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CHILD SOLDIERS IN MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

The issue of child soldiers is not unknown. There are thousands of children all around the world serving as soldiers in armed conflicts. These children serve in government forces as well as opposition groups. They fight on the front lines, participate in suicide missions, act as spies forced into sexual slavery and so on.

The issue of child soldiers in Myanmar is one that has persisted for a very long time. Armed conflicts between the state and numerous ethnic groups have been rampant for almost five decades, and children are being dragged into this war to fight. The Burmese Army is one of the largest recruiters of child soldiers along with certain opposition groups.

This paper aims to explore and understand the following aspects of the Burmese child soldiers:

- *How the children are recruited*
- *Tasks such employment requires them to perform, and*
- *Condition of their lives once freed from the army.*

KEYWORDS: *Child Soldiers, Human trafficking, Terror and coercion, Violence, Psychological trauma, Strict policies*

INTRODUCTION

There are thousands of children all around the world serving as soldiers in armed conflicts. These children serve in government forces as well as opposition groups. They fight on the front lines, participate in suicide missions, act as spies forced into sexual slavery and so on. Some believe that armed groups offer their best chance for survival. The children are almost always heavily drugged and are manipulated into committing heinous deeds in such conditions.

The issue of child soldiers in Myanmar is one that has persisted for a very long time. Armed conflicts between the state and numerous ethnic groups have been rampant for almost five decades. These have claimed thousands of lives and led to human rights violations. Children being drawn into active combat by all sides to these conflicts is an inevitable consequence of such militarization of societies. The Burmese Army, named *Tatmadaw Kyi*,

is one of the largest recruiters of child soldiers along with opposition groups such as the Karen National Union.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to explore and understand certain aspects of the Burmese child soldiers, namely:

- a. How the children are recruited
- b. Tasks such employment requires them to perform, and
- c. Condition of their lives once freed from the army.

METHODOLOGY

These facets will be reconnoitered via two documentaries, which are-

1. Men at 15- The Child Soldiers of Myanmar by PressTV Documentaries, and
2. Human Trafficking- The Child Soldiers of Burma by RFA Video

CHILD SOLDIERS IN MYANMAR

"They filled the forms and asked my age, and when I said 16 I was slapped and he said, 'You are 18. Answer 18'. He asked me again and I said, 'But that's my true age'. The sergeant asked, 'Then why did you enlist in the army?' I said, 'Against my will. I was captured.'"

-*Maung Zaw Oo*, describing the second time he was forced into the Tatmadaw Kyi (army) in 2005. (1)

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According to Child Soldiers International, a child soldier is, "a child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking, or has taken, a direct part in hostilities."

The issue of child soldiers in Myanmar is one that has persisted for a very long time. Armed conflicts between the state and numerous ethnic groups have been rampant for almost five decades. These have claimed thousands of lives and led to human rights violations. Children being drawn into active combat by all sides to these conflicts is an inevitable consequence of such militarization of societies. The Burmese Army, named *Tatmadaw Kyi*, is one of the largest recruiters of child soldiers along with opposition groups such as the Karen National Union.

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RECRUITMENT

"I was arrested one day at midnight, for being out at night. I was forced into the army and sent to military

training school. I had to serve for the Myanmar military for one year against my will."

-Aung Ko Khine, who was recruited at the age of 14 by the Myanmar army.

"...It was 8 pm and we went to the tea shop. We came back home at 11 pm...four soldiers wearing ordinary clothes arrested us. At first we said we wouldn't enter the army and we wouldn't go to prison...the soldiers said we will give you two days to think. After two days if you have not made a decision, we will kill you."

- Moe, a defected Burmese child soldier.

One of the strongest armed forces in Asia, the *Tatmadaw* is reported to employ more child soldiers than any other force worldwide.

Children are recruited for military purposes as cheap, effective and obedient fighters, to meet the pressure of recruitment targets where adults are unwilling to volunteer and strictly enforced recruitment procedures are absent.

