



## **Children on the Battlefield: A Look into the Use of Child Soldiers in the DRC Conflict**

**Judith Victoria Mwandumba,**  
Mzuzu University, Malawi

### **Abstract**

The phenomenon of child soldiers has become a global concern, particularly since the end of the Cold War and particularly in Africa, a continent replete with numerous and protracted civil wars where children are recruited to serve as combatants and carry out other roles. This paper focuses on the child soldier phenomenon on the African continent in general and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in particular. Following a review of literature on conflict in the DRC, Africa and beyond, the paper argues that a range of political, economic, social and cultural factors all combine to bring about this deadly phenomenon. In the case of the DRC, the paper argues that all parties to the conflict have used children at some point and this has made it hard to stop their recruitment altogether. The paper also examines reasons why children are preferred for recruitment and argues that as long as conflicts continue to ravage the African continent, the child soldier will remain on the African battlefields for the foreseeable future. Despite some drawbacks, the paper further argues that important steps have been made thus far to end the use of children in armed conflict.

### **Introduction**

The number and intensity of armed conflicts on the African continent has long been a matter of major concern to the world, and more specifically, to the United Nations Security Council; a body that holds the primary responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security throughout the world. From the time many countries on the continent gained independence there have been numerous, albeit of different types and durations. Adedeji (1999: 3) argues that during the four decades between the 1960s and the 1990s, about 40 sub-Saharan African countries registered close to 80 violent changes of governments. What is more, at the beginning of the new millennium “there were 18 countries facing armed rebellion and 11 facing severe political crises” (Adedeji 1999: 5). While the numbers might have dropped in recent years, Africa continues to grapple with conflicts. The Arab Spring, which affected Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the decade long conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, military coups in Mali, Madagascar, the Central African, and deadly conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, Rwanda and

Sudan have brought untold suffering to the people on the continent (Adedeji 2002; Cilliers 1995; Field 2004; Laremont 2002; and Tungwarara 2011). Conflicts in the region have been and continue to be a serious threat to political, economic and social development. In his report, 'The causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa', Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, noted that while Africa as a whole had begun to make significant political and economic progress, many parts of the region were still lagging behind because progress was being threatened or impeded by conflicts (United Nations 1998). This picture does not augur well for a region whose poverty levels still remain high despite numerous efforts at development. What is more, the prevalence of intra-state conflicts in Africa, specifically in the aftermath of the East-West rivalry has not only made a bad situation worse, it has also brought about a phenomenon that has become one of the most serious threats to the continent's development and security; the child soldier phenomenon.

As conflict and warfare continue to threaten societies and the lives of many, the welfare of children would appear to be at a greater risk than ever before. Today, large numbers of children are reportedly on battlefields the world over, fighting wars they do not know or being forced to support causes they know little about (Singer 2005). The effects of which are terribly felt by children themselves, specifically those that are recruited to serve in warfare. The use of children in armed conflicts is one aspect that had gone largely unnoticed for a long time in much of the literature. While literature on conflict traditionally focused mainly on its impact on political, economic and social development, not much was done to address the effect of such conflicts on children who incidentally happen to be one of the most vulnerable groups in society. However, times have since changed. Today, the phenomenon of child soldiers and its negative impacts on children has not been lost on the international community. Images of children on the battlefield have drawn the attention of the media, international policymakers and child rights advocates the world over; these bodies have been in the forefront demanding an end to this practice (Singer 2005).

This paper looks at the child soldier phenomenon as one of the characteristics of conflict in Africa and the DRC in particular, and argues that while poverty and political and economic stagnation are major consequences of conflict in general, the impact of child soldiers on Africa's development warrants special attention considering the fact that children remain important future leaders of the continent. The paper also argues that, contrary to conventional views which portray children as innocent victims of warfare, in contemporary conflicts in which children are not only passive victims; they are also active combatants on the frontlines. Children in Africa therefore remain both targets and perpetrators of violence to an unprecedented degree (Briggs 2005).

