

The kids of war: War-torn, impoverished countries are turning to their children to do the fighting

BY TINA SUSMAN

MONROVIA, Liberia

A one-legged young man using a splintery wooden stick as his crutch greets the few visitors who stop at a rundown housing complex in central Monrovia. In-side the bare-earth compound, more young men, most of them hideously maimed, press slowly forward like zombies in a horror film. One by one they remove dark glasses and hats to reveal sockets without eyes, scalps dented by shrapnel and bullets, and faces shredded, scorched and melted into mask-like, barely human blobs.

One who can't come forward is Saah Tonmos, who lies silently on the veranda of a small house in the hot, dusty compound, dying from the gangrene that is devouring his left leg. His companions pull down his trousers to reveal thousands of tiny white maggots that have infested the seeping wound and are wriggling around in the discolored mass of rotten flesh that used to be Saah's thigh. They casually discuss how much longer they expect him to live. One week at best, most decide, speaking as if he were already dead and couldn't hear them.

Saah was 14 when he began fighting and 17 when he suffered a leg wound in combat that was never treated properly. Now he lives with about 100 other physically disabled veterans at the compound, which was abandoned years ago by the state electric company employees who lived there and has been taken over by disabled ex-soldiers with nowhere to go. Most were child soldiers when they were wounded. Now, they seem destined for lives of begging and poverty. They're too old to receive assistance from programs for children, even though they were only children when they suffered their debilitating injuries. They can't find work because of their handicaps, and the government in power has virtually abandoned them.

Once a month, a government truck arrives carrying 100-pound sacks of rice for each wounded veteran. Most sell half on the street and ration the rest to eat. Otherwise, they are on their own, as are most of the world's former child fighters, leaving their scorched nations filled with brutalized, uneducated children and young adults with tortured pasts and little hope for the future.

"Basically it has become a lost generation," said Deroe Weeks, the executive director of the Children's Assistance Program in Liberia, which offers vocational training and schooling to Liberian kids. "You hope someone can grasp the vision and do something about it, fast."

There are many lost generations in countries where child soldiering is common.

The children's parents are often lost or dead, their communities know the children's histories and don't want them back, and foreign donors are reluctant to pump money into programs that cater to older children or young adults. Perhaps worse is the breakdown in the social fabric of the war-torn, impoverished countries that have been brutalized by their children - countries whose people have traditionally leaned on their relatives and neighbours for survival.

"Over 75 per cent of our population is young people, and the majority of these young people have lost hope for the future. They have no plan for tomorrow. They just live day to day," says Korneh Flowers, a counselor with the international aid agency World Vision, who invites ex-fighters to informal group therapy sessions each week in the shade of a tent set up on the front lawn of his Monrovia house. "Some of them do have a desire to be something. But because of what they've done in the past they're afraid nobody will want to have anything to do with them."

One of Flowers's regular visitors is Roland Vah.

Rockets had been ripping apart the sweltering capital for weeks by the time 11-year-old Roland made it to the oceanfront American embassy with his mother to seek shelter. As U.S. military helicopters thundered in over the sapphire sea to evacuate Westerners, thousands of Liberians crammed behind the stone walls of the embassy's nearby residential compound to wait out the worst eruption yet in their country's then year-old civil war.

Life was a gamble. You either covered inside the relative security of the compound, trapped in fetid, oven-like conditions with little food and no clean water, or you ventured out to forage for supplies and risked becoming another corpse in the road. Roland's mother gambled and lost, one day going out to find food and never coming back.

"My mother got killed by government forces," Roland says in the matter-of-fact manner of someone who has seen so much bloodshed that even his own mother's murder doesn't move him. "She had her throat cut." Government troops battling to keep the rebel army from capturing Monrovia had begun venting their anger at civilians and had arbitrarily accused the woman of being a rebel sympathizer. Roland, left on his own and hungry for vengeance, did what he had to do to survive. He joined the rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia.

There is no single path to becoming a child soldier, no pamphlet that instructs hitherto normal kids to leave their homes and schools, perhaps kill or abuse their neighbours, rape young girls, shoot old men, cut the fetuses out of pregnant women and devour drugs, all in the name of loyalty to warlords they probably will

never meet.

Desperation, frustration, anger and fear are the driving forces, and in Liberia as in other countries engulfed in civil conflict, they were never in short supply.

It started here on Christmas Eve in 1989 as a rebel attempt to oust President Samuel Doe, an American-backed marionette of the Cold War whose dictatorial government promoted his Krahn tribe at the expense of all others. But Charles Taylor's rebel army, which crossed the eastern border and quickly moved west to in-vade Monrovia, soon split into rival factions. Other warlords, seeing the potential to gain from Liberia's diamond wealth and fearing they would get nothing if someone else won, began forming more and more armed groups, built along tribal lines, until there were seven.

Families became separated as they fled their homes to escape rebel ambushes. Of an estimated population of 2 million, more than 750,000 became refugees in neighbouring countries and more than one million were displaced within their own. Children who became separated from their parents in the chaos were easy fodder for rebel commanders, who increasingly sought to fill their ranks with kids as more and more adult men were killed or abandoned the country.

"They handed me the gun, and they told me to join, and when they asked you to join you joined, or they killed you," said Prince George, who fought from age 16 until a rocket blasted off most of his left hand.

