

**ORPHAN-CAUSING ISSUE: CHILD SOLDIERING**

*by Amber Cassady, orphan advocate*

*Written for World Orphans when Amber was a student at Texas A&M University*

Throughout the world's history politicians, diplomats, artists, athletes, musicians, pastors, scholars and people of all walks of life have all reinforced that children are perhaps the most valuable investments for a brighter future. Indian political leader Mohandes Ghandi once articulated his belief in the younger generation in this way, "If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children."<sup>i</sup> Children represent hope, life, and potential, making them instruments of peace worth defending. As former president of Standford University, Ray L. Wilbur, puts it, "The potential possibilities of any child are the most intriguing and stimulating in all creation."<sup>ii</sup> They have significant purpose in creation as a whole and as individuals. Pablo Casals, a cellist and conductor, views children as unique miracles, "The child must know that he is a miracle, that since the beginning of the world there hasn't been, and until the end of the world there will not be, another child like him."<sup>iii</sup> But more than any other human being on the earth, Jesus demonstrated in actions and not solely through words that He loves and values children more than the world ever could. Even when Jesus' own disciples felt that Jesus was too important to spend time with the little ones, He replied, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14 NIV) Jesus demonstrates that children are worth taking His time with when He was amongst hundreds vying for His attention.

Regretfully there are those in the world who hold the opposite view. Instead of loving children and training them in the way they should go, children are treated as mere devices that are less than human in a world of corruption and violence. This is the story of a child soldier. They are not looked upon as God's treasures but as combatants for wars led by dark hearts seeking power. Children are abducted and brainwashed to be militant forces purposed by nothing more than stealing, killing and destroying whatever and whoever they are commanded to- even if that means their own family members. Corrupt leaders manipulate young minds that have not developed enough to understand fully what they are being asked to do. Many are not yet teenagers as children at a tender age of just seven years old have been taken as soldiers.<sup>iv</sup> Not every child soldier is forcibly recruited, as some will volunteer themselves when they see their peers receiving food and protection. Why would anyone, much less a child, subject himself or herself to this kind of life? When you take a step back to assess the types of situations that these children are coming from you can see why it easy for them to be convinced. Many of the children that fall prey to a life of soldiering are extremely poor, without family, live in areas of conflict, have limited access to education, or a combination of these factors. According to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers there are up to **86 countries and territories that participate in recruiting more than 500,000 children under the age of 18 for hostile purposes.**<sup>v</sup> And of the 9 countries that are most known for child soldiering, 8 of them are receiving military assistance from the United States. These countries include Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda.<sup>vi</sup>

**Girls are not exempt** from the horrors of child soldiering, as the heads of these armies do not see gender lines as a limitation in their quest for control. Boys and girls alike will serve not only



as front-line combatants but also as cooks, guards, sex slaves, spies, suicide bombers, and mine sweepers.<sup>vii</sup> Girls make up a larger percentage of child soldiers than one might expect. About a third of the child soldiers in countries like Nepal, Uganda, and Sri Lanka are in fact females. In some circumstances the young girls are given to military commanders as “wives.”<sup>viii</sup>

Terrorized and trained to follow orders, the child soldiers murder many and jeopardize their own life in the process. In the last decade, 2 million children have been killed, and 6 million are seriously injured or disabled because of war and conflict.<sup>x</sup> Beyond the physical detriments, the children suffer from severe emotional and psychological damage. From brutal initiation and punishments to harsh training and torturous practices, you can imagine the toll that is taken on any individual’s heart and mind, much less a child’s. It is not outside of the commanders’ methods to also give the children drugs and alcohol in order to break down their mental barriers to the atrocities they are made to take part in.<sup>x</sup> Some of the effects from the trauma that they experience usually include but are not limited to night terrors, excessive aggression and substance abuse. Below is one girl’s testimony of the scarring memories she has of another boy when they were child soldiers in the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda.