The paper is divided into six sections: the first section looks at the definitions of 'child' and 'child soldier'. The second examines the child soldier phenomenon within the African context. The third explores conditions leading to the increased use of children in African armed conflicts and why they (children) are specifically preferred targets for recruitment. The fourth gives a brief

overview of the DRC conflict and the use of child soldiers in that country's conflict thus far. The fifth investigates the effects of armed conflict on children in general, and the final section examines steps taken by concerned governments in Africa and the international community to reduce and stop the use of children in armed conflicts.

### **Who is a child soldier?**

There has been much contention surrounding the definition of the terms 'child' and 'child soldier', this is so especially considering the fact that childhood is a relative concept that changes according to historical time, geographical environment and socio-economic conditions among other factors (Twum-Danso 2003). This paper borrows the United Nations definitions of child and child soldier. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (UNCRC Article 1), and the term child soldier refers to:

any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members...it does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms (Coalition to Stop the Use of the Child 2003).

### **The child soldier phenomenon**

It has been argued that "the phenomenon of children in combat is not recent, nor is it solely an issue in African countries, as many may assume" (Briggs 2005: xii). However, the marked and tragic increase in their use particularly in civil wars in the last several decades has given the phenomenon a new and different dimension altogether (Briggs 2005). According to numerous accounts, the history of children's involvement in armed conflict dates back many years. What is important to highlight though, is the fact that the phenomenon has experienced several changes with regard to the roles played by children. Honwana argues that the phenomenon of child soldiers is deeply rooted in the history of all civilizations, and she points out that children have taken part in warfare and political conflict from as early as the Middle Ages (Honwana 2006:26). Notable warfare incidences in which children played a vital role include;

the Children's Crusade of 1212, Napoleon's army of 19<sup>th</sup> century which featured a number of child combatants about twelve years old and the First and the second World Wars in which young boys lied about their age in order to fight as a sign of patriotism (Twum-Danso 2003:17).

Children have also taken part in revolutions with strong ideological motivations, for instance the Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Honwana 2006:27). Children perform multiple roles for their groups, they might be used as active combatants, spies, messengers, porters, cooks, servants, layers and clearers of land mines and where girls are involved, they also

serve as ‘wives’<sup>1</sup> to commanders. These roles were carried out by children in the past and the trend has continued up to this day albeit with some remarkable differences. In modern conflicts, the roles played by children have become deadlier than before, with half the number of children in armed groups fighting in active combat on the battle field and performing some of the most horrifying acts ever known to mankind (Peter et al 1998).

### **Conditions/factors leading to increased numbers of children in African armed conflicts**

The literature on child soldiers indicates that the phenomenon seems to be a worldwide problem (Singer 2005, Honwana 2006, and Briggs 2005). Africa, and the sub-Saharan region in particular, however, appears to be the epicenter of the phenomenon. Studies further indicate that when compared to other regions of the world, Africa, one of the poorest continents of the world, has the highest number of child soldiers fighting in various wars that continue to plague the continent (McIntyre 2005). Accounts of child soldiering in Africa indicate that children have been used both by government forces and by guerillas battling them (Briggs 2005). It has been argued that of an estimated 300,000 children thought to be involved in wars around the world, nearly half are found in Africa alone (Twum-Danso 2003). Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Uganda are some of the countries where the use of child soldiers has been and still remains most problematic (Hirsch 2001). However, “due to the scarcity of reliable documentation and the fact that most armed groups, including government forces, deny their existence, the exact number of child soldiers is difficult to assess and thus, they remain ‘invisible’ ” (Afua Twum-Danso 2003: 12). Again, compared to other regions, Africa’s population consists of the highest number of young people; about 45 percent of the population (Afua Twum-Danso 2003). This presents Africa with a daunting task: that of finding a long lasting solution to the phenomenon especially given the fact that young people in Africa have very limited livelihood prospects and chances of their joining armed groups as an economic alternative still remain very high (Peters 2004).

