

# Children in Armed Conflict

This paper is designed to give a brief overview of recent Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs for child soldiers.

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## Recent Developments in International Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers

by Michael Odeh and Colin Sullivan

The United Nations defines a child soldier as “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group [acting] in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups.”<sup>1</sup> The most widely accepted estimate is that there are currently 300,000 child soldiers worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

The recruitment of child soldiers occurs all around the world, yet their use is publicly sanctioned at varying degrees of acceptability. For instance, more developed countries allow persons under 18 with parental consent to voluntarily join government forces, but only as trainees or cadets performing in limited capacities. Small numbers of youths (under 18) are active in forces associated with the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.<sup>3</sup> Youth forces in these developed countries are often characterized as career development programs, and the utilization of youth forces for combat purposes are limited.

The use of child soldiers becomes especially problematic when children are abducted or coerced into joining government, paramilitary or rebel forces, as happens in many third world and developing countries. Children are easy to recruit because of their vulnerability and naïveté, but are often neglected once the

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. Who is a child soldier?

[http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index\\_childsoldiers.html](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index_childsoldiers.html)

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch. <http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Data provided by Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Global Report 2004

conflict is over or when they leave the group. International groups have advocated for the rehabilitation of child soldiers, but children are often overlooked during official implementation.

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) intervention programs are intended to bring security and stability to a region after a conflict. The three phases of DDR programs are sequentially imperative.<sup>4</sup> First, Disarmament requires that combatants are stripped of their weapons, and DDR programs often utilize a trade-in system, such as weapons for cash. Demobilization constitutes the assembly and registration of ex-combatants, orienting former soldiers on the value of the DDR program, and transporting ex-combatants to desired locations at a time that is in-sync with civilian life, such as crop and school cycles. Finally, reintegration ensures social and economic assimilation through the personal empowerment of and financial incentives to ex-combatants. Although child soldiers have much to benefit from appropriate DDR programs, they are frequently disregarded in the planning stages of DDR programs and excluded from DDR implementation. These programs predominantly focus on adult male soldiers, rarely include women, and often exclude children.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nation's Security Council recognizes the importance of DDR programs for child soldiers and war-affected children,<sup>6</sup> but even with the help of international aid the responsibility and actual implementation of DDR programs ultimately lies with the government of the afflicted country.<sup>7</sup> The U.N. has taken many steps to protect the rights of children affected by armed conflict. To date, 72 nations have ratified the Optional Protocol<sup>8</sup> to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children involved in armed

conflict, a document that establishes 18 as the minimum age of conscription into the military (Article 2) and requires that members of the military under age 18 be kept out of hostilities by "all feasible measures" (Article 1). This Protocol also requires governments to provide programs for the "psychological recovery and social reintegration" of former child soldiers, where necessary (Article 6).

Unfortunately, ensuring the successful reintegration of former child combatants is rife with complexities. Children who have known only violence are likely to resort to violence when solving personal problems. Those who have been forced to commit atrocities sometimes return to their homes only to be shunned and stigmatized by their own communities.

Wars often uproot families, driving entire populations to seek shelter in refugee camps. These camps strain local resources, putting education and jobs out of reach for many refugee children and adults. In these conditions, with a shortage of food and no meaningful activities for children, armed groups find children in refugee camps to be easy recruits. Some programs, therefore, target the situation of children in refugee camps to prevent children from recruitment, and to advance the process of rejoining society. For example, the International Rescue Committee has developed structures in Indonesia to supplement the local school system in order to provide for the influx of the displaced population.<sup>9</sup>

The following is a brief survey of several countries dealing with the problems of conflict, child soldiers, and DDR programs. The programs discussed each deal with a different step in the process of reconstruction after war. It is clear that DDR is a long and complicated process, but one that brings about peace and hope for the future, especially for child soldiers.

<sup>4</sup> Fusato, M. (2003). Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants. [www.beyondintractability.org/m/demobilization.jsp](http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/demobilization.jsp)

<sup>5</sup> Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. [http://www.child-soldiers.org/cs/childsoldiers.nsf/displaysmessage/About\\_The\\_CSC](http://www.child-soldiers.org/cs/childsoldiers.nsf/displaysmessage/About_The_CSC)

