

Books and reviews

CHILD SOLDIERS

The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts¹

The participation of children in hostilities has become an increasingly common phenomenon which appears to be connected to the emergence of new kinds of conflicts, fought between regular armed forces and guerrilla forces. Despite the international community's growing concern for child soldiers, few studies take into account all the factors involved or make practical suggestions to remedy the problem.

By examining various typical conflicts this book analyses the issue in depth, closely studying each of the factors which give rise to this phenomenon. The authors begin by giving a definition of what a child is. Taking as a basis the age for military service and the voting age in more than 185 States, they conclude that the age of eighteen marks the transition between childhood and adulthood. A search for the reasons why children participate in hostilities reveals that their recruitment by armed groups is influenced by many widely divergent factors: the economic, social and political causes of the conflict, peer group pressure, fear, threats, the wish to feel safe or to take revenge. The authors then suggest a series of concrete measures to halt the enrolment of children.

In considering means of preventing the recruitment of children into the armed forces the authors review all the provisions of international human rights and international humanitarian law intended to protect children in periods of armed conflict. They observe that irrespective of the relevant legal instrument (the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols of 1977), the protection for young people is only indirect, depending on States and their national legislation. Even though the participation in hostilities of children below the age of fifteen is prohibited (Protocol I, Art. 77, para. 2 and Protocol II, Art. 4, para. 3(c)), effective application of these provisions is subject to numerous conditions, e.g. ratification of these treaties by States, or the consent or ability of non-State entities to implement them.

¹ Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, *Child Soldiers, The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts*, A Study on Behalf of the Henry Dunant Institute, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, 228 pp.

The authors also have the merit of looking into a subject which is rarely addressed, i.e. the mental and physical disorders caused in children by their participation in hostilities or a period spent in detention. A better knowledge of war trauma in children enables local non-governmental organizations — which are mainly responsible for rehabilitating children — to set up programmes to facilitate their reintegration into the civilian community.

Emphasis is placed by the authors on the fundamental role of the ICRC (present in most conflicts where children are involved) in protecting child soldiers on the spot, notably in visiting child detainees. They also underscore the complementary role which must be played by local non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies.

Noting that “a significant part of international human rights law is based on the protection of children and young persons up to the age of eighteen”, the authors believe that a total ban on the participation of these children in hostilities is a fundamental objective to be attained within the coming years. It requires a mobilization of the entire international community (non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as States).

The best way of raising the age of participation in hostilities would be to adopt a declaration containing minimum humanitarian standards banning any participation whatsoever under eighteen years of age and clearly specifying the responsibilities of adults in charge of recruiting children. At the same time, the enrolment of children in armed factions could be discussed by the various bodies which monitor the implementation of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The interest of this study lies not only in the comprehensive analysis of the causes of participation by children in hostilities and the consequences their participation has, but also in the very specific proposals it puts forward to curb such practices.

An enormous amount of research went into compiling the remarkable annex to the book. It provides an exhaustive list of 189 countries indicating whether or not they are party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols and the main regional and international human rights treaties, as well as specifying the respective voting and military age in each State. This latest research into internal State practice serves as a basis for encouraging international acceptance of a higher minimum age for participation by children in hostilities.

This book by Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, supported by an extensive bibliography, is unquestionably a first-class reference work for analysis of the phenomenon of child soldiers. May it be, as the authors desire, a further step towards preventing children from taking up arms.

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