in terms of a person *being* a mental illness versus *having* a mental illness. Estroff believes that labeling a person can be demeaning; thus, one must be sensitive when discussing mental-health issues (Janzen 2002). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I am using the term *mental health* to broadly describe any behaviors or conditions of former child soldiers that are related to mental health and mental illness but which may not be officially classified as a mental-health disorder.

Many former child soldiers experience some level of post-traumatic stress. In a recent study of great importance (Broekaert et al. 2004), out of 301 surveyed children 12 years and older who had been abducted and forced to become soldiers in the LRA:

- 52 percent had been seriously beaten;
- 77 percent had seen another person being killed during their abduction;
- 6 percent had seen their own parents or siblings killed;
- 39 percent had killed another person;
- 2 percent had to kill their own father, brother or another relative;
- 39 percent had abducted other children;
- 61 percent had lived in Sudan under very difficult conditions;
- 27 percent were forced to drink their own urine;
- 64 percent were forced to participate in fights;
- 7 percent of them had no military training; and
- 35 percent of girls had been sexually abused.

Of the 71 children who agreed to complete a questionnaire to assess post-traumatic stress disorder, 69 (or 97 percent) had clinically significant symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal. The death of a mother led to higher avoidance scores, especially for girls, which suggests that the supportive role of a mother can help deter the post-traumatic stress in child soldiers. The research also showed that post-traumatic stress reactions in children could last for many years.

Child soldiers often suffer from a type of *adjustment disorder* because first they have to rapidly adjust to a soldier's life and then readjust back to a civilian life. For this reason, child soldiers often have difficulty defining their identity during and after their participation in an armed conflict. For example, one LRA commander reportedly gave the same title to all boy soldiers under his jurisdiction and then never spoke their names again. As a result, the boys lost their previous identity and individuality and became generic soldiers (Dunson 2002). Once children are reintegrated into society, their struggles with issues of identity are many. Child soldiers find it difficult to re-enroll in school because they are far behind in their studies compared to other children their age, and they are still transitioning from soldier life to civilian

life. Often this transition is too difficult, and children drop out of school. Since they lack the skills required in a civilian economy, many are recruited back into the armed forces due to a lack of opportunities (Hill and Langholtz 2003). Abandonment and separation are also important issues because child soldiers first lose their families and communities when they become soldiers whether they were abducted or recruited, and then they lose the companionship of fellow troops when they return to civilian life. Other symptoms of adjustment disorder in child soldiers include nightmares, epileptic fits, alcohol abuse, and an inability to form trusting relationships with others (Dunson 2002). Girls who have been sexually abused, forced into marriage, or have become mothers typically have more problems adjusting back into their community, because traditionally they are ostracized from societies for these types of situations even if the girl is not at fault. The severity of a child's adjustment disorder will depend on the length of their service with an armed force and their experiences as a child soldier.

Other mental-health problems can include a type of *personality disorder*. Since child soldiers usually have been exposed to violence, imposed political ideology, and a different set of morals over a long period of time, they develop alternative behaviors like those of a personality disorder. For example, they may lose the ability to empathize with others; behave in an aggressive, militaristic, or manipulative manner; view violent behavior as a normal practice; or develop a vendetta mentality (Hill and Langholtz 2003). However, since personality disorders are genetic with environmental triggers and usually are not diagnosed until late adolescence or early adulthood, it is difficult to determine whether the behaviors of former child soldiers constitute an actual personality disorder (Van Arsdale 2005). In addition, these behavioral problems could be properly addressed through effective rehabilitation and reintegration processes, so they could be short-lived in comparison with the lifelong struggle characteristic of actual personality disorders.

Eating disorders and depression are other issues related to mental health. While fighting in the LRA, many children have little to eat, and when they are freed, they often eat too little or too much (Dunson 2002). Depression often occurs among former child soldiers who begin feeling worthless and ashamed of their actions as soldiers (Machel 2001). In order to help children overcome these mental-health issues, they need a social-support network that includes family members (when possible), community members, and social-service agencies that will help them in the rehabilitation and reintegration process.

Returning child soldiers, however, may not be able to obtain support from their families for several different reasons. Many children have lost their family members and relatives due to death or relocation. Children without family risk becoming street children, which makes them more vulnerable to being recruited back into the armed forces. Or a child could be reunited with his/her family in a refugee camp, which has its own dangers. Families that have stayed in their communities often experience material and economic devastation, which places additional stress on the family and could affect their ability to support a returning child soldier (Hill and Langholtz 2003). Families might reject their children out of fear. Sometimes a child's family misinterprets his or her post-traumatic stress symptoms and comes to believe that their child is mad or possessed by spirits of the people he or she have killed. Children may also be viewed as contaminated because a spirit could come out at anytime, making a child act unpredictably or be uncontrollable or even harm others (Boyden 2003). Family support is essential because even one stable caretaker in a child's life can significantly improve his or her healing process (Hill and Langholtz 2003). When a child's family is not available, the community becomes even more important to a child's social-support network.