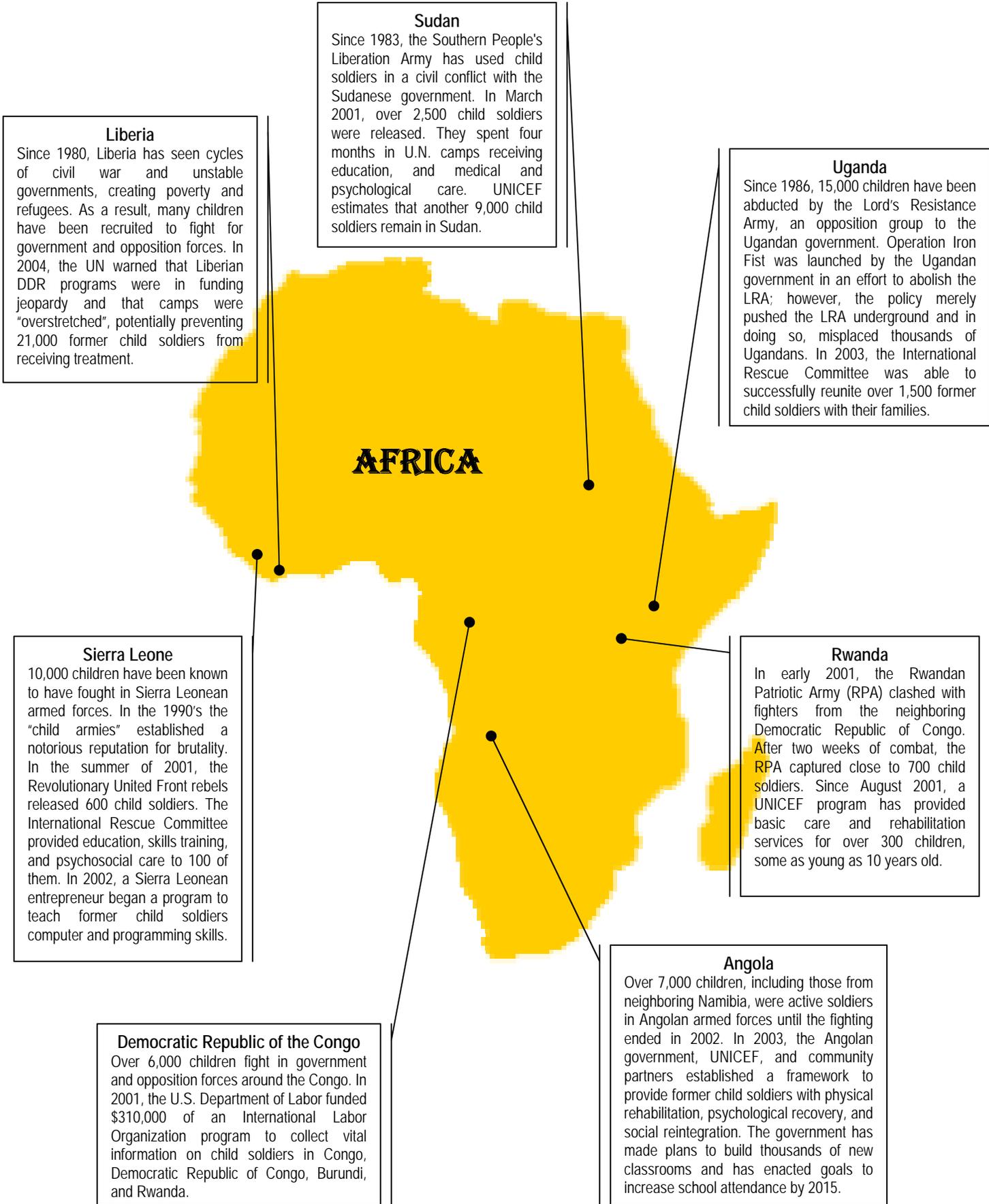
<sup>6</sup> Statement of the President of the Security Council (March 23, 2000). <http://www.un.int/usa/spst0010.htm>

