

Soldiering Children and Availability of Small Arms

BY BIPIN ADHIKARI

Nepal is one of the approximately 28 war-torn or disturbed countries in the world where children under the age of 18 are pressured into joining rebel groups or irregular army units. It is no wonder that the Maoists engaged in the 'people's war' have also banked on soldiering children to achieve their dream of a republican Nepal.

Following indiscriminate killing and heavy casualties at the hand of security forces in recent months, they have again beefed up their campaigns of kidnapping school students and dozens of teachers from the Western Nepal to balance their deficits. Such kidnappings of teachers and school children by the rebels are relatively common but have increased significantly in recent months. There has been a spate of recent abductions of school children by the rebels, who according to government officials are facing disaffections and resistance to recruitment. Armed Maoists force the students from grade six to 10 and their teachers to go with them. They are then made to undergo insurgency training by the rebels and would be drafted into their rebellion against the authorities. The attempt of the security forces to find the schoolteachers kidnapped by Maoist guerrillas have not been successful. These incidents have terrified other students and teachers who have stopped going to schools, forcing the school management to close down many schools in the conflict affected area.

There are easily understandable reasons why Maoists are banking on the children to achieve their political goal. For the type of armed conflict the Maoists are relying on, children make obedient and cheap soldiers, capable of instilling fear in civilians and opposition forces alike. Those forced to fight are generally poor, illiterate and from rural zones, while volunteers are usually motivated by a desire to escape poverty or lured by appeals to Maoist ideology. Some of them volunteer also out of a preconscious sense of machismo. Sometime their motive is simply revenge but often they are pushed into taking up arms against their will. In fact, there is still little information regarding the suffering inflicted on girl soldiers, or about the many roles they play in the Maoist movement. Everywhere in the world, a strong correlation has been seen between the easy availability of small arms and the dramatic rise in the victimization of women and children. As weapons become smaller, lighter and easier to handle, the number of child casualties of armed conflict mounts and children become increasingly attractive as soldiers and arms runners. It might be true of the Maoist people's war as well.

The move has become easier because the government never tried to effectively prevent the root causes of their recruitment and participation in conflict, or direct its efforts at vulnerable groups of children and at the recruiters themselves. They were never convinced that the costs of their behavior outweighed any perceived benefits. Additionally, the government continues to keep off from calling public scrutiny to raise

the political and material costs to those who would violate the rights of children in armed conflict. The psyche of the people must be harnessed to the development of fresh ideas for protecting children and to deterring those who would exploit them in times of conflict.

Nepal is not the only country failing in this sector. Children in many parts of the world, including in Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, Sri Lanka and East Timor, continue to be killed, maimed, sexually abused, recruited into armed forces and deprived of life saving humanitarian assistance. Many of the values, principles and concrete commitments enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child remain unfulfilled, as do those of Security Council resolution 1261 (1999), reflecting the Convention's obligations and principles.

In addition, Unicef wants every nation to sign the Optional Protocol on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which would raise the minimum soldiering age worldwide from 15 to 18. It is also calling for action to reunite refugee families and wants western countries to provide counseling for traumatized children on top of ordinary emergency aid. The organization is also calling for sanctions,

such as those on Iraq, to be analyzed to discover the impact on children. It wants action to protect relief workers in war zones and prosecute those using rape as a weapon of war. Unicef has also begun a counseling programme in Kosovo for Albanian children traumatised by the exhumation of their relatives' bodies. Landmines are killing 800 children every month around the world but in El Salvador Unicef's landmines awareness programme has reduced casualties to nil. A look at the Maoist infested areas in Nepal will also prove that children inevitably miss out on their education as a result of conflicts, which damage their schools and drive away teachers.

Fulfilling the international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child involves the daily advocating of child rights with government officials, insurgents like Maoists of Nepal, their commanders, civil society representatives, and children and youth themselves. It also means that UN Security Council members must actively turn words into deeds. Those who violate children's rights or collude in such violations must be made to feel the repugnance of civilized people everywhere.

However, it does not help to discuss the problems of conflict-affected children whether in the context of Maoist movement or otherwise in isolation. It is important to look not only at the symptoms of their plight, but to take aim at the causes as well. Poverty killed more children than did conflicts, and lack of health care would kill even more and leave millions of other children orphaned and destitute. ■

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