

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF CHILD SOLDIERING

Child soldiering has indeed become a disturbing characteristic of modern conflict but it is not a recent phenomenon. According to numerous accounts, the involvement of children in wars has a long history. As clearly indicated by its name, many children participated in the Children's Crusade of 1212; in fact, large numbers of its 30,000 child crusaders were sold into slavery and many more drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. In modern history, it has been suggested that Napoleon's army in the early 19th century featured a number of twelve year-old boy combatants.¹⁶ More recently, stories of boys lying about their age in order to join the army as a sign of patriotism during the First and Second World Wars are widespread.

This historical precedent notwithstanding, the post Second World War period has become known as the 'era of the child soldier'.¹⁷ This is mainly due to the radical transformations in the nature of armed conflict, which has not only led to the increase in the number of children involved in conflicts, but has also altered the nature of their contribution to the conflict.

The post-Cold War period has been marked by a dramatic change in the nature of armed conflict globally as most wars are now intra-state rather than inter-state. This has resulted in the blurring of the distinction between combatants and civilians as communities are now at the heart of warfare. Furthermore, these conflicts tend to linger with escalations and de-escalations thereby prolonging violence and instability (with benefits to some of the participants), and this, in turn, leads to an increased casualty in adult men. This factor encourages warring factions to turn to children to fill these vacant military roles.

Modern conflicts are characterised by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as grenades and AK-47s as opposed to the nuclear and biological weapons of the Cold War era. The development of the light weapons trade "takes the child soldier from the margins to the very heart of modern conflicts".¹⁸ An AK-47 or M16 transforms a ten or twelve year-old child into "an effective instrument of destruction".¹⁹ This is because an AK-47, for

example, which fires thirty bullets per trigger pull, is light enough for a ten year-old to handle and costs no more than a goat, chicken or loaf of bread in some parts of Africa.

International standards have also contributed to the child soldier phenomenon. In 1977 the two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which extended protection to all non-combatants and to military personnel no longer engaged in combat, prohibited the recruitment and participation in conflicts only of children under the age of fifteen years, with a weak rider that, in recruiting those aged between fifteen and eighteen years, governments should “endeavour to give priority to the oldest”.²⁰ In 1989 the UNCRC compounded the situation. Although the Convention defined a child in general as anyone below the age of eighteen years, it allowed the age of protection for children to be explicitly lowered with regards to military service—leaving children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen vulnerable to recruitment. Based on these existing standards, the Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in Rome in 1998, made it a war crime for both governments and armed opposition groups to recruit children under the age of fifteen or use them in national, regional and international conflicts. Thus, by avoiding addressing the recruitment of children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen the international community reinforced the idea that recruiting adolescents was acceptable.

The above factors have facilitated the involvement of children in armed conflict to such an extent that it is now widely recognised as a child labour problem. In fact, in June 1999 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted Convention 182, which included forced and compulsory recruitment of children under the age of eighteen years among the worst forms of child labour and thereby, opened up new possibilities of protection and enforcement.²¹ In less than three years this convention has been ratified by 132 countries, making it a record in ILO history.

Other legal instruments pushing previous limits have since emerged. In January 2000, after six years of negotiations, governments around the world agreed on a new international treaty to prohibit the use of children in armed conflicts: the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict. In May 2000 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the protocol and it was opened for signature the following month. Having achieved the ten ratifications needed, the protocol came into force on 12th February 2002. This protocol raises the minimum age for recruitment from fifteen to eighteen years and prohibits

the use in conflict of children under the age of eighteen by all armed groups. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was another landmark agreement as it was the first regional treaty to establish eighteen as the minimum age for all recruitment and participation in warfare; it came into force on 29th November 1999.

Furthermore, in August 1999, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1261, which instructs the Secretary-General to act on behalf of children affected by armed conflict, including child soldiers and to ensure the training in children's rights of peacekeepers deployed by the Security Council under the Secretary-General. Since then the Security Council has passed two more significant resolutions:

- Resolution 1314 (August 2000) was passed following the publication of a comprehensive report by the current Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in July 2000 on the implementation of Resolution 1261. This resolution emphasised the responsibility of all countries to exclude from amnesty arrangements anyone responsible for grave crimes against children. It also called for measures against the illicit trade in natural resources such as diamonds, which fuels wars and contributes to the massive victimisation of children. Furthermore, this resolution stressed the importance of addressing the special needs and vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict.
- Similar to its predecessor, Resolution 1379 (November 2001) was passed following the publication of a report by the Secretary-General on 7th September 2001 on the implementation of Resolution 1314. This resolution acknowledged the importance of including child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations and called for all parties to conflicts to take measures to put an end to all forms of violence and exploitation, including sexual violence, particularly rape which disproportionately affects girls—be they combatants or civilians.