Communities are often hesitant to accept returning child soldiers. They worry that the practice of child soldiering will lead to the moral degradation of society and thus are wary of welcoming back children whose morals have been compromised during war. In addition, child soldiering also breaches the adult notions of what is acceptable childhood behavior. In most societies, war is viewed as part of the adult sphere, and when children enter it, they disrupt the distribution of power among generations. Many fear that once children have tasted the power and freedom of the gun, they will be reluctant to respect the authority of adults in the community (Boyden 2003). Communities may reject former child soldiers or accept them only slowly because community members have often witnessed the atrocities that these children have committed in the past. LRA commanders often forced children to conduct horrible acts in an attempt to break their bond with the community, so that they would not be able to return home if they did escape (Hill and Langholtz 2003).

### **What Works: Rehabilitation and Reintegration**

Due to the mental-health needs of child soldiers and the concerns of the community and family, the rehabilitation and reintegration process for child soldiers is a sensitive issue, which must be handled with care to make sure that the needs of both the children and the community are adequately addressed. Humanitarian-aid agencies have established certain steps that can successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate child soldiers. Once children have escaped or been rescued from the armed forces, as in Uganda, children must immediately be sent to interim care centers (ICCs), where they receive medical treatment and are assigned a social worker. ICCs are a safe place for children to stay, because armed forces can not re-recruit them as child soldiers, and they offer a place removed from military and community life where children can begin to readapt to their identities as children or adolescents. Children spend about six weeks in ICCs, during which they are provided trauma counseling to help them recover from post-traumatic stress disorder. Children also receive formal and informal educational and recreational activities that help them learn how to interact in a civilian society and how to express themselves without aggression or violence. For example, in Uganda aid workers use traditional dancing and music to help children talk things out and emotionally heal from their ordeals. Family reunification is the most important part of reintegration and rehabilitation, so at the ICCs all attempts are made to find the child's family. Family reintegration can help the children build their self-esteem as well as the trust of adults. If a child's family is found, a sensitization campaign prepares the community to accept the former combatants. If a child's family is not found, he or she may live in a group home or be taken care of by other members of his or her community.

During reintegration, communities should be informed of the returning children's needs, and local cultures need to be respected and incorporated whenever possible. Most child soldiers interviewed desired finding and reconciling with their families, returning to a life free of suffering, getting an education, and providing a home for their own offspring if applicable. In Uganda, children most feared being re-abducted or being forced to return to the LRA. A network of community members such as the family members, teachers, healthcare workers, religious leaders, and other authorities should be a part of the reintegration process. Sometimes video cameras have been used to send recorded messages back and forth between children and their families to help in the reintegration process. Traditional healers have also been used to help communities forgive the former child soldiers for their atrocities by performing ritual healing ceremonies, such as burning the child's former clothes and giving them new clothes (Hill and

Langholtz 2003). Acholi leaders have also granted amnesty to former LRA child soldiers based on their traditional value of justice that favors reconciliation over reprisal (Boyden 2003). Children must be enrolled in educational or vocational training programs, which build a child's confidence and help them cope with stress, develop supportive peer-group relationships and positive social interactions, and regain their identity. Once reintegrated into society, a child's support network can help children work through their feelings. Humanitarian organizations must stay in contact with communities and perform follow-up visits to ensure that the child's mental, emotional, and physical needs are being met (Hill and Langholtz 2003). One very successful community program has been the Concerned Parent Association in Uganda, which welcomes children back into their communities, offers unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation, and provides care for children who have no families (Machel 2001). Several international organizations such as Save the Children, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund, formerly United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund), Jesuit Refugee Service, and World Vision are making great strides to ensure that former child soldiers receive the tools they need to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate into society.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Because history has demonstrated that war is almost inevitable, children will probably always be at risk of being recruited as or forced to become child soldiers. In the last three decades, many efforts have been made in the fight against this process; however, the international community needs to do more to prevent the use of child soldiers across the globe, especially in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa. The different conventions presented at the beginning of this paper are a good start, but governments have demonstrated that their commitment to a treaty does not mean that they will cease to use child soldiers or take legal action against other armed forces within their borders that use child soldiers. Therefore, I recommend that the following measures be taken to diminish or prevent the future use of child soldiers in armed conflict:

- Support should be given to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and other international organizations that are attempting to eradicate the use of child soldiers.
- The Optional Protocol should be amended in order to illegalize the use of all children under the age of 18 years in any governmental or rebel armed force, and all states should sign and ratify the amended Optional Protocol (Machel 2005).
- Western governments and the United Nations Security Council need to more stringently enforce the conventions by suspending military aid and imposing sanctions on governments that use child soldiers in their militaries.
- The international media should name and shame armed forces that use child soldiers.
- The International Criminal Court needs to prosecute governments and rebel forces that use child soldiers in armed conflict.

- Governments should reduce unemployment and improve access to education, so that children are provided with more opportunities and are less likely to be recruited into an armed force (Crawley 2004).
- Governments should establish reliable birth registration systems, so that the age of a soldier can be confirmed.
- Both military and non-state actors should be trained on the issues of child rights (Machel 2001).