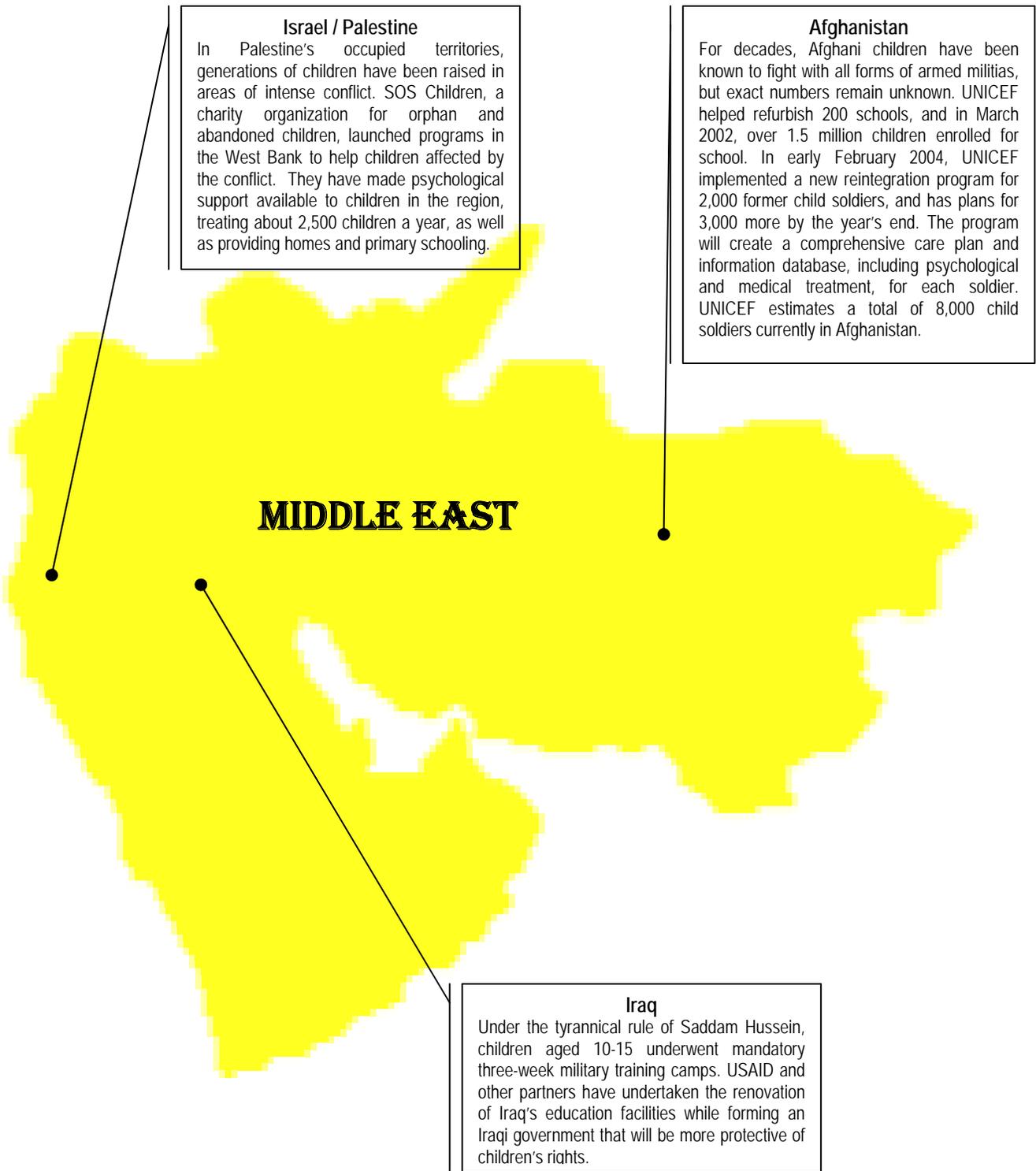
<sup>7</sup> Becker, J. (2004). Human Rights Watch World Report 2004: Children as weapons of war. <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k4/11.htm>