Why have children become a target for armed groups and some government forces in contemporary African conflicts? A number of factors/conditions help explain the unprecedented increase both in the number of child soldiers and their horrifying acts in today’s conflicts. In the first place, technological changes in weaponry in the contemporary era have seen the participation of children in armed conflicts take on a different dimension. As Machel (2001: 2) points out, “Indeed, small arms, light and easy to use, are now so readily available that the poorest communities can gain access to deadly weapons capable of transforming any local conflict into a bloody slaughter”. That earlier weapons were heavy and required enough strength

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<sup>1</sup>These girls are expected to perform the duties of any ordinary wife, cooking, washing taking care of the men and of course satisfying their sexual needs.

in order to carry and operate is one reason why children could not be engaged in active combat, however, today's weapons have been made lighter and they require neither strength nor years of training to master, to the extent that even children as young as seven can operate them (Singer 2005). Added to this, today's weapons have become more lethal, such that, a weapon in the hand of a child is able to produce the same result one would expect if the weapon was being operated by an adult. Another factor has to do with the easy access in obtaining these weapons. Globalization, with its resultant lower trading costs and faster delivery times, also applies in the case of weaponry, and it is argued that "there is no place around the globe where small arms are not startlingly cheap and easily accessible" (Singer 2005: 48). Africa is no exception – weapons are readily available. This makes the militarization of societies, and children especially much easier.

Poor socio-economic conditions in a number of African countries put children at a high risk of armed conflict. The case of the DRC in this regard is the most telling. Despite its abundant resources, the country is one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP per capita of 400 USD (CIA 2013). The collapse of the country's economy has been, among other factors, due to hyperinflation, mismanagement of state resources, corruption (especially by the top elites), the protracted conflict that has characterised the country's history, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Beya 2014). In a scenario like this one, the youth are the ones hardest hit by dire poverty and such a situation makes them vulnerable and exposes them to dangerous risks, one of which is becoming easy prey for recruitment by armed militias (Kaplan 2005). This is not to say that all poor children in conflict situations end up as child soldiers, rather poverty contributes highly to this phenomenon as it lessens the options available to children in such an environment (Twum-Danso 2003).

In addition, the peripheral position of Africa in the global economy has serious implications for its people, especially children. In the year 2000, a United Nations Development Programme report stated that "Africa is singled out as the only region in the world where both the absolute number and the proportion of poor people are expected to increase during this millennium" (Poku 2001: 23). Critical as the general situation is, it is even worse for children who in some cases are forced to fend for themselves and their families. In certain instances where parents get paid for their children's services in warfare, the former may willingly surrender their children to armed forces in return for money or any form of income for their survival. Literature on child recruitment indicates that on the whole, children are forcibly abducted by rebel or government forces to join their armies. It is also argued, however, that others do join armed forces out of their own will; they might join because they are supporting a certain ideology or they are seeking revenge for the ills done to them (Twum-Danso 2003). A survey on why children joined different armed groups in the DRC conflict found that 9 percent were abducted, 34 percent joined for material reasons, 21 percent joined because they believed the group's ideology, 10 percent joined for revenge purposes, and 11 percent joined simply to leave their home (Coomaraswamy 2009). However, this line of thinking (that children join out of their own free will) is challenged by

(Machel 2001) who argues that it would be misleading to consider children presenting themselves for service as ‘voluntary’ because at the time of recruitment children are faced with almost impossible choices; either survival (by joining a faction) or death if they refuse, and in addition there is always pressure to run away from the socio-economic problems in society, hence joining a faction becomes the best alternative, and this can hardly be described as voluntary.

The main argument from the literature therefore, is that collapsing socio-economic conditions in a number of African countries to a larger extent determine whether or not children join wars. In light of this; homeless street children, the internally displaced and those from poor broken-up families are at higher risk of taking part in armed conflict (Singer 2005). This is the case because such children lack basic necessities of life; such as food, shelter and clothing, hence joining rebel groups/warfare becomes their survival strategy, their viable alternative. Hence, the socio-economic conditions affecting children in any conflict environment must always be considered.

Closely linked to the above is the effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on African societies in general and on children in particular. Africa, especially the sub-Saharan region, has the highest number of HIV/AIDS infected cases the world over. The numbers of infected cases are horrifying; 75 percent for that part of the region alone (Fukuda-Parr 2004:40). Thus the HIV/AIDS pandemic results in large numbers of orphans in turn creating a new pool of children susceptible to being pulled into warfare (Singer 2005: 42). Without parental support and care and with minimal prospects for a steady source of food supply and income, such children prefer to join armed forces, as one author argues, “for refugees...orphaned, and the fearful, joining an armed group sometimes appears the better of the bad alternatives” (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994: 33).

