

Dear Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon,

You are surely aware that around the world, children have been forced into taking up arms, to fight across villages, towns, jungles, and deserts. Research has shown that worldwide there may be as many as 300,000 child soldiers fighting right now—that’s 300,000 children under the age of 18 who have been forced to carry guns, kill, maim (Save the Children, Human Rights Watch). These children are fighting in the Middle East, in Africa, and in South America. Most of these children are children of loss and violence. They have witnessed massacres, lost their families, and been abandoned to war.

In your position, knowing that child soldiers are mostly forcibly recruited, you can help shape the decision to give child soldiers amnesty. These children should be given amnesty, because overwhelmingly, they did not choose to become child soldiers—they are victims of war. They should also be given amnesty because they were shaped by war. Blame war, don’t blame these children.

It is true that some child soldiers have grown up to become adult soldiers. Some argue that these soldiers have committed unspeakable acts. They have gone on to recruit other child soldiers. Ishmael Beah in his memoir Long Way Gone, shows that even the youngest of child soldiers have committed horrible atrocities. “I shot everything that moved,” he said, when he was describing how he moved from village to village, killing (p. 119). Katie Couric, when she interviewed child soldiers, interviewed several who showed no remorse at what they had done (NBC News). They waved their assault rifles, high-fived their leaders, and seemed eager to go on fighting. And yet can you really hold these teenagers responsible for how they have tried to survive or how they have been shaped by war? Those same teens who Katie Couric interviewed lost their families and were desperate to survive. Take them out of these wars, give them a peaceful place to live, and perhaps they will put down their guns.

Of course you know a lot about child soldiers. Yet perhaps you don't know that almost all child soldiers are recruited by force, which is the most important reason to give them amnesty. They did not choose to become violent soldiers. Ishmael Beah reveals how he became a soldier. According to Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone, children like him were forced into military service and were taught to adopt the mentality of "kill or be killed" (CBS Interview). He did not go out and join up when he saw an army poster. Rebels came through his village and killed everyone. He and his young friends barely escaped. When they did, they had nowhere to go, no food, no way to survive. They were recruited, given drugs, forced to watch violent acts, and put into vicious battle. When they saw their young friends die, it made them want to fight to protect each other.

This is what Ishmael Beah writes about his terrible experience: "I heard Josiah scream. He cried for his mother in the most painfully piercing voice that I had ever heard. It vibrated inside my head to the point that I felt my brain had shaken loose from its anchor. The sun showed flashes of the tips of guns and bullets traveling toward us. Bodies had begun to pile on top of each other near a short palm tree, where fronds dripped blood. I searched for Josiah. An RPG had tossed his tiny body off the ground and he had landed on a tree stump. He wiggled his legs as his cry gradually came to an end. There was blood everywhere" (p. 118). You have to ask yourself how could Beah not want to avenge his friend in this situation? With bullets flying around and the jungle dripping blood, what was he to do? It just seems as if it's impossible to judge these children by the standards of the schoolroom or the neighborhood block. They weren't in a game. For them, this was real.

Another significant reason to grant child soldiers amnesty is that once they were recruited, they were shaped by war to be dependent on their leaders and their role as soldiers. In Katie Couric's interviews, the boys make it clear that their leaders completely

controlled them. This was more than bullying—they control them with fear. They can even shoot the children. Beah writes that “My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector) (p. 119) *A Long Way Gone*, Beah described being forced to take drugs, watch American war movies, and watch other soldiers killing people. In “Armed and Underage,” another child soldier from Myanmar showed how he had seen “thousands of boys, some as young as ten, are purchased, kidnapped, or terrorized into joining the country’s army” (*Upfront Magazine*, April 2009). Some people argue that video games can desensitize kids to war—how much more desensitized to the violence of war would come from this real violence? It’s just not fair to judge these children as perpetrators—especially when many seek to escape, or are eager to take up new lives when rescued.

There are some individual cases where a child soldier may become an adult who is a threat to others. In general, though, when these children are still under the age of 18, they should be given the chance to apply for amnesty. If they are rescued by relief organizations, they should be offered amnesty. There are organizations such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and the Demobilization and Rehabilitation Programs which can help (Debatewise, 2013). When you meet with these organizations and when you put pressure on military tribunals, you could help save these children.

These innocents did not ask for these wars. They deserve compassion.

Yours respectfully,

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