

Dear Judge Advocate of the US Military,

Have you ever wished that you could just grow up and skip being a kid? Well there are approximately 300,000 children in the world that have no choice but to act mature. These kids are trained to handle a gun, and to use it when commanded. They are surrounded by violence everywhere they go. The experiences these kids go through are unspeakably traumatizing. Their whole life is based on war and trying to please their commanders. Does this sound like the happy life every child should be guaranteed? These are child soldiers, and they are victims, and they deserve amnesty.

Child soldiers are denied a genuine childhood. When you think of a childhood, do you imagine a child covered in dirt, dangerously malnourished, and carrying a gun twice their size? Most people don't. A good amount of child soldiers are victims of war, and have lost their families, leaving them with no hope and no permanent home. Ishmael Beah; former child soldier from Sierra Leone, who became part of a rebel army at age twelve, had an interview with Katie Couric on *Eye to Eye*, CBS News, he says "It's your life, you have to do it to stay alive. . . ." Should small children have to make life saving decisions like this? According to Beah and many other experts in child soldiery, children are forcefully fed drugs such as "Brown-Brown," a mix of cocaine, heroin, and gunpowder, to help make them more susceptible to killings. They are forced to share, with many other men, a small room, if even one at all, that has a few fly covered mattresses and a cigarette covered floor. Girls are used as child soldiers too. They are utilized as cooks and messengers. These girls are not treated well at all; they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse. Child soldiers become so hypnotized inside the world of a soldiery that most don't even know how old they are. In the Upfront article, "Armed & Underage," Awil Salah Osman is a child soldier from Mogadishu Somalia. The article states, "Awil doesn't know exactly how old he is, but his commander

says he's around twelve." Children should know their own age. The life of a child soldier is nothing anyone could imagine; being traumatized by each and every killing, and being exposed to things no one should ever be exposed to. As Beah reflects on his life as a soldier he says "We lost ourselves completely in this world. . . ." This shows that being a soldier is something completely real and once you're a soldier, you can never be completely the same.

Child soldiers can become injured and/or further emotionally impaired. Even in the role you have, have you ever had a nightmare? One that scares you so badly that you instantly wake up? Well, for a recovering child soldier, this is an everyday occurrence. Beah, who also wrote the memoir A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier, says while in his New York apartment, "I was afraid to fall asleep, but staying awake also brought back painful memories." When being a soldier, you will experience so many killings, and so much blood and violence that suddenly it becomes your life. Beah would see blood everywhere he looked, even coming out of the bathroom faucet. He would have flashbacks and remember things he wishes he could forget. According to research, the psyches of child soldiers can become permanently damaged from this traumatization and their judgment impaired because of everything they had been trained to do and believe. Not only do child soldiers suffer major emotional and mental damage, they suffer from extreme physical damage too. Their bodies become damaged from being so malnourished, and it is likely that a soldier could become partially or fully demobilized due to war related injuries, stunted growth from "conflict induced famine." This proves child soldiers are at risk in many different ways.

Children are mentally and physically manipulated by elders they are trained to believe they can trust. A soldier may believe that now, this is their home, that they are safe now and that the commanders have a magical "Juju" power that will protect them. Well

the ultimate truth is that all of that comes from the impaired judgment they develop. The life of a child soldier is provision less and precarious.

If the adults in charge actually cared about these children, they would provide them with proper care, a healthy family, and an education. Unfortunately, these kids are taken advantage of and used for nothing other than their quantity and vulnerability. Imagine a child on the street, gun in hand, and so drugged and malnourished they don't even look like a regular child. These kids trust these adults with their lives and if they were actually cared about, would this sort of thing happen? According to Ali Sheikh Yassin of the Elman Peace and Human Rights Center in Mogadishu, Somalia, "80 percent of the rebel troops are children. . . ." This means that while there are many other men out there, without a living and looking for a job, children are used as the army, they are the ones risking their lives, whether it's because they wanted to or not. As you can see, being a child soldier is not only physically dangerous, but extremely mentally harmful.

It is true that many people will argue that child soldiers are perpetrators. They may think this because two thirds of these children are in fact volunteers. And yet, what does it mean to be a volunteer? Imagine yourself as a child, alone; no home and nowhere to go. Hungry and in need of company, child soldiery may be your only option, next to dying. They'll tell you stories of kids who love to kill and take soldiery as a "game," but that is nowhere near the truth. Some are even kidnapped, or sold in by their parents for money. According to research done by human-rights experts, more than a fifth of a million children world wide are still being used as combatants, usually against their will. This shows the word "volunteer" can mean many things. This suggests that anything is better than hardship and although it provides a sense of community, it definitely isn't anything to be in favor of.

It is obvious that the use of child soldiers is terrible and unacceptable no matter what the need may be. It is hard to comprehend that countries around the world use child soldiers on the front lines every day, and that they use them to kill or to participate in dangerous stunts. These children do not deserve any of what is being done to them and should be able to live a happy, untouched childhood where they can have many joyful memories to look back on. These children do not deserve to be mutilated and taken advantage of in such ways. Every child deserves to have a healthy childhood. As said in the Upfront article, "Children belong on playgrounds, not battlegrounds. . . ."

I hope I have convinced you that these children deserve amnesty, and that in your powerful positions you will consider these points in your judgments.

Yours sincerely,

S. B.