"I decided to join the struggle just to survive. All the chance I had to survive was to pick up arms and save my life," said Joe Morris, whose parents had crossed the eastern border into Guinea and left 12-year-old Joe with his elder brother in their home town of Harbel. When Taylor's rebels attacked Har-bel, they captured Joe, took him to one of their training camps and turned him into a fighter.

Anyone who was in Liberia during the war, who saw the swaggering boys with their guns demanding handouts at highway roadblocks or playing soccer with human skulls in the rubble-strewn streets of Monrovia, felt a combination of fear, revulsion, and perhaps a touch of envy.

They seemed to have more fun than anyone else, certainly more than their withered elders whose bony shoulders sagged from fetching water and from yanking roots from the ground to mix in a pot with grass and eat as stew.

Boy soldiers, on the other hand, would stuff themselves with rice and grain donated by international aid agencies and stolen from the civilians for whom they were intended, and they would buy extra goodies with cash extorted from highway travelers.

When the war came to Monrovia, as it did three times over the course of the conflict, rebel fighters looted residences, offices and the UN compounds bare.

Children being children, boy soldiers often donned the dresses, wigs, pearly handbags, hats, fancy shoes and other goodies they had stolen and charged gleefully into battle.

Despite the laughs, the arrogant grins and the impromptu soccer games, the boy soldiers weren't having a good time. A close look into the faces of most revealed hazy, bloodshot eyes behind the pervasive dark sunglasses, the result of drugs forced upon them or taken voluntarily to dull the fear of death. As they became more accustomed to the killing they began to enjoy it, or at least not be afraid of the battles.

When the war ended, most kid soldiers assumed their leaders would reward them with money, schooling or cushy jobs in the security forces. None of those dreams came true. Of the children who turned in their weapons, the overwhelming major-ity simply wandered away to search for their families or, like Roland, to live on the streets.

It has been seven years since he ran to the U.S. embassy with his mother and joined Taylor's forces. In August 1997, Taylor was elected president of Liberia by a landslide in an election that marked the end of the war. While Taylor cruises Monrovia in his metallic four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser, Roland spends his days with other young ex-soldiers looking for food, money and odd jobs.

Some ex-soldiers have ended up in transit camps while agencies such as Save the Children try to find their families. The agency has reunited more than 650 ex-child soldiers through this tracing program, and each day, teams head into the countryside or deep into the slums of Monrovia to track the progress of the ex-soldiers. The results underscore the difficulties of transforming young killers back into normal children, particularly after a war that has left few families intact and has brutalized even those who didn't take part in the fighting.

"Abuse is a big problem, " said Jerry Jimmy, a Save the Children social worker. "Most of the things these parents do, they don't consider abuse. They consider it part of discipline, part of training, such as beating a child when the child doesn't do something or denying him food."

The result is that many children who have been reunited run away again and end up on the streets. Many ex-soldiers retain violent tendencies and frighten their families. Others simply can't adjust to a life of discipline after having spent years living with other kids on their own, drinking, smoking and taking drugs.

Few have received psychological counseling to deal with the horrors they witnessed during the war, in large part because after the war ended it was seen as more important to get them back into a normal environment to hasten rehabilitation. Time was also a factor. It can take months for a child to develop enough trust in a stranger to admit to the kinds of atrocities many young soldiers

com-mitted and discuss their feelings about what they did, and there was neither the time, money nor expertise available for that level of counseling.

Those who take part in vocational training or educational programs often drop out. "They don't understand why you should spend three years training to do something when you can just get what you want now by stealing," says Mulbah Johnson, the program director at the Don Bosco Vocational Training and Rehabilitation Center in Monrovia, which offers courses such as carpentry and electronics to ex-fighters.

Ironically, Johnson believes that in Liberia at least, the warlords' failures to care for their former fighters, and the Taylor government's slow pace in reviving the educational system, may be the wakeup call former combatants need. The more they see they've been left to fend for themselves, the more inclined they'll be to pull themselves up, he said.

But most child soldiers are getting little or no help.

"We're dying slowly," says Prince George, one of the residents of the electric-company compound. He becomes angry when asked why anyone should help people who pillaged the country and probably killed and raped many times over during the war: "We were children when we took up arms. We may be adults now, but a 16-year-old is a child, and a child who grew up with arms should definitely receive help."

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#### CHILDREN AT WAR / DUAL CAPTIVITY / REBEL GROUPS FORCE GIRLS INTO SOLDIERING AND SEX By Tina Susman. AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

Gulu, Uganda - Grace Akumu collapsed onto a straw mat on the floor of her family's home in rural northern Uganda, exhausted from hours of dancing with other young girls at a ceremony in their village. The warm, silent night quickly lulled her into a deep sleep alongside her mother and stepbrother. In her weary state, the 12-year-old forgot to bolt the heavy wooden door of the two-room house.

Suddenly the tiny home was filled with rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army shining their flashlights along the floors and walls and into the eyes of the frightened family. "I was so scared. I thought I would be killed because my stepbrother was being tied up and beaten," Grace said. They beat her mother,

then disappeared into the pitch-black night with Grace.

For the next five months, Grace carried boxes of ammunition, weapons and looted goods on her head, and she cooked for the fighters as they marched in blazing heat through the dry, thorny bush of northern Uganda toward LRA camps in southern Sudan. The farther they went, the longer the column of marchers became, as more children were abducted from villages along the way and forced to join. Those who couldn't keep up were lashed with sticks, beaten, shot or stabbed to death, often by other children ordered to do so by the adults leading the march.

