Child Soldiers Forgotten in Angola

(New York, April 29, 2003)—Child soldiers who fought in the Angolan civil war have been excluded from demobilization programs, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today. April marks the one-year anniversary of the agreement that brought peace to mainland Angola in 2002.

Both the largest opposition group, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and the government used child soldiers in the war. Children’s rights groups have estimated that as many as 11,000 children were involved in the last years of the fighting. Some children received weapons and arms training and fought in the conflict. Many others acted as porters, cooks, spies and laborers.

“These boys and girls have been victimized twice. First, they were robbed of their childhood as soldiers, and now they are denied access to government demobilization programs,” said Tony Tate, a researcher in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. “These children—especially girls—are being forgotten in post-conflict Angola.”

One year after the conflict ended in mainland Angola, some UNITA soldiers who are 18 or older have been incorporated into the national army and police. Others were demobilized in a national program and have received needed assistance. But child soldiers, many of whom performed the same duties as adults, were denied these benefits.

The use of children in armed conflict is in violation of Angolan and international law. Angola also has obligations to provide for the recovery and reintegration of all children affected by conflict.

Beyond the hardships of war, child soldiers were deprived of educational, vocational and developmental opportunities. For these reasons, child soldiers in particular need rehabilitation programs tailored to their specific experiences. Without assistance, they risk future manipulation, and are vulnerable to being taken into military service or illegal activities.

The 26-page report, Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola, details the hardships these children faced during the war and the abuses they suffered. UNITA soldiers regularly beat children for infractions and assigned them hazardous duties. UNITA combatants also sexually abused girls and assigned them as “wives” to soldiers.

The government armed forces also used boys in the war, although in smaller numbers than UNITA. Boys served as fighters as well as mechanics, radio operators and porters.

Since the end of the war, child soldiers have received no direct assistance and rehabilitation in contravention of Angola’s treaty obligations. Some programs have been set up to assist children generally but do not target or identify child soldiers specifically.

“Existing community-based programs provide some relief but no provisions for child soldiers,” said Tate. “Programs must be established that provide for their specific needs based on their experiences as soldiers in the war.”

With the rainy season ending in the coming weeks, hundreds of thousands of displaced Angolans will return home. Many child soldiers currently residing in camps and transit centers will also be on the move. Identifying these children now and tracing them to their communities may be the only way to include them in future programs.

The World Bank has recently granted U.S. $33 million to assist the government with the rehabilitation of former combatants. Human Rights Watch said a larger portion of this grant should
be channeled to help child soldiers. Children who fought in the conflict must first be identified and recognized in order for any tangible assistance to reach them.

In April 2002, the war ended on the mainland after decades of fighting. The infrastructure of the country lies in ruins with schools and health clinics destroyed and few qualified professionals to deliver services. The success of child soldier reintegration projects will be contingent on the government’s increase of funding to provide basic services to all Angolans.

During the embargo period, the report will be available online at http://docs.hrw.org/embargo/angola0403/ [2] with the username: ‘angola’ and the access-code: ‘chillsoldiers’.

Beginning April 29, the report will be online at: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/angola0403/ [3].

Testimonies from Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola
(children’s names have been changed):

I was taken away in 1999 when I was thirteen-years old. At first, I was used to transport arms, supplies, and other materials. Later, I was shown how to fight. We shot with AK-47s and other weapons. I was the youngest in my troop of about seventy, children and adults. We were on the front lines and I was sick, with bouts of malaria and often not enough to eat. I was in the troop only because they captured me in the first place. This wasn’t my decision.
—Manoel P., former UNITA child soldier

I was with my family, we left because of the war—the fighting came and we had to flee. I was sixteen years old. For our work, we had to carry heavy things. Mortar shells for example. There were other children in my group, we were a group of between thirty and forty children aged fourteen to sixteen. Our main job was to carry ammunition from the bases in the altura (heights) to the front lines. It was difficult work because the loads were heavy. We were often hungry and without proper clothes and sometimes it would happen that people would “disappear.”
—Carlos B., former UNITA child soldier

I was involved in the fighting and in the action. At first, I was used to carry goods and help make food, later I was trained to fight. At fourteen, I was the youngest boy in my unit, although there were others of fifteen and sixteen. I saw people with their arms being blown off.
—Luiz J., former UNITA child soldier

We were trained in shooting automatic weapons, like AK-47s, and shown how to use grenades. Some kids also got training in the use of missiles and anti-tank weapons. We also received some technical training on automobile repair, mechanics, and arms cleaning and repairs.
—Felipe A., former FAA child soldier

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