The prevalence of warfare in contemporary times is another factor that explains the increased use of children in African conflicts. Africa is one region with the highest number of conflicts the world over (Adebajo 2002). With the intensification of protracted intra-state conflicts in Africa, armed groups are always on the lookout for more recruits to replenish their troops and in most cases they turn to children.

### **Why children?**

Why do armed groups and some government forces prefer children to adults? Singer (2005) argues that children are now being preferred because they provide a low-cost and efficient way for organisations to mobilise and generate force. In addition, children are often seen as expendable, they are also easily manipulated and controlled to carry out the most repulsive orders; hence they are much more preferred than adults when it comes to recruitment. Further still, children can be found in abundance, and through brutal indoctrination (a form of training mostly preferred by rebels); children can be turned into the fiercest fighters. In addition, because contemporary wars kill at a higher rate, there is therefore a continued need for soldiers to replace

the dead, and as argued before, the recruiters turn to children. Machel concurs with this point arguing that “as conflicts drag on, recruits tend to get younger and younger” (2001: 8).

Children are also targeted because of their nature – owing to the fact that they still have not developed mentally, they can easily be intimidated and manipulated by those that recruit them. Children are often seen as agile and more enduring than adults and following indoctrination and manipulation, they will worship their ‘commanders’ and carry out any orders without question (Twum-Danso 2003). In an interview with former child soldiers, one author came across a Renamo deserter in Mozambique who had been forcibly recruited at the age of ten, and he explained that “kids have more stamina, are better at surviving in the bush, do not complain and follow directions” (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994: 26). Unlike adults, children are bound to work effectively and efficiently whether they get paid or not. Other than this, there are certain conditions that have made children easy targets for recruitment. Children who are poorest, least educated and from most marginalised sections of society are most likely to be recruited. Children from wealthy families are at lower risk of recruitment because their parents can afford to pay-off their recruiters in exchange for their children’s freedom. In addition, in some cases those children with proper birth certificates may be spared since they have proof to show that they are underage hence not fit for recruitment. Children with no families or papers to identify them and their age are likely to be abducted and forced into fighting (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1994). The abovementioned factors serve to explain why children are specifically preferred to fight in African armed conflicts. It is important to note that the conditions/factors leading to the increased number of children in African armed conflicts discussed above were and are still prevalent in the DRC, making children an easy target for both government and rebel forces fighting in the conflict.

### **The DRC conflict and child soldiers**

Probably one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars on the African continent since the end of the Cold War, the DRC conflict dates as far back as the 1960s when the country, then Zaire, gained its independence from Belgium. Since then, armed conflict has been and continues to be a regular feature in the country, with grave consequences for the population and the country’s development. To date, it is reported that as many as five million people have lost their lives in this conflict, and in addition many have been displaced, with more than a million living as refugees in neighbouring countries (Human Rights Watch 2010). A range of factors combined have been blamed for the conflict in the DRC and they include: legacies of both colonial and autocratic rule, ethnic differences and the wars in neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda (World Movement for Democracy 1999). The picture is made worse when one considers the many factions that are fighting in the DRC. Over the years, the national forces have fought a host of Congolese and foreign armed groups, such as the Rwandan-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie* (RCD) and the Ugandan backed *Mouvement pour la Liberation du Congo* (MLC), during the phase in which the eastern DRC was occupied by foreign forces, and since

then, groups such as *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), and the M23. Given the number of actors in the conflict and their ever changing motives,<sup>2</sup> a long lasting solution to the conflict remains a farfetched dream (World Movement for Democracy 1999). It is worth noting that Rwanda and Uganda have been blamed for their continued support of the rebels with the aim of pursuing their own interests in the DRC (Nest et al. 2006). They have thus emerged as the biggest spoilers to any peace efforts in the DRC conflict.