"When they would tell you, Let him rest, they'd just kill him. That is the rest. You rest forever," said Michael Ojara, a 10-year-old abductee. Sometimes, the slow ones were simply abandoned as they dropped onto the sienna-colored earth, left to die of thirst and be picked apart by vultures.

In Sudan, Grace was taught to fire an AK-47. But in addition to being physically strong, Grace was tall and pretty. Eventually, a 40-year-old man named Ocholi won the battle among the LRA's male soldiers for Grace. The first time he demanded sex, Grace refused. "The man told the rebel commander," she recalls.

The commander said: Has she forgotten she could be killed?

More than 8,000 children have been abducted into this army of children in the past five years. Most are between the ages of 13 and 15, and only about half have escaped. Cruelly, about one-third of the LRA's child soldiers are girls like Grace, who in addition to being trained fighters are sex slaves to rebel commanders and have a far more difficult time than boys because of the sexual abuse they suffer. Those who escape often return to rural villages, where girls are expected to be virgins when they get married, usually in their mid-teens, and where the fertility rate - about seven babies per woman - is evidence of the cultural pressures on girls to marry and produce children. Communities often are more willing to forgive a male ex-soldier who has killed than a female ex-soldier who has been raped and perhaps left infertile by venereal disease. Whereas the boy is seen as still able to lead a productive life, the girl is viewed as unmarriageable, hence a burden to her family.

This perspective is not unique to Uganda, or to Africa. In Liberia, Sierra Leone and other countries engulfed in civil wars that have come to include children, girls and young women frequently are forced to become soldiers or sex slaves and are abandoned when they become pregnant or prove too much of a burden to their captors. In Colombia, right-wing paramilitaries use underage girls as spies who must sleep with enemy soldiers to get information. In Colombia and the Philippines, young girls are often enticed into joining the army or a rebel group by promises of training in nursing. They may get the training, but like Patricia, who at the age of 12 joined leftist guerrillas fighting the Colombian

government, they often get more than they bargained for. In Patricia's case, it was a bullet through the shoulder.

Given the LRA of Uganda's claim to be a religious army fighting to install a government based on the teachings of the Bible, the abduction of children and sexual abuse of girls might sound wildly incongruous. But nothing about the LRA or its war, now in its 13th year, makes sense.

Its leader, Joseph Kony, targets primarily civilian villages as opposed to Ugandan government forces, and he fills his ranks with children whom he uses to mete out the worst atrocities on people deemed enemies of the LRA's cause. Lips and ears of people who disobey LRA orders are sliced off, leaving villages occupied by scores of people with flat, pink splotches at their mouths and on the sides of their heads. People caught riding bicycles are hacked to death, the assumption being that the riders cycled into town to warn officials of the LRA's presence. One girl told counselors of being ordered to remove the intestines of a bicycle rider she had just killed and to wrap them around her body while drinking the victim's blood.

Boys and girls are forced to kill their own parents or one another, or be killed themselves. And while sexual activity between girl soldiers and LRA commanders is encouraged, affection between girl and boy soldiers is punishable by death.

One day in camp, a commander accused a boy and girl of having sex, another boy said. The two were tied to separate trees, and eight children were selected to shoot them. "There's no refusing. If you're picked you do it," recalls the boy, among those forced to be on the firing squad. Killing becomes normal, and showing sadness or fear brings beatings or death to the mourner. "Those killings - you don't even feel the pain," said Michael, the 10-year-old abductee. "You don't mourn.

You can't mourn someone being killed."

In camp, Kony harangues children for hours, telling them their army will one day win over Uganda and that the Ten Commandments will be the rule of law. "He used to say, Don't worry, by February we're going to take the government and everything will be possible," said a former soldier, Betty Ejang, smirking and shaking her head in disbelief. "I knew the man couldn't take the government."

Few believe the LRA could exist if it did not kidnap children to fill its ranks and if the Sudanese government did not allow it to operate from southern Sudan. Kony has no political or economic ideology to attract adult followers, and northern Uganda's children are easy and pliable targets. The region is largely rural, dotted with isolated villages occupied by extended families with dozens of children running free in the fields and tending crops on their own. They are small and wiry

but strong, with muscles developed from years of carry-ing water buckets and yanking potatoes out of the ground. Those lucky enough to get a good education are often in boarding schools, which are favorite LRA targets because of the number of obedient young girls found in them. Betty, then 13, was in such a school when it was attacked at about 2 a.m. one November morning in 1996 by LRA soldiers who burst into the dormitory where she slept with dozens of classmates. They were marched through the night without rest or food into southern Sudan for military training.

"I was so, so fearful when I was forced to fight, but when you say you don't want to fight they will just kill you right there - no compromise," Betty said. "When we were fighting we were just shooting and shooting. I don't even know if I killed anyone. I really intended to escape, but when they learn you want to escape they just kill you, so that's why I stayed so long in the bush. To get away from that bondage was so difficult."

When she wasn't fighting, Betty was one of several children picked by Kony to tend to his personal needs, which included clipping his toenails and finger-nails and combing out his dreadlocked hair. She said he spoke to her only when he wanted something done, and she refused to say if her duties included sex.

Betty escaped after two years as she marched, gun slung over her shoulder, in a line of young soldiers.

When she fell and twisted her ankle in the muddy ground, the children ahead of her didn't notice and kept walking. Betty looked back and saw that the rest of the line had not yet rounded the curve. For the first time in two years she was alone, and she ran. By the time she reached Gulu, where social workers were able to contact her family, her parents had given her up for dead. They had even held a funeral.

