A logo of a suit up

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**Agenda: Combating the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Armed Conflicts and Fostering Rehabilitation Practices for Underage Combatants**

Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations General Assembly, where you will partake in fervent debate on global issues and navigate your way through the complexities of international policy. As the representative organ of the United Nations, we strive to facilitate collaboration between nations while emphasising the importance of human rights, civilian well-being and sustainability.

According to UN News, the recruitment of child soldiers is on the rise in 2025 despite multiple global commitments. Thousands of children are being recruited into the military and forced to put their lives on the line, scarring them forever with the trauma of conflict. We strongly urge you to approach the agenda with diligence, sound judgement and empathy in light of the fact that the lives of future generations lie in the hands of the current. The mental and physical devastation they undergo is unfathomably large, and the forthcoming committee sessions will encourage you to think deeply not only about the atrocities faced by child soldiers but also the potential ways in which they can be safely reintegrated into society. In other words, this MUN will play a vital part in shaping you to be responsible global citizens and the forces of change this world desperately needs.

This guide is intended to give you some rudiments of this vast topic and is not exhaustive. We look forward to seeing your unique ideas, unwavering diplomacy and well-reasoned solutions in committee. Needless to mention, there lies room for creativity and tenacity beyond your scrutiny of what has taken place. Feel free to reach out to us if you have any questions or concerns, for we are extremely honoured and ready to serve as the members of your Executive Board.

All the best!

UNGA Executive Board

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Introduction to the Agenda

The term “child soldier” broadly covers any person under 18 who is part of an armed force or group in any capacity, not only as fighters but also as porters, scouts, cooks, or spies.

UNICEF notes that between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children – many under the age of 15 – were verified as used in armed conflict and that the actual number is probably much greater. These children, girls and boys alike, endure extreme exploitation and trauma that ordinary definitions of “soldier” cannot fully describe. They may be abducted or coerced into joining armed groups, or sometimes join to escape poverty, protect family members, or seek a better life. Armed actors exploit these children for their obedience, fearlessness, or as cheap labour. UNICEF also emphasises that girls often face sexual exploitation in addition to combat duties. Regardless of how they become involved, ‘voluntarily’ or not, the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is a grave violation of child rights and international law. Once involved, they face appalling dangers and abuses.

Take a look at some of the multifarious aspects underneath this agenda:

**Types of organisations** - Child soldiers are recruited by both governmental armed forces and non-state actors. This disturbing act takes place globally and has been documented in armed conflicts across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, etc. Sierra Leone’s civil war (1991-2002), the FARC guerrillas’ mass child-soldier release in Colombia and the activities of Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army are just some of the ways in which children have been exploited for the motives of states and non-state groups in the past. Furthermore, an article on Balkan Insight estimates that around 2000 children fought in the 1992- 95 Bosnian War. A total of 661 soldiers between the ages of 10 and 18 were killed in the war and countless survivors still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Non-state actors such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka and al-Shabaab in Somalia are prominent groups that recruit children. Some organisations have, however, stopped the use of child soldiers, often as a result of signing agreements. For example, by 2017, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines released almost 2000 children from its ranks.

**Types of recruitment:**

* Violence and coercion: Many children are forcibly abducted or coerced by armed groups due to their physical vulnerability and since they can be easily intimidated. Victims of kidnapping are threatened or physically forced into service.
* Socio-economic factors: Extreme poverty, lack of education or jobs, and the breakdown of family structures can make joining an armed group seem like the only option for survival. In their book *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, Scott Gates and Simon Reich have identified that ‘children are more likely to become child soldiers if one or both parents are dead’. Militias often exploit these facts by promising food, money, or a sense of belonging to such children.
* Protection and ideology: In some conflict zones, families send children to armed groups to keep them safe, or children choose to join armed factions out of loyalty or in response to propaganda. Religious factors may also come into play. For example, parents are reported to have volunteered their children to join ISIS, encouraging them to take part in militant activities and become martyrs.

**Physical effects** - A multitude of physical abuses await the children who are recruited by armed groups. They range from appalling initiation ceremonies, hazardous labour and direct infliction of pain to forced participation in combat, substance abuse and gender- based violence. While girls are disproportionately targeted in the scenario of sexual exploitation, an article on Save the Children notes that sexual violence was strategically perpetrated against boys in conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, etc. largely in the past few years. The outcome is often lasting disability, chronic injury and even death. Into the bargain, the living conditions of child soldiers are horrifying. The lack of a nutritious diet and sanitation poses significant health risks to these individuals, thereby increasing the death and impairment toll of child soldiers.

**Mental effects** - While in armed groups, children may witness or commit atrocities and they often endure malnutrition, disease, and harsh living conditions. These experiences inflict profound psychological trauma: post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression are common among former child soldiers. A study in 2004 done on Ugandan former child soldiers reported that 97% of those who participated reported post-traumatic stress reactions of clinical importance. Child soldiers are often also given drugs to decrease their fear and increase their prowess in battle, which in turn can lead to paranoid psychosis, changes in personality and depression. Even after the conflict ends, returning children face stigma and rejection in their home communities. Families may fear and distrust them, especially if they were forced to commit violence. Successful reintegration requires addressing these deep wounds.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration Practices

Children that are taken out of armed conflict are usually in a traumatised state and ignorantly placing them back into society can lead to recidivism or reversion to hazardous behaviour.