“One boy tried to escape but he was caught. His hands were tied and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before; we were from the same village. I refused to do it and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it... I see him in my dreams and he is saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying.”<sup>xi</sup>

Accounts like this are all too common, and the reintegration of child soldiers back into society, given they are ever able to escape or be rescued, is a whole other battle in itself. Therefore, it is necessary that rehabilitation programs include psychosocial care and recovery in order for the process to be successful.<sup>xii</sup>

One of the longest wars involving child soldiering has been taking place in Uganda over the last 23 years. Millions of innocent citizens are caught in the middle as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) fail to ever make peace or come to a resolution. The origins of the war date back to the 1980’s when a woman named Alice Lakwena claimed that the Holy Spirit had instructed her to overthrow the Ugandan government because of injustice towards the Acholi people. After she was exiled, a man named Joseph Kony took over claiming to be her cousin and transformed her rebel army into the LRA. He did not receive the same amount of support that Alice had which lead him to abducting and indoctrinating children to become troops in his army. About 90% of the LRA consists of children as soldiers. In recent years, the conflict has finally been brought into the limelight through an organization called The Invisible Children after a long period of being overlooked by most of the world. Governments began to take notice and in 2001 the US Patriot Act declared the LRA a terrorist group. The first American legislation passed regarding the conflict was the Northern Uganda Crisis Response Act in 2004. International pressure has instigated negotiation between the LRA and the GoU on multiple occasions, and while some progress has been made, movement is too slow for lasting resolution and thousands of children remain imprisoned to a life of fighting and fear. Let us not settle for such a fate for thousands of God’s children and instead take a stand for their finding liberty, hope and a new life in their ultimate advocate- Christ Jesus our Lord. Join in with those already fighting so that these young soldiers no longer have to.

## Organizations fighting for the Child Soldier:

Invisible Children- <http://www.invisiblechildren.com>

Amnesty International- <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/children-s-rights/child-soldiers>

World Vision- <http://www.worldvision.org/content.nsf/learn/globalissues-child-soldiers>

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers: <http://www.child-soldiers.org>

Compassion. <http://www.compassion.com/child-advocacy/find-your-voice/famous-quotes/default.htm>. 27 August, 2011.

<sup>i</sup>Compassion.<http://www.compassion.com/child-advocacy/find-your-voice/famous-quotes/default.htm>. 27 August, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Think Exist.

[http://www.thinkexist.com/quotation/the\\_child\\_must\\_know\\_that\\_he\\_is\\_a\\_miracle-that/148959.html](http://www.thinkexist.com/quotation/the_child_must_know_that_he_is_a_miracle-that/148959.html). 27 August, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> World Vision. [http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day\\_img\\_child\\_soldier](http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day_img_child_soldier). 24 January, 2008

<sup>v</sup> Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Child Soldiers Global Report. Rep. 2008. Print.

<sup>vi</sup> World Vision. [www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day\\_img\\_child\\_soldier](http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day_img_child_soldier). 24 January, 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> World Vision. [www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day\\_img\\_child\\_soldier](http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day_img_child_soldier). 24 January, 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> Human Rights Watch.<http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/12/03/facts-about-child-soldiers>. 3 December, 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> World Vision. [www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day\\_img\\_child\\_soldier](http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/wvususfo.nsf/stable/child-soldiers?open&lid=childsoldiers&lpos=day_img_child_soldier). 24 January, 2008.

<sup>x</sup> "IRIN | In-Depth: Child Soldiers | AFRICA: Too Small to Be Fighting in Anyone's War | AFRICA | Children." IRIN • Humanitarian News and Analysis from Africa, Asia and the Middle East - Updated Daily. Web. 28 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=24>>.

<sup>xi</sup> "IRIN | In-Depth: Child Soldiers | AFRICA: Too Small to Be Fighting in Anyone's War | AFRICA | Children." IRIN • Humanitarian News and Analysis from Africa, Asia and the Middle East - Updated Daily. Web. 28 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=24>>.

<sup>xii</sup> "IRIN | In-Depth: Child Soldiers | AFRICA: Too Small to Be Fighting in Anyone's War | AFRICA | Children." IRIN • Humanitarian News and Analysis from Africa, Asia and the Middle East - Updated Daily. Web. 28 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=24>>.