

# Armed & Underage

Thousands of children are being forced to serve as soldiers around the world. And in the African nation of Somalia, the U.S. might even be helping pay their salaries.

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN IN MOGADISHU, SOMALIA

**Young recruits**  
for one of  
Somalia's  
Islamic rebel  
groups



**P**rowling the streets of Mogadishu, the shattered capital of Somalia, Awil Salah Osman looks like all the other boys with torn-up clothes, thin limbs, and eyes eager for attention.

But 12-year-old Awil is different in two ways: He is shouldering an automatic, fully loaded rifle; and he is working for a military that is substantially armed and financed by the United States.

It is well-known that Somalia's radical Islamist insurgents are plucking children off soccer fields and turning them into fighters, just as rebel groups in a number of African countries and elsewhere in the world do.

But Awil is not a rebel. He is working for Somalia's government. The U.S. and other Western nations support the fragile Somali regime, which is battling an Islamic

insurgency, as part of the counterterrorism strategy for the region.

According to human-rights groups and the United Nations, the Somali government is using hundreds of children, some as young as 9, on the front lines.

While the number of conflicts involving child soldiers has dropped since 2004 from 27 to 15, human-rights experts estimate that more than 200,000 children worldwide are still being used as combatants, usually against their will. And it isn't just boys: Girls are often pressed into duty as cooks or messengers. Many are subjected to sexual abuse, including rape.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, a human-rights group based in London, defines a child soldier as anyone under the age of 18 who is a member of government armed forces or any other armed

group. (The U.S. allows voluntary militia enlistment with parental consent at age 17

In much of the world, particularly in unstable countries, when conflict breaks out, children are quickly swept up (*see* *ma* pages 8-9).

## The Perfect Weapon

In some countries, hunger and poverty drive parents to sell their children into slavery. What's more, children are often considered the perfect weapon: They are easily manipulated, intensely loyal, fearless, and a most important, in endless supply.

"Child soldiers are ideal," a military commander from the African nation of Chad told Human Rights Watch. "They don't complain, they don't expect to be paid—if you tell them to kill, they kill."

The use of child soldiers is "widespread



and very persistent,” says Lucia Withers of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

It's not a new problem. The Germans drafted adolescents when they got desperate toward the end of World War II. So did Iran, which used boys as young as 12 to clear minefields during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.

Today, the Asian nation of Myanmar (also known as Burma) has one of the world's highest rates of child-soldier recruitment. Thousands of boys, some as young as 10, are purchased, kidnapped, or terrorized into joining the country's army.

In Colombia, approximately 8,000 children are fighting in armed rebel groups battling the U.S.-backed government. The rebels have used boys and girls as combatants and spies, and to plant mines.

In the Philippines and southern Thailand, children are being recruited by rebel groups.

In Afghanistan, there have been reports of children being used as soldiers or suicide bombers by the Taliban and other insurgents. And in the Middle East, Palestinian children in the West Bank and Gaza have been sent into Israel as suicide bombers.

#### **Worst Offender: Africa**

In Africa, the problem is especially severe: In one country after another, conflicts have morphed from cause-driven struggles, like ending colonial rule, to criminal drives led by warlords whose goals are nothing more than plunder, greed, and power.

In Congo (also known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and formerly Zaire), a civil war that started in 1998 to oust the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko is now a free-for-all among rebel groups and the government. Those groups are fighting among themselves

for a share of the country's timber, copper, gold, diamonds, and other resources. All sides have relied on child soldiers.

Child soldiers are also being used in conflicts in Sudan (both southern Sudan and in Darfur), Chad, the Central African Republic, and Somalia, and until recently also in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.

According to the U.N., the Somali government remains among the “most persistent violators” of sending children into war.

Somali officials concede that they haven't done the proper vetting. Because the U.S. is helping to pay Somali soldiers, it is possible that the money for some child soldiers may have come from American taxpayers.

Carolyn Vadino, a State Department

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# Child Soldiers Around the World

**Child soldiers are used mostly by armed rebel groups, but in Somalia, Chad, and Myanmar, they are used in the government's forces too.**

spokeswoman, says that Washington is pressing the Somali government "to make certain that they do not use child soldiers," and that the U.S. is taking "appropriate steps" to verify that the Somali soldiers it helps pay are 18 or older.

Part of the problem is that few young people in Somalia have birth certificates. One official said the U.S. has asked doctors to look over young Somali recruits before they board airplanes for training outside the country.

All across Somalia, smooth, hairless faces peek out from behind enormous guns. In blown-out buildings, children load bullets twice the size of their fingers. In neighborhoods by the sea, they run checkpoints and stop four-by-four trucks, though they can barely see over their hoods.

Somali government officials admit that in the rush to build a standing army, they didn't discriminate. "I'll be honest," says a Somali government official. "We were trying to find anyone who could carry a gun."