Geographical Distribution

It is essential to realise that child soldiering is not limited to Africa as is often portrayed by the Western media. The global dimensions of the involvement of children in armed conflict cannot be ignored. The United Nations study on the 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' led by Graça Machel cogently asserted that "child soldiering is a global problem that occurs more systematically than

most analysts have previously suspected".²² The facts themselves are revealing. Since the inception of war against the Sri Lankan government in 1983, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, has incorporated thousands of children into the war. In fact, the LTTE established two armed units consisting entirely of children. The case of Myanmar is particularly illustrative. Despite repeated denials from the government, Myanmar is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country in the world; more than 70,000 children may currently be serving in the national army alone, making the government of that country the greatest single global user of children as soldiers. The national armed forces are known to forcibly recruit children as young as eleven years old. It is also important to note that the various opposition factions in Myanmar also co-opt children into their ranks, but on a much smaller scale; the 'rebel' group consisting of the largest number of child combatants (20,000) is the United Wa State Army (UWSA).²³

In addition, children have been used by both government and opposition forces in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Chechnya, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia-to name but a few. In the so-called West, the example of Northern Ireland, where children are used by paramilitaries, is particularly noteworthy. It is crucial to take into account the fact that many Western governments recruit under-eighteens (albeit voluntarily and with parental consent) into their regular forces. Until recently it was legal for the UK not only to recruit sixteen year olds, but also to deploy under-eighteens in wars such as the Falklands conflict and the Gulf War. However, in March 2002 the British Ministry of Defence issued a statement declaring that soldiers under the age of eighteen will no longer be allowed to go into battle, even though the armed forces will still be allowed to train recruits from the age of sixteen. It is further believed that an unspecified number of soldiers from the 45 Commando contingent, sent to war against Al-Qaida and the Taliban forces in Afghanistan in 2001, were withdrawn for being under the age of eighteen.²⁴

However, it has to be acknowledged that a large proportion of child combatants are indeed to be found in Africa today. Thus, it is necessary to further examine the reasons inciting and fostering this phenomenon.

Civil Wars in Africa

The African continent has been ravaged by internal conflicts and insurgencies in the past decade. Eighteen of the fifty-three countries on the continent are

currently involved with, or emerging from, armed conflict.²⁵ Violent conflicts have devastated countries such as Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR), Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The outbreak of violence in Côte d'Ivoire in September 2002, has further exacerbated the political instability of the West African sub-region. An in-depth analysis of the causes and dynamics of modern armed conflicts in Africa is not only beyond the scope of this monograph, but they have been well-documented elsewhere.²⁶ However, a brief analysis is necessary to properly situate the subject of children in armed conflicts and to appreciate the reasons behind their deployment across the continent.

Some commentators have viewed these conflicts as irrational and senseless or dismissed them as ethnically-derived, pointing to the atavistic nature of the 'tribal' people inhabiting these countries. One such commentator, Kaplan, has postulated that in modern African wars, "a pre-modern formlessness governed the battlefield, recalling the wars in tribal or feudal Europe before the Peace of Westphalia introduced the era of organized nation-states".²⁷

Indeed, recent African civil wars have been particularly brutal and bloody. Violence against civilians, a characteristic of modern warfare, has been excessive and extremely explicit. In Sierra Leone, villagers were forced to watch public beheadings in which "the victim's neck was cut, working from back to front with a blunt blade".²⁸ Civilians were also mutilated and maimed. There were two particular ways of torture common to the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia which should be described: *tabay* and *halaka*. To *tabay* a person involved tying them so tightly with wet ropes that their arms and shoulders were permanently damaged. *Halaka* was a system whereby civilians were stripped naked, had their arms and feet tied, and "beaten from point to point while lying prone".²⁹ In Liberia, women were raped by friends of their sons. One child soldier, fighting for Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), was forced to bayonet his pregnant sister to show his loyalty to the force.³⁰ The Rwandan genocide provides examples of some of the worst atrocities known to man. Women and children were tortured, buried alive, burnt or hacked to death. Babies had their heads smashed against walls as their parents watched. Women were raped in front of their husbands and children and then had to watch whilst their families were killed before they were. The Prime Minister of Rwanda, Madame Agathe Uwilingiyimana, was forced to strip naked in the presence of her mother, husband and children, before being bayoneted through the vagina repeatedly until the bayonet emerged through her throat.³¹

For many, these atrocities are incomprehensible; some ascribe them to barbarism and 'tribalism', with its pejorative connotation of 'primitiveness'.³² Although these acts are difficult to comprehend, this monograph argues that it is necessary to reach a better understanding of the political and economic forces inciting and driving these conflicts and their attendant atrocities. Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda are informative examples.