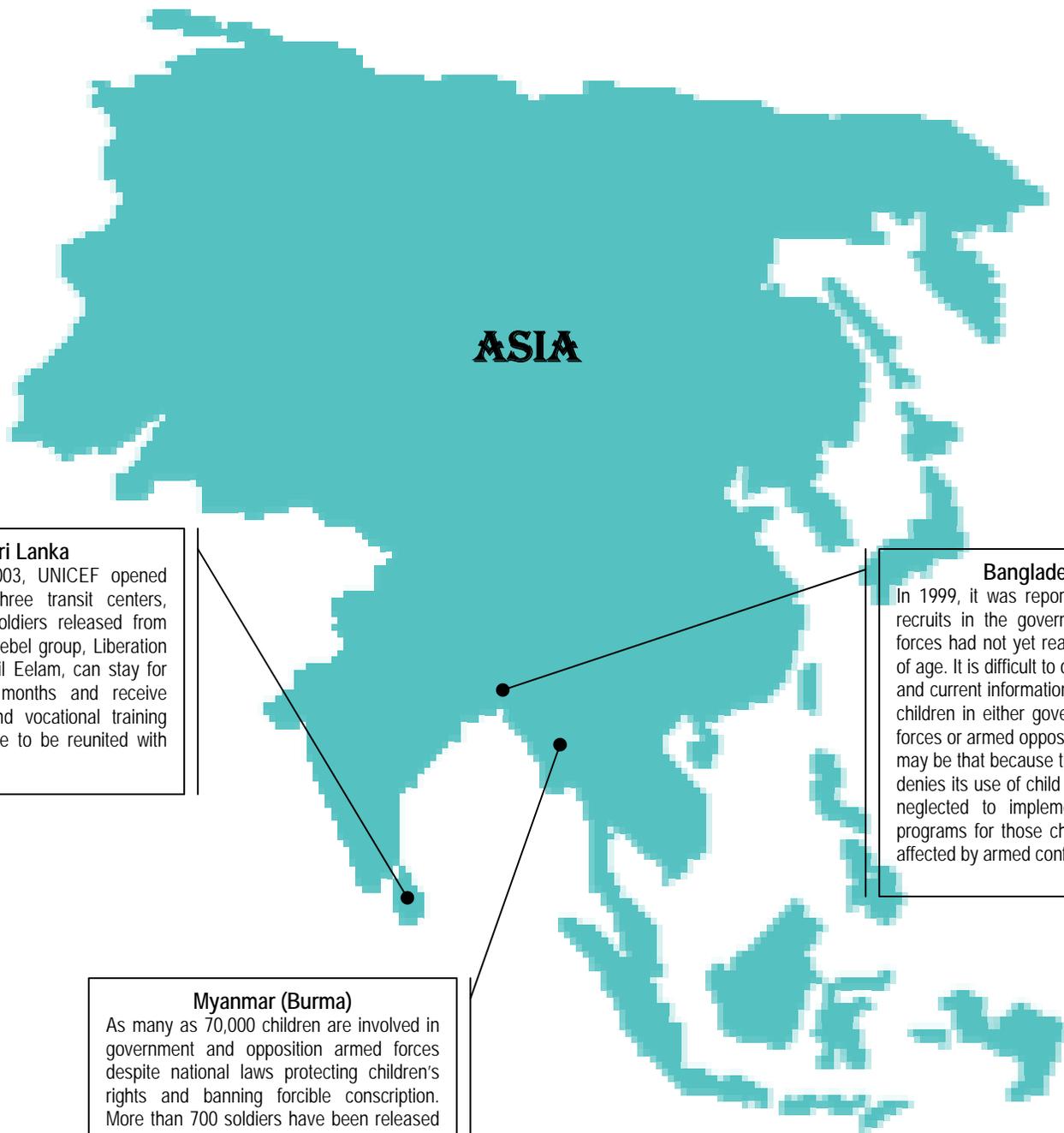
<sup>8</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (June, 2004). "Status of Ratifications of the Principal International Human Rights Treaties." <http://www.unhchr.ch/pdf/report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The International Rescue Committee