In terms of the use of children in armed conflict, the DRC has not been spared. Like many other countries suffering from conflict, the DRC has witnessed massive recruitment of children. What is interesting to note though is that all fighting forces in the country have unlawfully recruited children (both boys and girls) to carry out a number of roles besides fighting on the battle field (Child Soldiers International 2012). Like in other war-torn countries, children in the DRC conflict have been used to perform some of the most horrifying acts in their societies , including killing, maiming and torture. The United Nations estimates point to the fact that at the height of the DRC conflict there were more than 30,000 child soldiers fighting for the various parties to the conflict (Human Rights Watch 2010). While a number of efforts have been made to reverse this trend, resulting in the release by armed groups of large numbers of child soldiers, their recruitment still continues especially in the eastern part of the country (Human Rights Watch 2010). All this has serious implications for the campaign to stop the use of children in armed conflicts. Also worrying are revelations that even the DRC national forces also recruited child soldiers to fight on their side (Turner 2007). While circumstances leading to this trend may not be clear, one could still argue that by recruiting child soldiers, the national forces were/are no different from the many rebel groups they were/are fighting. How, for example, can the government discourage or stop altogether the use of child soldiers when it is doing the same? It is imperative therefore to understand that while all this plays out, it is the children that bear the brunt of the suffering through active involvement in armed conflict.

### **Effects of armed conflict on children**

This section examines the effects of armed conflict on children in general, regardless of whether or not they have been on the frontline. It must be emphasised that childhood is one of the most important stages of one's life since it shapes the way for adult life. Once lost, childhood cannot be regained. Unfortunately this is what conflict does to children's' childhood days. On the whole, the long-term effects of conflict are probably more devastating than the immediate effects and this is particularly true for children whose mental capacities are still in the earlier stages of development. The effects of conflict on children have been terrible. Modern conflicts have killed and exploited children to such unprecedented levels. During the 1990s alone, "more than 2 million children died as a result of armed conflicts, often deliberately targeted and murdered"

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<sup>2</sup>The DRC conflict is exceptionally complex, with huge numbers of armed groups fighting each other, many of whom have swapped sides at some point since the conflict began.

(Machel 2001: 1). Children for their part have killed, sometimes their own families, friends and people they once lived with in the same communities. These acts leave an indelible mark on children and may haunt them their entire lives.

While the physical suffering that children incur through their involvement in conflict cannot be underestimated, the psychological consequences of conflict present a far greater challenge to children and the decisions they make later in life. Psychologically, children suffer from conflict-related trauma, and, because of the horrible acts they have committed, former child soldiers fear retribution and rejection by their societies (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994). Feelings of guilt, shame and helplessness characterise their life after conflicts. One child soldier in the DRC reported that every night visions of all the people he had killed would come before him asking why he had done it (Briggs 2005). In a related development, a child born of a Tutsi mother and Hutu father in Rwanda was asked to hack his three Tutsi nephews to death during the Rwandan genocide (apparently his sister had been married to a Tutsi). The child, then ten, reported that fifteen years down the line, he still saw his nephews as vividly as he saw them then asking him “why are you killing us” (Briggs 2005). Such mental suffering becomes too much for children to bear and in some cases it may lead to juvenile delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse, depression, social isolation and withdraw and discipline problems.

Other consequences of conflicts on children concern their social lives. Conflicts deprive children of education opportunities. Schools in conflict zones are destroyed, and where structures remain intact children are afraid to go to school for fear of being abducted or killed. Thus by denying them education, conflict denies children one of the most important keys to their adult life. As already noted, children in Africa, as elsewhere, are important future leaders at various levels and in various walks of life, and thus require a sound education to tackle effectively and efficiently the political, economic and social developmental agendas on the continent. In the absence of the provision of proper education for its children, Africa risks lagging further behind in terms of global development.

Conflicts further deprive children of the opportunity of growing up in stable societies and proper homes. Under the Convention of the Rights of the Child, “every child is entitled to receive such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being” (Cohn and Goodwin-et al 1994: 105-106). In most cases such protection and care is provided by the family and society to which the child belongs, but conflict destroys family and societal bonds to such an extent that children in conflict zones may never grow up to cherish the bond and togetherness of family life. By not growing up in proper homes and societies, children lose out on the cultural values, beliefs and morals that govern and shape society and individual life. In these ways conflict affects children’s relationships with others in society and their understanding of life in general.

### **Steps being taken to reduce and stop the use of children in armed conflicts**

It is encouraging to note that African countries and the international community are making commendable strides in attempting to put an end to the use of children in armed conflict. Clearly

this problem will not end overnight, but it is of course vital to support the initiatives put in place to curb this practice. A number of positive steps have been taken to end the child soldier problem, including the ratifying of treaties to protect children's rights, and the conviction of individuals involved in the use of child soldiers (World Movement for Democracy 1999).