Now 17, Betty stays within the confines of a Gulu trauma center run by the international aid agency World Vision and has given up thoughts of going back to her boarding school or home. "I'm still scared," she says.

The extra duties imposed on Grace and Betty because they were girls are not unusual. "Most of the girls have syphilis when they come," said Grace Achan, a social worker in Gulu who counsels ex-soldiers. "We tell them it's the process of becoming a woman, that it isn't bad, that once you get cured you will become a normal girl, you will produce children, and you will have a happy life with your husband."

Few, though, have any desire for domestic life after being raped and abused. "You know, most girls who have been through forced marriage, they don't have much interest in getting married or having children," Achan said, recalling a 16-year-old who escaped the LRA with her baby and came to Gulu. "Within a week, she'd abandoned the baby."

The children, boys as well as girls, are not the only casualties of the LRA's brutality. The war has distorted the entire society of this part of northern Uganda.

Before the war, Gulu, the capital city of Gulu District, had a population of about 30,000. Now it bursts with more than 70,000 people, most of them here because they have been frightened out of their villages.

Crops throughout the region have withered and died from lack of care, communities and families have scattered and become fractured, and towns have been abandoned in favor of so-called "protected villages" where people live in squalid camps under 24-hour military guard.

"This is how most parents cope: They sleep in the bush, and the children come and sleep in town, so parental control over children has deteriorated," said George Omona, director of one of the trauma centers for ex-child soldiers in Gulu. "Children see that their parents cannot protect them. This thing is going to have a long-term effect on this region." Walter Opiyo's family is a perfect example. Each evening as the sun drops behind the palm fronds and the din of the day gives way to the humming of insects and the rustling of leaves, Walter creeps into the tall grass surrounding his family's mud hut, wraps himself in a blanket and settles down for the night.

It is a drill he has practiced since September, 1998, when he escaped from the LRA one year after being kidnaped at age 14. "Until it comes to daybreak and you see your son back at home - it is not until then that you see it is all right until the next night," says his mother, Christine Aunu.

In a clearing in the palm forest a few miles outside Gulu, Walter lives among two families who have lost a total of five sons to the rebels. Four of the boys have escaped and returned home, including Walter's brother Francis. It is difficult to find any family in northern Uganda's Gulu District that has not been touched by Kony's LRA. These two families, though, who share a collection of mud and thatched-roof huts that are overrun with tiny children, have suffered more than most. Aunu's first son, Francis, was kidnaped in April, 1996, during a raid on the family homestead. Seventeen months later, the rebels returned to take Walter.

"I said, You're not going to take him away! I've already lost one! It annoyed them," said Aunu, who was holding her 9-month-old daughter in her arms throughout the attack. "They began beating them up and down. The baby fell from my arms." They wanted to take her husband, Nelson, but he resisted. "They tied his hands behind with a belt and beat him with sticks and stabbed him with a bayonet, once in the heart and once in the ribs," Aunu said as chickens and a gray rabbit scampered through the yard among the palm trees and a young girl stirred the steaming contents of a huge iron cooking pot.

"I would like to be able to keep them in a safe place. I want them to survive," said her neighbor, Saraphina Atoo, the mother of three abducted sons. Two have escaped, but she has lost hope for the third. "We're totally helpless, and the way the rebels are mistreating our children, abducting them time and time again, it worries us a lot. There's nobody now who can protect us," she said as the light began fading and sounds of human life began receding.

Dusk is brief along the equator, where day becomes night in minutes, with little in the way of evening in between. By 6:30 p.m., as the sun is about to set, the footpaths cutting through the tall grass and the dirt road leading into Gulu are deserted, because most rebel attacks occur after dark. Gulu stirs busily with hundreds of children from nearby villages, who have streamed in to sleep in relative security wherever they can find space: on the grounds of the post office, in schools, in the hospital, on the verandas surrounding downtown shops. Gulu itself is a city of long-faded charm about 60 miles south of the Sudanese border, where either the sun or rain beats down mercilessly upon wide avenues shaded by flowering trees and lined by cracked and sagging buildings. Life moves at a languid pace, from the bicycle taxis pedaling slowly around the forlorn traffic circles to the vendors fanning themselves in the shade.

It is here that hundreds of children have been brought after their years with the LRA, to be counseled by social workers and, when possible, returned to their families. But it's not easy to get frightened kids like Betty, Grace and Michael to leave the security of Gulu when they know there's a chance the LRA could abduct them again.

It's just as difficult to get families and communities to take back children who have killed and brutalized others, including their family members. One family refused to accept a 14-year-old boy who had been forced to smash in his parents' heads with an ax when he was abducted. In another case, the parents of a young boy came to Gulu to meet their newly freed son and stared in horror as he cheerily recounted tales of torture and murder from his days with the LRA.

"The child now is different from the child they remember," said Omona, the trauma center director. "Some people in the community say, Look, that child is mad. Why don't you keep him there or keep him out on a farm somewhere? " Perhaps the worst lesson the children learn from the LRA is that killing a person is easy.