While they vary in their effectiveness, there exist numerous rehabilitation strategies supported by UNICEF, UN missions and NGOs which include:

* **Immediate support:** Children are received in Demobilization Centres or safe homes as soon as they are rescued where they are given medical care, psychological first aid and basic necessities. UNICEF partners with governments and community groups to provide a “safe place” for children who exit armed forces to live upon their release.
* **Family Tracing and Reunification:** Reuniting the children with family helps restore a sense of normalcy. Efforts are made by organisations such as UNICEF to identify and locate the child’s parents or relatives in tandem with the provision of immediate support. Alternative care in the form of foster families or communal care is arranged in the event that the family is unable to be located.
* **Psychosocial and Emotional Support:** Therapy, counseling, and peer support groups help address trauma with studies showing peer support and acceptance to be crucial factors in recovering mental health. Specialized care is provided for children who were sexually abused or witnessed extreme violence. Programs often include community leaders or traditional healers to reduce stigma.
* **Education and Vocational Training**: Reintegration plans typically include schooling or technical skills. Vocational training offers older youth a chance to learn trades. Access to education not only builds skills but also provides a beacon of hope as children are brought back to the normalcy of everyday life.
* **Community Outreach**: Communities must be open to receiving the incoming children for successful reintegration. Workshops and awareness campaigns are held so that locals can understand that the child was a victim and not a criminal. Research conducted on Sierra Leone’s former child soldiers show that communities which accept returning children tend to see lower rates of delinquency and better mental health outcomes for the children themselves.

International Law and Standards

Several international treaties and protocols explicitly seek to protect children from being used in warfare. Key legal instruments include:

* **Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):** As the world’s most ratified human rights treaty, the CRC obliges States to shield children from armed conflict. Article 38 of the CRC requires governments to ensure that “persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities,” and to refrain from recruiting any person under 15 into their armed forces. Thus, countries party to the CRC commit to a 15-year minimum age for combat roles. The CRC also emphasises care for children affected by war (Article 39), mandating that States promote the “physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration” of child victims of armed conflict.
* **Optional Protocol to the CRC on Armed Conflict (2000):** This Protocol strengthens child protection by setting 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and military service. It requires States to take measures to prevent under-18s’ recruitment by their armed forces (except in purely voluntary circumstances, with safeguards) and forbids non-state armed groups from recruiting any under-18s. Under the Protocol, some Parties have even committed to stop voluntary recruitment under 18.
* **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols (1977):** International humanitarian law (IHL) prohibits the enlistment and use of children in warfare. Article 77 of Additional Protocol I and Article 4(3)(c) of Additional Protocol II forbid all recruitment of children under 15 into hostilities. These rules apply in both international and non-international conflicts. In practice, this bans any deliberate use of young teenagers in combat zones.
* **International Criminal Law:** The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the “conscripting or enlisting of children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces or groups” as a war crime. This provides a legal basis to prosecute commanders who force children to fight.
* **Paris Principles (2007):** Adopted by 85 governments and organisations, the Paris Principles and Commitments complement binding law with practical guidance. They call on States and armed groups to prevent unlawful recruitment and to support the release, reintegration, and recovery of children who have been used in conflict. The Principles emphasise education, vocational training, psychosocial support, and community integration as vital elements of rehabilitation.
* **Other Instruments:** The International Labour Organisation’s Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) (1999) includes forced or compulsory recruitment of children as a worst form of labour, implicitly covering child soldiers. In many countries, national laws have also been reformed to criminalise child recruitment and to raise the army enlistment age to 18.

Notable actions taken by the United Nations

* **United Nations Treaties and Frameworks:** The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict (2000) set age limits and obligations for governments to follow. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols (1977) explicitly ban the recruitment of under-15s. In 2007, the Paris Principles and Commitments provided non-binding guidelines to prevent recruitment and to support release and reintegration. Many countries have also enshrined these principles in national legislation or military policy.
* **Security Council Resolutions:** The UN Security Council has repeatedly condemned the use of child soldiers. The UN has identified and publicly listed armed groups (and in some cases, national armies) that recruit children, encouraging targeted action.
* **Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) Initiatives**: Many peace agreements and UN peacekeeping mandates now include DDR programs for child combatants. UN peace operations in the Central African Republic, DRC, South Sudan and elsewhere actively support DDR processes. For instance, peacekeeping forces have established child-friendly demobilisation centres and worked with local authorities to repatriate child soldiers. The New Agenda for Peace (UN 2023) and related DDR pledges emphasise including communities and youth in DDR planning.
* **UNICEF and UN Agencies:** UNICEF leads child protection in humanitarian crises. It publishes annual reports on children in armed conflict, supports DDR through funding and technical help, and advocates globally. For example, UNICEF’s partnerships have helped absorb thousands of ex-combatants into schools and communities.

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