The regional body at the continental level in Africa, the African Union (AU), has taken a leading role to ensure that children are not exploited and used as child soldiers (Clarke: 2012). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which came into being in 1999, is considered as one of the most important initiatives to curb the child soldier phenomenon (African Union 1999). The charter calls upon all signatories to ensure maximum protection of children and their rights. Of particular importance is Article 22(2) which underscores the responsibility of states to "take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from recruiting any child" (African Union 1999). Thus, by virtue of being members of the AU, countries are obliged to adhere and respect the charter. In addition, the AU has also embarked on a number of campaigns to stop the recruitment of children. Recently, the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), for example, launched a campaign in the Western region of Sudan to stop recruitment of children. While this campaign specifically targets the Darfur region, it is important to note that the message in this campaign is echoed in all corners of the continent where the use of children in armed conflict has been and still remains rampant. Sub-regional organisations too are doing their part. For instance, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been urging its member states to refrain from recruiting children. In addition, all SADC member states have ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the African Youth Charter (SADC Action on Orphans, Vulnerable Children and Youth). Thus, while the success of such efforts by the AU and other sub-regional bodies such as SADC may not be witnessed overnight, they go a long way in showing the commitment to end the problem of child soldiers.

The international community beyond the continent has also played a major role in attempts to end the use of children as soldiers. In the case of DRC, a number of initiatives have been made. For instance on 4 October 2012, "the government of the DRC and the United Nations officially committed to ending the recruitment and use of children by Congolese armed forces and security services by signing an Action Plan" (Child soldiers international 2012). In addition some individuals have been convicted of enlisting child soldiers, a familiar case being that of Thomas Lubanga who was convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in March 2012 (Child Soldiers International 2012). Such initiatives are also apparent on a broader level:

In June 2013 the UN set a goal to have no child soldiers anywhere in the world by 2016. There are eight Government armies listed for the recruitment and use of children and six of them have already committed to making their armies child-free. In 2012, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia and the

Democratic Republic of Congo signed action plans with the United Nations. The previous year, Afghanistan and Chad made similar commitments. Discussions initiated with the Governments of Yemen and Sudan are expected to lead to action plans in the near future” (Child soldiers international 2012).

Other notable initiatives by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) include awareness campaigns to demobilise child soldiers and have them return to their homes and be re-integrated into society. While all these plans and actions sound promising, they can only be realised through comprehensive and collaborative efforts by government, civil society, and the international community.

## **Conclusion**

The child soldier has become a more active player on the battlefield than ever before. The DRC remains one country in Southern Africa where the use of child soldiers is still rampant. Child soldiering therefore remains a huge challenge for national governments in Africa, peacemaking forces and humanitarian organisations. Personal and tragic stories of child soldiers reveal that transcending their terrible past and building new lives for themselves is not an easy task. Governments in Africa have a duty to protect their citizens, especially children; and, while it remains a major challenge to remove child soldiers from non-government armed forces, the governments must also set a good example by not recruiting children for their own armed forces. However, the struggle to prevent the use of children as soldiers should not be left to national governments alone. To this end, civil society, including human rights organisations (many of which are already lobbying for children rights), should step up their efforts in helping governments so as to reduce the number of children taking part in armed conflicts.

This paper has discussed how conflict and warfare continue to threaten societies and the lives of many people in a number of African countries; most notably in terms of the threat to children. The after effects of conflict on child soldiers have long-term negative implications both on their physical and cognitive development. The paper has further argued that the increased use of children in African conflicts, and the DRC in particular, is largely due to poor socio-economic conditions, technological simplification of modern weaponry, and changes in contemporary warfare which combine to create situations which put children, vulnerable as they already, are at a higher risk of taking part in armed conflicts. Given the entrenched nature of the factors that allow and promote the use of children in armed conflict, perhaps the most effective way to stop the use of children as soldiers is to end the conflicts in which they fight in the first place.

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### **Biographical Note**

Judith Victoria Mwandumba lectures at the Department of History, Faculty of Education, at Mzuzu University, Malawi.