
Myanmar: All parties must immediately halt child recruitment and use

Urgent measures needed to ensure the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar military comply with international standards

London, 2 July 2015 - The Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) should immediately end the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 years and release all those recruited under-18 within their ranks, Child Soldiers International said in [new research](#) released today.

Research conducted by Child Soldiers International shows that ongoing conflict between the Myanmar military (the *Tatmadaw Kyi*) and the KIA has spurred the demand for both sides to continue to recruit children into their forces. Fresh disagreements between the government and negotiators from the ethnic armies have generated pressure on the peace process. The *Tatmadaw Kyi* continues to face pressures to increase troop numbers and a system of incentive-based quotas drives demand for fresh recruitment. This puts children at particular risk. In the Kachin state, a sense of public service, revenge and justice, coupled with a lack of alternative livelihoods are the main drivers for ongoing underage recruitment. Occasionally, the KIA has intimidated and coerced children into their ranks and in some other instances children are sent to the KIA by their parents or guardians as a form of correction for aberrant behavior.

Ongoing child recruitment in the KIA

Child Soldiers International conducted research in Kachin state in June 2014 and found evidence of ongoing child recruitment, documented in its new report, [A Dangerous Refuge: Ongoing child recruitment by the Kachin Independence Army](#). While much of the recruitment is formally voluntary, ongoing coercive recruitment also takes place. Soldiers and civilian administrators in charge of recruitment routinely overlook evidence that recruits are underage.

While the KIA denies the practice, confidential interviews conducted by Child Soldiers International with KIA officers reveal that since the 1960s, the KIA has recruited according to an unofficial but customary rule of a "one-recruit-per-family" quota. KIA soldiers have access to a "list" containing data on household members and their ages, maintained by Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) administrators at the township and village level as part of an ongoing data collection effort. A Kachin aid worker told Child Soldiers International:

"The KIA has a list with information concerning every household and their members and ages. In the [internally displaced persons] camps, this is also true. The KIA can call whomever they want at any time and they know where to find them. No family is exempt from this kind of recruitment because the KIA has the list of every person in their territory. If you are called but not ready to join then you can try to explain your circumstances but they may not choose to release you ... Once the KIA has the list with your name on it, you will have to join sooner or later when they call you."

Children who volunteer with the KIA are, in some cases, encouraged to continue their studies, but they are almost always eventually accepted into the KIA's ranks. Children involved in drugs or criminality or those who skip school are also sent to the KIA as a form of "correction" by their parents or guardians. Research conducted by Child Soldiers International found that the most common ages of children in the KIA are between 15 and 17 years old, although there have been a few reports of children aged 13 and 14.

Once in the KIA, children are treated like adults and not allowed direct communication with the outside world during training. They receive a soldier identification number and a weapon upon graduation, and both girls and boys are deployed to KIA posts to fulfill non-combat duties, until their physical and mental abilities are deemed mature enough to fight. Children in the KIA are explicitly told by officers during recruitment and training that they will not be assigned to combat duties and in practice they are

used by the KIA in “support” roles for duties such as cooking, cleaning, errand running, and portering. Child Soldiers International found no evidence of children being deployed to the front lines by the KIA.

“Inevitably, children recruited by both sides are those who are deprived of education and employment opportunities,” said Charu Lata Hogg, Policy and Advocacy Director, Child Soldiers International. “Children in the Kachin areas suffer immense hardships. Despite its claims, the KIA is not helping children who voluntarily enlist: these children need to go to schools, not barracks,” she added.

Low recruitment, increasing use: child soldiers in the Myanmar military

Child Soldiers International’s [briefing on child soldiers in the Myanmar military](#), also released today, shows that children continue to be unlawfully recruited into the ranks of the *Tatmadaw Kyi*, although reported numbers of new recruitment cases are significantly lower in comparison to previous years. From January to April 2015, 14 cases of ‘suspected minors’ were reported to the UN Country Task Force for Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) but few of these were recruited during that period.

Information received by Child Soldiers International shows that owing to on-going conflicts new recruits, both adults and children, continue to be deployed to the front lines, more recently in the southern Shan state. In addition, use of underage children by the military other than deployment in the front lines has been reported in Shan, Chin and Mon state. Patterns of use of children have been reported from Arakan state since 2013, where members of the Rohingya community are specifically targeted. Although, as “[non-citizens](#)”, they cannot be recruited into the army, the use of members of the Rohingya community as forced labour by Myanmar security forces, including the Border Guard Police, has been documented.

Military officers and civilian brokers continue to use deliberate misrepresentation, intimidation, coercion and enticement to obtain new recruits, including under-18s. Civilian brokers are known to frequently recruit boys under false pretenses, often offering them a different job, such as a driver. While representatives from the Myanmar military have strongly denied the prevalence of this practice, Child Soldiers International’s research found that an unofficial system of incentives to reward recruiters and punishments for failure to meet recruitment targets still exists at the battalion level. Bonuses in cash or in kind are also known to be provided to recruiters for exceeding recruitment targets and, in some cases, serving soldiers who want to leave the army are told that they will only be discharged if they find new recruits.