"Killing people among them is so normal. Killing a person is just like killing a chicken. It's just a normal thing," said Anthony Obama, the social worker assigned to work with Michael Ojara, who spent three years with the LRA before escaping shortly before Christmas, 1998. "I've been asking him when he saw people around him getting killed, how did he feel. He said, Nothing. I feel nothing. "

A short, sinewy boy with black, almond-shaped eyes, Michael looks younger than his 13 years, but his mannerisms are those of an adult who has seen it all: short, clipped sentences with no childlike hesitation; head held straight up and eyes staring ahead as he talks about the past. "Sometimes you would get a big stick and just beat the head," he says, describing punishment for children who were caught trying to escape. "Sometimes they were cut using pangas, machetes. Sometimes they were just trampled, stepped on until they died."

"It didn't look difficult, and you just got used to it. Every punishment was death," said Justice Kaguma, another child receiving counseling in Gulu, who spent months hiding his horribly swollen feet from his captors. "I saw a boy who could not walk anymore because his feet were swollen, so they hit his head until he died. I was scared, because I knew if anyone else couldn't walk they would kill them, too, so whenever they asked me I said my feet were fine."

Last year, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni bowed to pressure from opposition politicians, church leaders and civilian organizations and announced he was prepared to grant amnesty to Kony and his followers if they would emerge peacefully from the bush, free their child soldiers and stop fighting. The rebels have yet to respond, and their attacks continue.

Museveni's critics say he could have ended the violence years ago through negotiations. Being a former rebel leader himself, though, the Ugandan president refused and insisted he would defeat the LRA militarily.

In the past year, though, he has in essence admitted defeat, saying his 40,000-strong army - whittled down from 100,000 since 1992 to save money - lacks the strength and discipline to chase down the LRA as it slips through the north and back and forth across the Sudanese border. His problems are compounded by separate rebel insurgencies in the west and northwest, and by his army's involvement in the war in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo.

Some of Museveni's critics suggest that he has intentionally allowed the LRA war to continue in order to deflect attention from the country's other problems and garner international sympathy for his government.

They say it may be time for Museveni to talk directly to Kony to negotiate an end to the war, but that would involve dealing - at least indirectly - with one of Kony's backers, Sudan's government in Khartoum.

As long as Museveni supports southern Sudanese rebels battling that government, it's doubtful Khartoum would agree to cut off the support that helps keep the LRA operating.

Counselors in Gulu and parents of abducted children reluctantly agree that amnesty is the only solution.

"But that means we have to forgive, and that's not easy," said Omona, who

admits his gut reaction would be to punish Kony after seeing what his LRA has done to children such as Grace, now 15 years old and undergoing rehabilitation in Gulu. "Is there a way of winning his Kony's heart so all those children can come out? That's where we have a moral dilemma. Do we forgive him to win his heart?"

For two years, Grace was forced to live as Ocholi's "wife" and submit to his sexual demands in between forays into the battlefield. She's not sure which was worse: being a soldier or a sex slave.

"I hated both. Each seemed worse than the other," said Grace, who made her escape in March, 1997, when the rebel unit she was with came under attack by Ugandan government soldiers. Eight months later, on Nov. 28, 1997, she bore a child by the man she hated.

When she realized she was pregnant, Grace's first thought was to abort the child. "I didn't even like the father," she said. After the birth, though, she said she began to love the baby, "just because it's a baby girl. Taking care of a boy would have been very difficult. It might be just like its father."

Grace took the advice of a social worker and named the baby Hope.

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CHILDREN AT WAR / A GENERATION LOST TO WAR / REBELS, NATIONS  
FASHION CHILDREN INTO KILLING MACHINES  
BYLINE: By Tina Susman and  
Geoffrey Mohan

DATELINE: Kenema, Sierra Leone

Kenema, Sierra Leone - Soldiers who were themselves children drove fourth-grader Abu Jusu to go to war.

Hunched in the bushes, he watched as rebels dragged his mother and father from their home and forced them to lie on their backs in the dirt road, their eyes staring up into the starry night.

As other villagers were ordered to crowd around like spectators at a cock fight, the rebels hoisted axes high and slammed them down onto the necks of the chosen couple, sending their heads tumbling toward the terrified onlookers. "Nothing was explained. They killed them just because they wanted to kill them," says Abu. "They were child soldiers, very young boys who beheaded them."

Now, Abu himself is a child soldier, a trained member of the Kamajor civil-defense unit who joined to avenge his parents' murder.

That was three years ago, and although the math doesn't match the physique, this would-be seventh-grader - standing about 4-foot-8 with tiny hands, undeveloped body, cherubic, hairless face and high, prepubescent voice tells visitors in all seriousness that he is 28 years old.

Age is a touchy topic in the rebel zone where Abu lives, in a violent nation where the international spotlight on the use of child soldiers has been cast with particular intensity. Worldwide, that spotlight has grown brighter. And with good reason. There are an estimated 300,000 minors engaged in combat world-wide, and the 20th Century is ending with the dubious distinction of having more children in the field of battle than any other period of history.

Children "become in a very cynical way the best raw material to fashion into efficient, ruthless, unquestioning tools of war," Olara Otunnu, the UN special representative for children and armed conflict, said in an interview.

"Because they are impressionable, they're like a vessel. Whatever you want to shape them into, they'll be shaped. So you indoctrinate them, you shape them, and then as we see, from Sierra Leone to Congo to Sri Lanka, they are the most ruthless."

With an intensity similar to the campaign against land mines, international attention is beginning to turn toward people like Abu. The aim is to raise in international law the minimum acceptable age for combat to 18. The current standard is 15, a benchmark the majority of signatory nations found too low when they agreed to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 under pressure from the United States, which recruits 17-year-olds.