Sierra Leone

The war in Sierra Leone, which resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 civilians as well as the displacement of over half of the country's population both internally and externally, begun when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh, invaded the country from Liberia (where they had been exiles) at two diamond-rich points: Bomaru in Kailahun District and Mano River Bridge, Pujehun District on 23rd March 1991.

This invasion was characterised by extreme violence but it is necessary to consider the socio-economic context within which the war emerged. At the outbreak of war, there had been a growing resentment towards the authoritarian regime of the All People's Congress (APC), which had been in power since 1968. Corruption in all sectors was rife. It was also believed that because of government neglect, the health and sanitation services had deteriorated and this, in turn had led to an alleged life expectancy of twenty-one years in 1987.³³ Since the middle of the 1980s the education system had also suffered; this was partly due to the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank as part of their structural adjustment package for Sierra Leone, which is now ranked as the poorest country in the world. This led Richards to conclude that,

The crisis of patrimonialism has had a devastating effect on schooling, social services, jobs and national communications infrastructure—which had blighted the hopes of most young people for meaningful life in the cities.³⁴

It is also important to consider the factors, which prolonged the conflict. By capturing the diamond-rich areas of Kailahun and Pujehun districts, the RUF was able to embark on the illegal mining and exporting of diamonds. With regards to the government, Keen coined the term, the 'privatization of war' and used it to argue that due to IMF and World Bank austerity programmes, the government of Sierra Leone, like many other African governments, was

'strapped for cash'.³⁵ Hence, they paid their supporters in kind by giving them the right to inflict violence and freedom to loot. The continuation of violence also allowed soldiers to remain posted in resource-rich districts. According to Abdullah and Muana, the government soldiers of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) fighting at the war front, freely admitted to living off the brutal exploitation of civilians in the war.³⁶ In addition, prolonging the war meant that it would not be possible to hold elections and so the government could continue its rule. These factors have led some commentators to suggest that for most of the participants, the purpose of the war is not to win it, but rather to profit from it (financially and otherwise) while it lasts.³⁷ It is not surprising that Sierra Leone has recently been ranked as one of the worst places to be a child, second only to Angola which ranked first.³⁸

Liberia

The Liberian civil war, which officially ended in July 1997 but continues to fester violently today, began on 24th December 1989 when the NPFL, led by Charles Taylor, attacked a border town in Nimba County from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. During the war an estimated 200,000 people died and approximately 700,000 fled the country. Like the Sierra Leonean war, the conflict in Liberia was characterised by excessive brutality.

Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, president of the country at the outbreak of war, had himself come to power via a violent coup d'état by the lower ranks in the army in April 1980. Since Liberian history is often framed in relation to the history of the domination of Americo-Liberians over the indigenous populations, some commentators have argued that the 1980 coup was "to end Americo-Liberian minority rule and usher in indigenous Liberian majority rule".³⁹ In order to secure his position and fight off all rivals, Doe, a Krahn, sought the support of the Krahn and Mandingo communities by favouring them with jobs and commercial opportunities among other perks. According to Ellis, after violently suppressing a coup attempt by his major rival, Thomas Quiwonkpa in 1985, Doe "resorted to a particularly poisonous form of ethnic manipulation which was to have consequences in the ethnic pogroms of 1990".⁴⁰ Ellis adds that it was this blatant manipulation of ethnic alliances for Doe's personal aspirations and greed that made the Krahns and Mandingos so unpopular, especially in Nimba County. To worsen the situation, by the outbreak of war and the ensuing violence, the Liberian economy was in decline, public institutions had been grossly mismanaged, the government had become more autocratic and over-militarised and national debt was

increasing rapidly. Dunn's description of the impact of the rebellion on Liberian society is apt, "the society was on the verge of collapse when the insurgency gave it a final shove".⁴¹

Shortly after the insurgency the NPFL (or put in another way, Taylor himself) came to control most of the country outside Monrovia including Nimba County where the most valuable iron ore deposits in the world are located. Taylor also had access to other valuable resources such as gold, diamonds, hardwood and other commodities and he quickly came to realise that he could export the goods with which to maintain his rule over the territory he called 'Greater Liberia'.⁴²

Other actors such as the Ivorian government of President Henri Konan Bedié are said to have benefited from these exports.⁴³ Ellis further argues that Bedié's predecessor, Felix Houphoët-Boigny's support for the NPFL rebellion in the early stages of the war, was "in part intended to wrest control of an economic resource, and in this he had the support particularly of French businesses anxious to gain access to Liberia's raw materials".⁴⁴