A total of 646 children and young people have so far been released from the *Tatmadaw Kyi* under the Joint Action Plan signed with the UN in June 2012. These include 93 released since the beginning of 2015. A majority of these cases are identified through complaints of underage recruitment made to a public hotline number.

The Myanmar military is required to follow agreed protocols for identifying underage recruits within their ranks. In practice, children who have come forward and identified themselves as underage have been threatened, beaten, hand-cuffed and on occasion forced to take on duties involving hard labour after they have presented themselves.

“Undoubtedly the Myanmar government has taken some positive steps: it has spread greater awareness on the unlawfulness of child recruitment; it has tried to streamline recruitment practices and held some of those responsible for child recruitment accountable”, said Hogg. “However, children continue to be among those forcibly recruited, as they are easier to trick and more susceptible to pressure to enlist,” she added.

Children who escape from the *Tatmadaw Kyi* continue to be detained and treated like adult deserters. While commitments and policy directives against the practice have been issued at higher levels of the government, this practice is not supported at the level of battalions and regiments, where such arrests continue to take place. Children arrested in this manner are charged with “desertion/Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL)” and also for “criminal action”. In 2014, the International Labour Organisation via its Complaint Mechanism on forced labour received 52 cases of children who fled the *Tatmadaw Kyi* and were declared “deserters”. Out of these, at least 13 were arrested, charged with desertion and imprisoned.

While some steps have been taken to strengthen recruitment procedures into the *Tatmadaw Kyi* to

prevent underage recruitment, the fact that recruitment occurs in various smaller recruitment units across the country makes effective implementation and controls difficult. Implementation of these measures needs to be routinely monitored and verified by members of the UN CTFMR, for which access remains a crucial requirement. No steps have been initiated to ensure that preventative mechanisms are instituted in the Border Guard Forces (BGFs), which operate under the control of the *Tatmadaw Kyi* and are within the remit of the Joint Action Plan, including by implementing documentation and screening procedures for entry into their ranks.

Key Recommendations

Recommendations to the KIA

- ✓ Immediately end the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 years and release all under-18s within their ranks without fear of reprisal for the children and/or their families;
- ✓ Publicly agree to abide by international law and standards to prohibit and prevent the recruitment and use of children, such as the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles) and the Paris Commitments to Protect Children from Unlawful Recruitment or Use by Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Commitments);
- ✓ Issue and enforce orders to prohibit child recruitment and use to all soldiers, commanders and officers in the KIA; Widely disseminate the orders to members of the KIA and KIO and to communities in areas under the control of the KIA;
- ✓ Strengthen mechanisms to prevent the recruitment of children by developing guidelines on appropriate age assessments (e.g. by making use of household lists) and ensuring that recruiting officers and KIO township authorities are trained and continually monitor recruitment practices.

Recommendations to the Myanmar Government

- ✓ Implement the Joint Action Plan fully, resulting in the identification, registration and discharge of all children present in the ranks of the *Tatmadaw Kyi* and the BGFs; Issue and disseminate directives on the prohibition of use of children to all military units;
- ✓ Immediately end the practice of harassing, detaining and prosecuting children on the grounds of desertion from the armed forces, and ensure their immediate and unconditional release; in particular, the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs should issue a joint directive to all military and civilian police stations, stressing that suspected minors should not be arrested and detained for desertion and requesting that age assessments be carried out by military and civilian police before any arrest for desertion;
- ✓ Allow and facilitate access to the UN Country Task Force and other humanitarian and human rights organisations to the KIA in order to enable the negotiation of action plans, monitor and verify reports of child recruitment and use, and ensure the safe release and reintegration of children associated with the KIA;
- ✓ Ratify, without delay, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

Notes for Editors:

For more information and to arrange an interview with a spokesperson from Child Soldiers International, please contact Charu Lata Hogg, Policy and Advocacy Director, Tel: +44 (0) 20 7367 4112.

For more information:

Child Soldiers International, [Under the Radar: Ongoing recruitment and use of children by the Myanmar army](#), January 2015.

Child Soldiers International, [Myanmar: Step up efforts to end and prevent child recruitment, implement Working Group recommendations](#), 29 November 2013.

Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, [Conclusions on children and armed conflict in Myanmar](#), 16 August 2013.

Child Soldiers International, [Briefing on the situation of underage recruitment and use by armed forces and groups in Myanmar](#), May 2013.

Child Soldiers International, [Chance for Change: Ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers in Myanmar](#), January 2013.

Child Soldiers International, [Myanmar: Shadow report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), May 2011.

Committee on the Rights of the Child, [Concluding Observations: Myanmar](#) (CRC/C/MMR/CO/3-4), 14 March 2012.

For additional information on UN reports on underage recruitment and use in Myanmar, see the [annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict](#), A/69/926–S/2015/409, 5 June 2015.