In visits to six countries on four continents, Newsday has found that even the 15-year-old limit is widely and openly flouted. Children as young as 9 have been fighting in battle zones as diverse as Kosovo, Colombia, the Philippines, Liberia, Uganda and Sierra Leone. They are snatched or seduced into committing unspeakable acts. They think like children, but fall like adults.

These are the children at war: A 13-year-old girl in Mindanao, the Philippines, joins communist rebels to avoid a forced marriage. Three years later, she is cut down by a bullet, and in her childish mind, wonders why she doesn't die like the heroes and heroines of Hollywood. "I was thinking all the while that if you are hit by a bullet, like you see in movies, you would just fall down and that's the end," Lilay, a former communist cadre, says.

"But the experience of being hit in an encounter, it's different and very, very painful." At an age when an American girl has just gotten interested in boys, a

12-year-old Ugandan girl becomes both a soldier and a sex slave because one day she forgets to lock her door, and the minions of a crazed warlord come in. "I hated both," Grace, now 15 and the mother of an infant, said of her dual bondage. "Each seemed worse than the other." Her fellow child soldiers are dispatched to cut off the lips or ears of those who disobey a violent and ranting leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, leaving villages with scores of mutilated victims. A teenage girl joins the communist rebels of Colombia in the cocaine jungles, eager to be trained as a nurse. But her last gruesome anatomy lesson comes when she is told to cut open the body of her 14-year-old friend, executed after being judged a traitor in a revolutionary show trial. She swears the girl was still moving when the blade pierced her adolescent belly.

A Liberian boy who resists forced recruitment is told rebels will begin killing a lineup of captured civilians, one by one, until he agrees to join. After the fourth killing, he relents. Many children in Liberia and other countries are fed drugs to make them fight more ferociously, like Mohammed Sisay, a preteen soldier who became dependent upon "Bubbles," as his comrades called the amphetamines fed to them by their grown-up Liberian commanders. "I began to fight the war. I didn't feel discouraged or afraid. They made me invisible," he said.

At night, they were given more drugs to make them sleep. A 10-year-old Sierra Leonean boy abducted by Revolutionary United Front rebels tries to escape but is caught and punished by being confined six days in a dungeon-like hole dug into the ground and covered with metal sheets that turn it into an oven. Each day brings lashings with a rubber trun-cheon. Some of his fellow combatants, like the ones who attacked Abu's parents, tear through the countryside lopping off hands and arms and collecting them in sacks to impress their commanders.

Child rebels in April used axes to chop off the hands of 13-year-old Mariatu Kamara after they kidnaped her and her 15-year-old sister, Adama, as the girls walked through the forest. First they hacked off Adama's hands and left her for dead. Then they carried Mariatu away, promising she would not be harmed. As soon as some adult rebels left the girl alone with kid soldiers, though, they decided to chop off her hands, too.

The sisters survived and today live in a camp for amputees in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, along with hundreds of victims of similar atrocities. Many tell similar nightmarish tales of children who laughed as they chopped off limbs and claimed to be collecting hands to impress a commander dubbed "Capt. Blood.

"They were laughing. They were enjoying it," said 25-year-old Muctarr Braima, whose left arm was chopped off in January by young rebels carrying a bloody sack filled with other amputated hands.

Child soldiers are the lost generation of protracted civil wars, in nations where the three things that are most plentiful are children, poverty and violence. Shell-

shocked human-rights workers in Colombia joke that in their Amazonian backwaters, kids leave three prints behind: their two feet, and the rifle barrel dragging behind them. The kids tread a career path offering a post in the right-wing paramilitaries, the left-wing guerrillas, prostitution or cutting coca to process cocaine.

The use of children who are still developing their values and personalities to shoot, often to murder, their fellow human beings violates all the moral taboos of society and, at least for the younger ones, constitutes a massive violation of human rights.

As Newsday reporters talked to child soldiers around the globe and those who worry about them, it became clear that war itself has become more brutal, unpredictable and violent because of their more widespread use, because children are so malleable and easily misled.

"They have no notion of what they're doing," said the UN's Otunnu. "They're indoctrinated. They are told to do this, and they will do it with ferocity." While some of these children join armies or guerrilla groups willingly, their decision often is founded in such desperation that it represents no choice at all. Many, many others are systematically kidnaped into war, while the world stands by watching.

How does a child recover from such horrific experiences? Experts say most never do, because there are precious few resources set aside to help them. Not only do these countries lose an entire generation, but families wind up torn apart while society at large fears its own children. "There's a value crisis in the society. Sitting by the fireside is no longer there," said George Omona, director of a trauma center for child soldiers in Uganda. "It has brought about a lack of trust in the family."

The United Nations, UNICEF and a slew of international human-rights groups believe one simple first step toward improving the situation would be to raise the minimum age for combat to 18 in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. In that treaty and others, the age of adulthood is defined as 18. That is, for everything but war.

"With the 18-year limit, hopefully we'll see fewer 13- and 14-year-olds pulled in," said Jo Becker, head of the Children's Rights section of Human Rights Watch, a Manhattan-based group spearheading the effort against child soldiers. "Especially in countries without a lot of documentation, where a commander can pull in a healthy-looking 13-year-old and pass him off as 15."