<http://www.theirc.org/index.cfm/wwwID/1665/programs/show/topicID/134>







# ASIA

## Sri Lanka

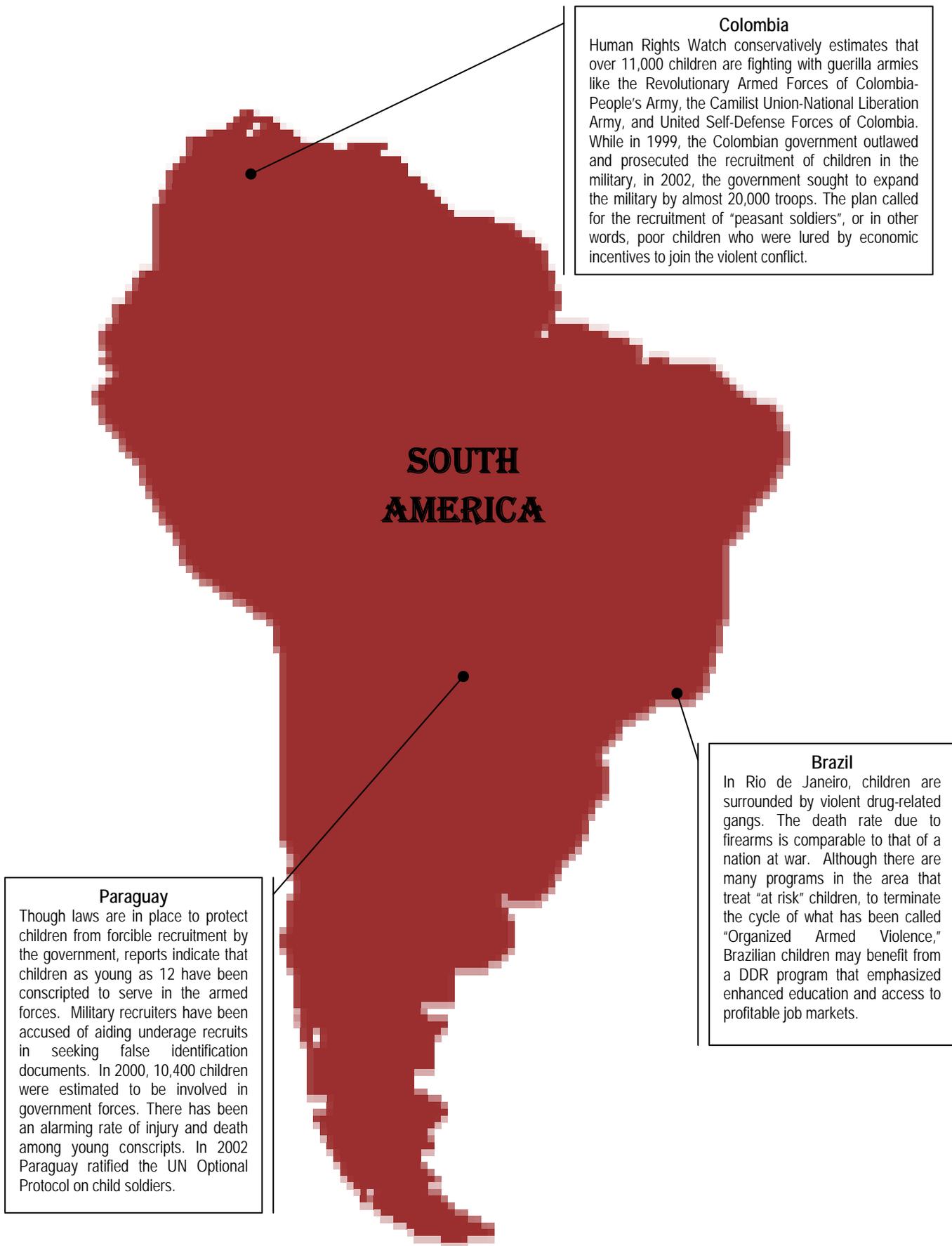
In October 2003, UNICEF opened the first of three transit centers, where child soldiers released from the notorious rebel group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, can stay for up to three months and receive educational and vocational training before they are to be reunited with their families.

## Bangladesh

In 1999, it was reported that 3,374 recruits in the government's armed forces had not yet reached 18 years of age. It is difficult to obtain accurate and current information on the use of children in either government armed forces or armed opposition groups. It may be that because the government denies its use of child soldiers, it has neglected to implement any DDR programs for those children that are affected by armed conflict.

## Myanmar (Burma)

As many as 70,000 children are involved in government and opposition armed forces despite national laws protecting children's rights and banning forcible conscription. More than 700 soldiers have been released since 2002 thanks to a program that verified soldiers' and prevented forced recruitment. The government has disbanded training camps used to hold street children and orphans until reaching recruitment age. These children were offered the opportunity to attend non-military training schools when the recruitment program was discontinued in 2000. The numbers of children participating in this program were not available.



**Colombia**

Human Rights Watch conservatively estimates that over 11,000 children are fighting with guerilla armies like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army, the Camilist Union-National Liberation Army, and United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. While in 1999, the Colombian government outlawed and prosecuted the recruitment of children in the military, in 2002, the government sought to expand the military by almost 20,000 troops. The plan called for the recruitment of "peasant soldiers", or in other words, poor children who were lured by economic incentives to join the violent conflict.

**SOUTH AMERICA**

**Paraguay**

Though laws are in place to protect children from forcible recruitment by the government, reports indicate that children as young as 12 have been conscripted to serve in the armed forces. Military recruiters have been accused of aiding underage recruits in seeking false identification documents. In 2000, 10,400 children were estimated to be involved in government forces. There has been an alarming rate of injury and death among young conscripts. In 2002 Paraguay ratified the UN Optional Protocol on child soldiers.

**Brazil**

In Rio de Janeiro, children are surrounded by violent drug-related gangs. The death rate due to firearms is comparable to that of a nation at war. Although there are many programs in the area that treat "at risk" children, to terminate the cycle of what has been called "Organized Armed Violence," Brazilian children may benefit from a DDR program that emphasized enhanced education and access to profitable job markets.

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