

## Books and reviews: "Children: The invisible soldiers"

31-08-1997 Article, International Review of the Red Cross, No. 319, by Stéphane Jeannet

Stéphane Jeannet , ICRC Legal Division

Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The invisible soldiers* , Rädda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children), Stockholm, 1996, 257 pages

Over the past few years an international movement to prohibit the recruitment and participation in hostilities of children under 18, in line with the general age of majority stipulated in Article 1 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, has gained momentum. It must be noted that under Article 38 of that same Convention, which was inspired by the 1977 Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the minimum age set for child soldiers is 15 years.

The original research for *Children: The invisible soldiers* was commissioned as part of the United Nations Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (also known as the Machel Study), which was presented at the fifty-first session of the UN General Assembly in November 1996 [1] . The present book is an expanded and updated edition of the Machel Study.

The authors, of the Quaker UN Office in Geneva and the International Catholic Child Bureau respectively, state that the purpose of the book is to develop a better understanding of the causes and consequences of children's participation in armed conflicts, rather than to expose or stigmatize the policies or practices of particular governments or armed opposition groups.

The research methods used and the practical difficulties encountered are clearly outlined at the beginning of the book, which is based on 26 case studies of particular situations where children are or have been active participants in armed conflicts or have been recruited into armed forces. It was of course an immense and difficult task to conduct these studies and the authors acknowledge the challenge of giving a global picture, especially because of the difficulty of collecting data in conflict zones. The research is made even more difficult by the fact that children are "invisible" soldiers, in that those who employ them deny their existence and no record is kept of their numbers and ages, or the ages are falsified. Nevertheless, the authors estimate that there may be a quarter of a million children under the age of 18 serving in government armed forces or armed opposition groups. The arguments put forward in the book are illustrated by vivid examples and accounts taken from country case studies as well as many tables and statistics.

As adequately described in *The invisible soldiers* , existing provisions contained both in international humanitarian law instruments and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are too often disregarded in practice. Nonetheless, the report may give too pessimistic an impression of the relevance and efficiency of humanitarian law. This is due in part to factual errors. In the chapter on "Legal standards", for instance, the authors write that 1977 Additional Protocol II, on non-international armed conflicts, has been officially applied only twice (in El Salvador and the Philippines), whereas such was recently the case in Bosnia, Colombia, Georgia, the Russian Federation, Rwanda and Tajikistan. Indeed, the book is focused somewhat narrowly on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Similarly, the recommendations contained at the end are addressed almost exclusively to UNHCR, UNICEF and NGOs. Little attention is paid to the role and activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The book does, however, make appropriate reference to the Movement's Council of Delegates, which endorsed a Plan of Action in 1995 aimed at promoting the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of children under the age of 18 in armed conflicts and calling for practical measures to protect and assist child victims of conflict [2] . Reference is likewise made to the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, held in Geneva in December 1995, which recommended that parties to conflict refrain from arming children below the age of 18 years and take every feasible step to ensure that children under 18 do not participate in hostilities. [3]

*Children: The invisible soldiers* is a book well worth reading for its very thorough explanation of the mechanisms of recruitment and its clear and convincing arguments in favour of prohibiting the recruitment and participation of children in hostilities. It also makes practical recommendations aimed at curbing the phenomenon. However, for a full understanding of the legal issues involved, specialized works on international humanitarian law should also be consulted.

### Notes:

1. UN document A/51/306.
2. "Children in armed conflicts", *IRRC* , No. 310, January-February 1996, pp. 146-147.
3. Resolution 2: "Protection of the civilian population in periods of armed conflict: C. With regard to children", *ibid* ., pp. 63-64.