Awil struggles to carry his. It weighs about 10 pounds. The strap digs into his bony shoulders, and he is constantly shifting it from one side to the other with a grimace.

Sometimes he gets a helping hand from his comrade Ahmed Hassan, who is 15. Ahmed says he was sent to Uganda more than two years ago for army training, when he was 12, though his claim could not be verified.

## Lost Generation

Children do not have many options in Somalia. After the government collapsed in 1991, an entire generation was let loose on the streets. Most children have never been in a classroom or played in a park. Their growth has been stunted by conflict-induced famines, their psyches damaged by all the killings they have witnessed.

"What do I enjoy?" Awil asks. "I enjoy the gun."

The war has left him, like many other children here, hard beyond his years. He was abandoned by parents who fled to Yemen, he says, and joined a militia when he was about 7. He now lives with other government soldiers in a filthy house littered with cigarette boxes and smelly clothes. Awil doesn't know exactly how old he is,



but his commander says he's around 12.

Awil is paid about \$1.50 a day, but only every now and then, like most soldiers. His bed is a fly-covered mattress that he shares with two other child soldiers, Ali Deeq, 10, and Abdulaziz, 13.

"He should be in school," says Awil's commander, Abdisalam Abdillahi. "But there is no school."

Ali Sheikh Yassin of the Elman Peace and



Human Rights Center in Mogadishu that 80 percent of the rebel troops and 80 percent of government troops are children. The leading rebel group, which has links with Al Qaeda, the Islamic terrorist group behind the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the United States, is called *Al Shabab*, which means youth in Arabic.

"These kids can be so easily brainwashed," says Ali. "They don't even have to be p.



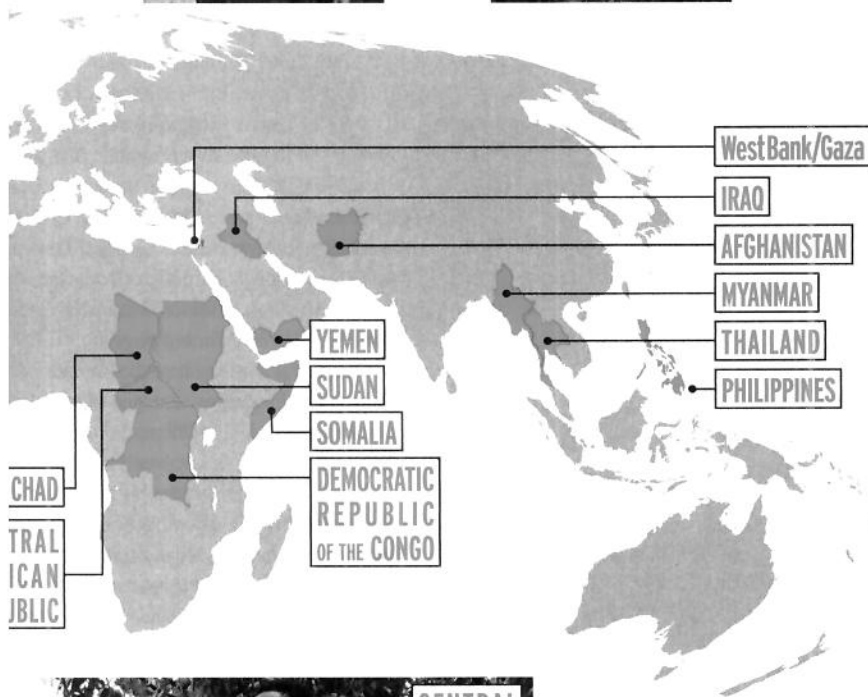
IRAQ



AFGHANISTAN



SOMALIA



West Bank/Gaza

IRAQ

AFGHANISTAN

MYANMAR

THAILAND

PHILIPPINES

YEMEN

SUDAN

SOMALIA

DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC  
OF THE CONGO

CHAD

CENTRAL  
AFRICAN  
REPUBLIC



THAILAND



CENTRAL  
AFRICAN  
REPUBLIC



PHILIPPINES



MYANMAR

PHOTO: COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS; THE NEW YORK TIMES

The international justice system is catching up with those who use children as soldiers. In 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone convicted three commanders on charges related to child recruitment. And Congolese warlord faces charges at the International Criminal Court in the Hague. But perhaps most significant is the going trial in the Hague, a city in the Netherlands, of former Liberian President

Charles Taylor. The trial made headlines over the summer when supermodel Naomi Campbell testified about uncut diamonds she received, allegedly as a gift from Taylor, who is also accused of sponsoring a brutal rebel group that routinely forced children into combat during wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone from 1989 to 2003.

“The former president of a country being prosecuted for his role in the use of child

soldiers is very, very significant,” says Neil Boothby, a Columbia University professor who studies child soldiers. “It sends a message across Africa that you could get punished if you’re involved with this.” ●

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