"Forced recruitment is regularly employed, particularly targeting children, who are easier to trick and susceptible to pressure to enlist. An unofficial system of incentives to reward recruiters and punish failure to meet recruitment targets still exists." (2)

Military officers and recruiting agents use terrorization, coercion and physical violence to obtain new recruits. Enrollment is achieved mostly among poor and uneducated children, who are vulnerable to false threats and promise of salaries. Children are taken away whilst on their way to work or in search of jobs, or at busy locations. "One day, me and my friends went to watch a soccer match. On our way home we were stopped by two police officers...they kept accusing me...a soldier was with them who asked me to come with him. The policeman explained I could go with them and go to jail or go with the soldier who would help me become a soccer player", says Myat Win who was insidiously recruited at the age of 15. The ages of these children are then forged and recorded in the paperwork and therefore they are not distinguished from adults when it comes to training and deployment. Former commander Khin Thant says, "If someone came to join the army at 15 years of age, they would let them sign as 18 and then issue ID cards, so if the international community were to check, the card would serve as proof that he was 18."

TASKS PERFORMED BY CHILD SOLDIERS

"I was forced to kill my close friend, my comrade, with my own two hands because he refused to obey an order. He was my best friend. I had no choice...after I killed my friend, I killed the comrade who had given me that order." - Aung Ko Khine

In addition to the physical dangers of armed combat, child soldiers are at risk of prolonged psychological disorders, often caused by witnessing traumatic scenes of violence and death. Children are forced to slaughter their own families. To assuage their pain and sensitivity, they are heavily drugged and made to operate lightweight guns, having minimum training. They often kill their own commanders in attempts to escape. They are also sent to labor camps and are made to do strenuous manual labor under impossible time frames, failing to abide by which they face severe punishment. Girls serve as “wives” of soldiers and are sexually abused and exploited. Many served on the front lines, leading groups and sent to fight, occupying dangerous, forward positions

CONDITION AFTER FREEDOM FROM THE ARMY

“I am happy. Now I can live freely – I’ve got my freedom back.” Now 18, and the eldest of his siblings, he must support the household. With little training or education, it will be a struggle. “Career and education is the hardest – because [I am] too old, I cannot get [an] education,” says Maung Maung. (3) “I have not given up. I’m 19 years old and can still become a soccer player.” –Myat Win.

The number of child soldiers in the Burmese army is increasing day by day. Some are released, some manage to escape- crossing the border, over to Thailand. A mutual feeling of helplessness, exasperation and exhaustion prevails among the released child soldiers. Even though their freedom is redeemed, life does not become easy. The perils aren’t finished for those who succeed in escaping. “Just because they have crossed the border and have escaped the military doesn’t mean they’ve escaped for good. The fear of retribution is ongoing”, says David Mathieson, Human Rights Watch Asia Division. The psychological impact of these children is traumatic. Years of their lives, including their childhood, have gone astray. Depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is common amongst these children. Elevated levels of physical

morbidity and mortality is also seen. Abduction has an adverse impact on education, reading problems, lower occupational functioning, and lower work quality later in life. Exposure to trauma in foundational years may affect the maturation of the central nervous system. Social skills and a part of their humanity is also stripped away.

“A lot of children don’t access secondary education, because there is a pressure to support the family economy,” says Laura Payne, child protection adviser for Save the Children in Burma. (3)

Just like thousands of other children across Burma, former child soldiers are hampered by a system that offers scant access to education, few vocational training opportunities and no social protection. Despite recent reforms, Burma remains one of south-east Asia’s poorest countries, and serious change will require a huge investment of time and resources.

It is difficult to reintegrate demobilized children after a peace settlement is reached. Many have been physically or sexually abused by the very forces for which they have been fighting, and have seen their parents killed, sometimes in the most brutal manner, in front of their eyes. Most have also been led into participating in murder, rape and other atrocities. These children have no skills for life in peacetime and they are accustomed to getting their way through violence.

Myanmar is in dire need of strict implementation of policies and rules against recruitment of children for military purposes. Former child soldiers themselves don’t seem to understand why their childhoods were unjustly taken away from them and possess a desire to inform the world about the brutality of the Myanmar army.

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