The last effort to raise the minimum combat age failed when the treaty was finalized in 1989, due to protest from an unexpected source. The United States maintains it must protect its right to recruit from a pool of high-school graduates or dropouts, even though they amount to less than 6 percent of any year's batch

of recruits, and less than 1 percent of the active force. Britain, which allows 16-year-olds into its ranks, also opposes raising the age limit, but has said it will stand aside to let the treaty pass, then decide whether to sign it.

The United States won't let the treaty go forward at all.

"We have trouble with the notion of allowing an international standard to form that we would have trouble adhering to," said James Schear, an aide to Defense Secretary William Cohen who is following the issue for the United States.

"Standing aside, as some countries may be willing to do, would not cut it with us." That posture angers the developing world, where most wars are being fought.

"It depresses me when I see countries like the United States opposing this," said Omona. "These other countries already have mechanisms in place to protect their children, but in Africa we have a problem.

There is this will among African leaders to shoot their way into power and to give guns to children, and there currently is nothing stopping them from doing that. It would not cost these countries a lot to raise the age to 18, and I think African children would greatly benefit from it."

Not only in Africa, but also in Asia, South America and Europe, it is becoming increasingly hard to separate civilians from combatants.

In the mindless carnage of World War I, civilians accounted for 10 percent of total casualties. In the era of aerial bombardment of cities in World War II, they rose to 45 percent. Today, in the wars of the developing world, civilians can comprise as much as 90 percent of wars casualties, according to the UN.

"That is prosecuting war for the purpose of killing civilians, where the very purpose of war is to annihilate the enemy community," said the UN's Otunnu, a native of Uganda. "That's what we're witnessing today. If this was something isolated - it happens in Rwanda, it happens in Kosovo and maybe in Afghanistan - fine. But this is across the globe. In that context, we're seeing, with barely an exception, the massive use of children."

Internal wars last longer and gut societies of any taboos they once may have held, explained Otunnu, who this past year visited most of the civil-war hot spots, from Sri Lanka to Colombia to Sierra Leone.

"War is not new to them, but they always had rules of war," Otunnu said. "The elders will tell you very clearly, This you do, this you don't do. That has gone. It's a kind of ethical vacuum, a free-for-all. It's total war, in which everything goes."

With adults dying or dropping out, children fill the vacuum for leaders who increasingly seek total control, Otunnu said. Forty-two percent of the population

in the developing world, on average, is under 18. It is about a quarter of the population in the developed world. So children become the most available and willing recruits, he said.

To be sure, children and war have intermingled in the past. During the Middle Ages, thousands were sent off from Europe to martyr themselves in the Children's Crusade. British soldiers as young as 16 died in the Falklands and Persian Gulf Wars, according to Human Rights Watch. But never were children so widely exposed as they are now, human-rights officials warn.

"Certainly, youths have been involved in war, but not at the same level or in the same extreme measures," said Becker, of Human Rights Watch. "We are seeing kids today being used on suicide missions, being pushed to the front or even being used as human mine detectors."

Jean-Claude LeGrand, the head of child-protection programs for UNICEF in New York, says history is no excuse. "I am always a bit concerned about comparing too much the fact that there have always been children used as soldiers in history, because this would miss the point," he said. "The point is that there is a systematic use of children for the last 10 years, not for the last 20,000 years. For the last 10 years what has occurred is the systematic use of children on a very large scale. And it's developing very, very fast."

Technology has helped make child soldiering feasible. Children are fighting with arms that are increasingly easy to carry and toy-like in their simplicity. The M-16, the AK-47, the AR-15 and the ArmaLite rifle, weapons of choice for rebel groups and regular armies alike, weigh about 8 pounds. With a light squeeze of the trigger, they fire a burst of bullets that travel at more than 900 yards per second and can punch a fist-sized hole in human flesh. For many of these children, their elders say, that squeeze of the trigger is their first sensation of power, identity and belonging.

In Sierra Leone, where, until a recent peace agreement, children were ordered to lop off the heads and limbs of civilians, child soldiering dates to colonial times. As the British army began withdrawing in preparation for the country's independence in 1961, it began searching for suitable recruits to build a new, post-independence army for Sierra Leone. "They started with men, but they were not educated enough," recalls Momodu B. Jawara, the commander of the Kamajor camp in Kenema and a former child soldier himself.

"Then they started looking at new secondary school graduates, but that took too long. So they started looking for kids in school."

Jawara, recruited at age 14, was one of those kids. Unlike in his day, though, when children were molded by military officers into disciplined soldiers, the child soldiers of today are primarily members of rebel groups whose main skills are

killing and looting, not defending their countries against foreign invaders. The UN's Otunnu said the Kamajors, a civil-defense unit that evolved from an elite brand of hunter-warriors, fall into that category, though they support the current government of Sierra Leone.

"The Kamajors, they had a traditional system for training adults, to learn how to hunt, to assume responsibility," Otunnu said. "It was twisted in the context of this war to become a channel through which you get young fighters. It's no longer to go through an elaborate training program. Just round them up, indoctrinate them and give them a gun. That was an offshoot of something traditional, which had a positive purpose. It was orderly, it was very systematic, and then it was distorted into this."

Jawara's trainees undergo a secret initiation and immunization - which neither he nor his followers would describe but which is rumored to include the eating of human flesh - that they claim makes them bulletproof.

Their trademark is a lion's tooth hanging from a black cord around the neck. Children Associated With War, which tries to rehabilitate former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, estimates about 10,000 kids under 18 - many under 15 - are involved in combat in the country, where a civil war has raged since 1991. Though a truce was signed in July, peace is far from guaranteed, and the young combatants remain armed to the teeth and on a war footing. There is a land of teeny-boppers with guns who listen to rap music and wear Tupac Shakur muscle shirts, imitation Ray-Bans, counterfeit Nikes, and AK-47s slung across their bony chests.