Rwanda

The genocide of April 1994, in which 1 million Rwandans were butchered in just 3 months, was viewed by some as the 'final solution' to the ongoing civil war. On 1st October 1990 between 1,500 and 2,000 members of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) had launched an attack from southern Uganda where they had been living as exiles. Their target was the government of Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, who had achieved his position via a palace coup in 1973 supported by northern Hutus, particularly members of his Bushiru clan from the Ruthengiri province of northern Rwanda. Like Doe in Liberia, Habyarimana and his allies quickly consolidated their power to the detriment of Tutsis, southern Hutus and those from rival clans. In fact, by 1980 80% of senior positions in the army were held by Bushiru Hutus.⁴⁵

Hutus and Tutsis have a long history of cohabitation, which in recent decades has become marked by tensions and consequently, violence. Many refer to Belgian colonial rule as a turning point in these relations. The Belgians introduced rigidities into the categories of 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' which had previously been fluid. Furthermore, the colonial government chose to consolidate its power through Tutsi chiefs and thus, assigned members of this group to positions of power, providing them with privileged access to the state and economic opportunities.

By introducing the now-notorious identity cards, which facilitated the genocide in 1994, the colonial power ensured that identity would henceforth be based on ethnicity. These changes led to enduring bitterness among some elements of the Hutu population, particularly those in the north, leading to violence in the 1950s and a bloody revolution between 1959 and 1962, which left 20,000 Tutsis dead and drove hundreds of thousands more into exile. In this way the Hutu elites ensured that they would succeed the Belgian colonial power on the achievement of independence in 1962. Some commentators have claimed that this mass deportation of Tutsis, particularly to Uganda, was at the root of the civil war thirty years later.⁴⁶

The socio-economic context within which the war emerged must also be examined. By the 1980s Rwanda had the highest population density in Africa, but was among the poorest countries in the world, with declining land productivity. This was compounded by pervasive corruption, high unemployment, especially among the youth, leading to various forms of political unrest in the early 1990s. A short rainy season in 1989 led to widespread food shortages, and even famine in some areas in 1990. In addition to a deteriorating economy, coffee yields were diminishing and in July 1989 the world coffee prices slumped, which was particularly devastating for Rwanda, a coffee-producing country. Also in 1990 the Rwandan currency experienced a 40% devaluation due to the anticipation of the introduction of a structural adjustment programme by the World Bank and IMF.⁴⁷ Therefore, like Liberia, Rwandan society was on the verge of collapse when the outbreak of war pushed it over the edge.

To exacerbate an already devastating situation, Habyarimana and his coterie, many of whom were extremists, intensified their 'tribilization' of national politics. It was these extremists who were the architects, coordinators and controllers of the genocide between April and July 1994. Although the Western media depicted the genocide as a spontaneous outburst of ethnic violence by the Hutu masses, this was far from the truth. People had to be manipulated. Genocide had to be incited and organised. Not only was this mass slaughter prepared well in advance, but it was also a political act or technique, a 'final solution' to exterminate an entire racial group as well as Hutu opponents. As Berry and Berry put it,

In essence, the genocide in Rwanda had as much to do with tribalism as the Holocaust did in Europe. Both were organized and implemented by a small group of extremist politicians using every means possible to hold power. Unaccountable before the law, this small

group of individuals transformed racial extremism, oppression, and violence into legitimate means of exercising political authority.⁴⁸

Extremists in the government coordinating the genocide were able to do so by using fear and ignorance as their main tools to legitimate violence against Tutsis and others. Fear was instilled in the Hutu population, so much so that many came to believe that if the RPF invaded they would be killed, mutilated or even eaten alive by Tutsi soldiers.⁴⁹ Ignorance, the other main tool of the extremists, was forced on the population using mainly the infamous state-owned Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). Misinformation and lack of information about both domestic and international events was central in the campaign to incite people to violence. Therefore, the socio-economic problems facing the Rwandan people as a whole and the 'tribilization' of politics by Habyarimana and the Hutu extremists in his government combined to produce yet another twentieth century genocide.

Conflict Patterns

The similarities between these three case studies are striking. Not only are their routes to, and patterns of, violent conflict almost uniform, but also, they highlight the grave political and economic factors inciting and prolonging conflicts. An assessment is proposed by Adedeji:

There is a growing evidence to support the view that the elites in African societies, particularly members of the political class, have shown no restraint in manipulating the people through feeding them with prejudices against and stereotypes about other ethnic groups to win their support for achieving their own self-centred objectives ... Personal interests and ambition of such leaders are framed in ethnic terms and the bells of ethnic solidarity are rung to rally group support even at the risk of developing animosity against another group which is considered the enemy. This sometimes degenerates into the incidence of people-to-people violence and pogroms.⁵⁰

It is fair to say that civil wars are not the products of arbitrary violence and barbarism by 'tribal' people but rather, they are the result of complex political and economic tensions. These tensions, in turn, create an environment in which children become targets for recruitment by both government forces and opposition groups.