If these recommendations were effectively carried out, child soldiering would decrease globally. Some progress is being made because in 2004 the International Criminal Court announced that it was initiating investigations of child soldiering in Uganda and the Congo (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004). Of course, the only way to totally eliminate the practice of child soldiering and protect all children from armed conflict is to ensure peace throughout the world. Thus, at the broadest level, the international community should continue to advocate peace in hopes that one day it will be achieved.

## References Cited

African Union

2005 "List of Countries which Have Signed, Ratified/Acceded to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child." Electronic document. [www.africa-union.org/home/Welcome.htm](http://www.africa-union.org/home/Welcome.htm). Accessed April 2, 2005. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Africa: The African Union.

Anderson, Rory E., Fortunate Sewankambo, and Kathy Vandergrift

2004 *Pawns of Politics: Children, Conflict, and Peace in Northern Uganda*. Federal Way, Washington: World Vision.

Boyden, Jo

2003 "The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What Do Adults Have to Fear?" *Peace and Conflict, Journal of Peace Psychology* 9 (4): 343–362.

Brett, Rachel, and Irma Specht

2004 *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner.

Broekaert, Erin, Els De Temmerman, Ilse Derlyn, and Gilberte Schuyten

2004 "Post-traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers." *The Lancet* 363 (9412): 861–863.

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

2004 *Child Soldiers Global Report 2004*. Electronic document: [www.child-soldiers.org/resources/global-reports](http://www.child-soldiers.org/resources/global-reports). Accessed January 10, 2005. London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

2005a "International Standards." Electronic document: [www.child-soldiers.org/resources/international-standards](http://www.child-soldiers.org/resources/international-standards). Accessed January 10, 2005. London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

2005b "Regions." Electronic document: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/regions/>. Accessed January 10, 2005. London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

2005c "Some Facts." Electronic document: [www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/some-facts](http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/some-facts). Accessed January 10, 2005. London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

Cohen, Marc J., Thomas Marchione, and Ellen Messer

2005 Summary of Draft Review from *Conflict: A Cause and Effect of Hunger, International Food Policy Research Institute*. Electronic document: [www.ennonline.net/fex/12/rs9.html](http://www.ennonline.net/fex/12/rs9.html). Accessed January 15, 2005. Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute.

Crawley, Mike

2004 "New Push to Stop Child Soldiers." *Christian Science Monitor* 96 (248): 6–7, November 18, 2004.

Druba, Volker

2002 "The Problem of Child Soldiers." *International Review of Education* 48 (3–4): 271–277.

Dunson, Donald H.

2002 "The Child Soldiers of Gusco." *America* 186 (2): 12-16.

Ehrenreich, Rosa

1997 *The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*. Edited by Joanne Mariner, Peter Takirambudde, Yodon Thonden, and Lois Whitman. Electronic document: <http://hrw.org/reports97/uganda/#I.%20SUMMARY%20AND>. Accessed January 23, 2005. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Estroff, Sue

1993 "Identity, Disability, and Schizophrenia: The Problem of Chronicity." In *Knowledge, Power, and Practice*. Edited by Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock. Pages 247–286. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Farmer, Paul

2003 *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Hill, Karen, and Harvey Langholtz

2002 "Rehabilitation Programs for African Child Soldiers." *Peace Review* 15 (3): 279–285.

Janzen, John M.

2002 *The Social Fabric of Health: An Introduction to Medical Anthropology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

Machel, Graca

2001 *The Impact of War on Children: A Review Progress Since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. New York: Palgrave Publishing Company.

2005 Selected highlights from *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Electronic document: [www.un.org/rights/introdu.htm](http://www.un.org/rights/introdu.htm). Accessed January 15, 2005. New York: The United Nations.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

2005 "Status of Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child." Electronic document: [www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/status-crc.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/status-crc.htm). Accessed April 2, 2005. New York: The United Nations.

Smith, Gary

2002 "Child Soldiers and the Lord's Resistance Army." *America* 190 (11): 13–15.

Teklu, Tesfaye, Joachim von Braun, and Patrick Webb

1998 *Famine in Africa: Causes, Responses, and Prevention*. Baltimore, Maryland: The International Food Policy Research Institute.

Tshitereke, Clarence

2003 "On the Origins of War in Africa." *African Security Review* 12 (2): 81–91.

Tuchman-Mathews, Jessica

1995 "Demographic and Environmental Forces." *Peaceworks* 4: 10–12.

United Nations

2005 "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict." Electronic document: [www.child-soldiers.org/document\\_get.php?id=674](http://www.child-soldiers.org/document_get.php?id=674). Accessed April 2, 2005. New York: General Assembly of the United Nations, updated May 25, 2000.

Van Arsdale, Peter

2005 "Paul Farmer's Theory of Structural Violence." Class lecture. Mental Health, Human Rights, and Post-Conflict Development (INTS 4953). Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado. January 21, 2005.

Waltz, Kenneth

1979 *Theory of International Relations*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.