Here, at least, the campaign against child soldiering is being heard, though not necessarily heeded. Jawara insists no one younger than 18 is accepted into Kamajor training. Having been a 14-year-old recruit himself and having made a career of the military, however, he says child soldiering is good if discipline and training go with it.

Why, then, doesn't he drop his age limit? "Because you people don't allow it!" he says with a laugh, referring to the international condemnation of child soldiering. "I've been scared of you guys. One day you might just bump into us and say, Let me see your Kamajors. So I have to make sure they're all old enough."

Still, it's clear they're not. It's hard to keep a straight face as one Kamajor after another steps forward, shyly extends a skinny arm in greeting, and states in an unbroken voice an age that appears to be exaggerated by at least a decade. Musa Kallon, about 5 feet tall and no more than 80 pounds, insists he is 25 but looks 15 at most. "I've come to fight and train for my country," he says, holding up a rifle as his fishnet camouflage tank top hangs on him like a potato sack.

A boy in fuzzy pink pajamas who looks about 15 bounds forward and offers his

age as 22. A tiny boy claims to be 19. Jawara jumps in and says the boy is only 9 and not a Kamajor but a kitchen helper. When Jawara is not listening, though, the boy insists he has undergone Kamajor training.

Later, as more and more self-proclaimed 20-somethings begin running forward and clowning childishly for the visitors, the camp's adult commanders get edgy. One grabs a stick and chases the group - including the boy in the bunny-like pink pajamas and another toting a rifle and wearing a goofy Cat-in-the-Hat style top hat - into the kitchen and orders them to stay there.

Later, under Jawara's watchful eye, three lines of about 200 trainees march back and forth under the barking orders of a commander. Little Abu, who has graduated from military training, uses a stick taller than himself to lash at those who don't keep up with the drill, which is performed under a broiling sun.

Like Abu, these trainees will be taught how to use and care for a variety of weapons, how to dig trenches, how to swing across a rope suspended between two trees, how to find their way through the dense forest and how to sustain them-selves for days in the wilderness. It's like an African version of the Outward Bound survival course, except that most of these boys have seen combat and are doing this to hone their survival skills and obtain the laminated card that identifies them as full-fledged Kamajors.

These boys at least are volunteers, basking in the glory of being part of a group that still has an elite reputation for its fighting skills and willingness to confront the notorious rebels. But many Sierra Leonean rebels are children abducted by the fighters and literally branded by having their skin sliced with razor blades.

"They're the worst," militia commander Jawara said of his adversaries in the Revolutionary United Front.

"They have no consciences. They kill; they don't feel anything. They're the most wicked of the lot. This cutting of hands is done by children. The burning of houses - they use the children to do that."

James Thorpe was 10 when he was abducted by the rebels and forced to pick up a gun and fight with them.

His captivity lasted six years and included being drugged with gunpowder to make him hyper and agitated - more willing to kill and fight on the front lines. "We were almost always hungry. When there was food, we would be called to stand in line and hold our hands out," he says, explaining that there were no bowls or eating utensils. The gunpowder was mixed into the food to ensure it was ingested by the famished boys.

Like most former child soldiers, who are fearful of retribution and tortured by the things they have seen and done, James denies ever intentionally killing anyone

during his fighting days, though he admits the bullets he fired might have hit someone. It is only after months of in-depth counseling - a luxury un-heard of in most developing countries - that youngsters start to admit to what they have done, say adults who work with such children. But getting them to confess is crucial to relieving their guilt, say counselors, whose job is to make the children see that their horrible deeds were forced upon them by adults and that they should not be burdened by guilt.

For both former abductees and willing recruits whose hands are accustomed to little more than guns, the end of the wars leaves their prospects truncated. With its war over for two years, Liberia's estimated 4,300 child soldiers have exchanged their weapons for sacks of rice, a change of clothes and the equivalent of \$ 5. But few have gone back to the few schools that remain open. Most ex-soldiers, wherever they are, are too embarrassed to sit in classrooms surrounded by children years their junior. What's left to most of them is an itinerant life on the street, where begging and stealing offer more immediate rewards than lean years spent in a classroom or vocational school. And many have been horribly maimed or disfigured by their battles, left by their rebel heroes to languish or die.

Perhaps worse is the change in attitudes toward children in countries that have been brutalized by them.

No longer can a hungry, homeless child wander into a village and expect help, said Theo Momoh of Children Associated With War. "Now, people are a bit skeptical," he said. "How can they be so open? They think maybe this child could be a spy. In the beginning of the war we saw children as innocents, but during the war we came to see how they were being used, and that's when the doubts came."

Meanwhile, besieged governments around the world choose defense spending over more social programs that could help ex-soldiers. "With this will in Africa, with leaders shooting their way into power and putting children at war, I don't know what kind of Africa we'll have in the future," said Omona, at the trauma center in Uganda.

"I think for the sake of children in Africa, the world should do more." And more for all the children of the world whose tender years were brutalized by performing the arts of war.

"These guys are loose cannons in a way. They're so used to being on their own, that they're basically just little, early adults," said Elke Wisch, a child-development expert with UNICEF. "If they don't want to go home at night, they don't go home. You basically have a lost generation out there now."