GREAT LAKES POLICY FORUM
MEETING REPORT
May 1, 2003

The May Forum focused on the impact of armed conflict and HIV/AIDS on children in the Great Lakes region from a programmatic and policy level. The panel included Michael Despines, Senior Program Policy Advisor, and Les Roberts, of the International Rescue Committee; John Williamson, Senior Technical Advisor for the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund at USAID; Julia Freedson, Coordinator for the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict; and Tony Tate, Researcher in the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch.

The recent increase in child soldiers worldwide is a disturbing trend. However, there are logical reasons for this rise. First, there are currently more cheap and relatively available small arms that children can carry and use in war. Second, children's impressionability can lead them to become extremely obedient soldiers and effective fighters. Not all child "soldiers" are used for combat, though. Increasingly child soldiers are being used as cooks, porters, and sex slaves as well as combatants (a child soldier is generally defined as any child associated with a fighting force). Often it is easier to force children into a conflict as children are much more easily abducted than adults. Sadly, children are often viewed as expendable. Nations with weak states often perpetuate the problem by either enrolling child soldiers into state armies or not having the capacity to enforce other armed groups from enlisting children. There are children who do choose to become involved in a conflict, for a variety of reasons. Children opt into fighting out of poverty-related desperation, which is often associated with social alienation and a lack of education or training options. Children caught in the throes of war frequently choose to fight out of fear or a need for protection from an opposing force. Children may also be motivated by a desire for revenge or an indoctrinated belief in one group's cause.

Children are not only vulnerable to the horrors of armed conflict. Other interrelated issues that cause child vulnerability are HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and poverty. These forces combine to jeopardize children's education, social development and stability, health, family care, basic human rights, and community infrastructure. Further, HIV/AIDS and child soldier issues intersect on a host of levels. For one, armed conflict facilitates the spread of HIV. Also, displacement of combatants, whether child or adult, weakens family and communal social protection, household and local economies, schools, and family and community structure. In addition, incidents of rape increase during conflict. Children orphaned by AIDS also become more vulnerable to being recruited as child soldiers. Finally, in a society with less educated, more marginalized, angry youth, the future stability of that society is weakened. To look in-depth at child issues in the DRC and Uganda illustrates the need for more awareness and a greater search for long-term peace and stability in the Great Lakes region, where the reality of child soldiers is far too common.

The DRC plays an influential role in the region. The current humanitarian crisis in the Eastern part of the country hinders the DRC from a potentially vibrant economy and stable state that because of its resources could be a leader in the region. The predicament in the East must be handled before this can take place. An estimated 3.3 million people have died as a result of war in the DRC since August, 1998. The crude mortality rate (CMR) in the DRC is higher than the UN reports for any other country in the world. In 2002, the CMR among 9.3 million people in the East was 3.5/1000/month, while among 31.2 million people in the West the CMR was 2.0/1000/mo. (the African average was 1.2/1000/mo.). Health conditions in the East are also much worse than the West. At the same time, there have been positive trends in the past two years: the rate of death from violence in the east decreased dramatically from 2000; the CMR rate, though exceptionally high, was also a decrease from the previous 2001 estimate. Meanwhile, 55% of the DRC's population is children. Children should therefore be a focus of post-conflict and transitional programs and policies.

In Uganda, the fighting in the north that began in the mid-80s persists. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been cited throughout the war for human rights abuses that continue today. Reports of rape, massive child abductions, and looting and burning of villages characterize the LRA movement. At the same time, though to a lesser degree, the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) of President Museveni, has been accused of human rights abuses as well, including recruitment of children. In March 2002, the UPDF-led government began a military operation known as "Operation Iron Fist." One of the main reasons for Iron Fist was to rescue abducted children. Since Iron Fist's beginning, there have been a number of changes in the realm of child abductions and child soldiers. The number of children that have escaped from or have been released by the LRA has been at least 2,000, a very positive sign. Simultaneously, the number of children abducted by the LRA has been greater than 5,000, a significant increase in comparison to past years. Those children that have been taken from the LRA and turned over to the UPDF have subsequently been recruited by the UPDF to join their forces. The UPDF also continues to recruit in rural villages in the north. Also, the age of children being abducted has dropped in the past year. Additionally, the ratio of boys to girls being taken has risen; whereas it used to be about one boy taken for every girl, since Iron Fist there have been about 2 boys taken for every girl. The struggles in the north have led to most of the population being forcibly displaced (an estimated 800,000 of 1.2 million residents in the region are internally displaced). The displacements and ongoing conflict lead to many children not having access to health services; therefore HIV/AIDS rates, which have gone down steadily in most of Uganda in the past 10 years, continue to increase in the north.

Programs and policies toward children involved in conflict have across the board throughout the world been inadequate. The impacts of conflict on children around the globe mirror one another and the responses have also unfortunately mirrored one another in their lacking enough child attention. Children must be a focus in programs that seek to reintegrate ex-combatants into societies in conflict zones. Children should be included in amnesty processes, crimes against children should be included in truth and reconciliation structures, and children's voices must be a part of peace and transition. For example, in

the DRC, there has been a lack of focus on reintegrating child soldiers in the DDR process. There is a lack of monetary resources going towards enabling children to transition to normalcy. There need to be more support for education programs and for working with communities to accept children back into local communities. There especially needs to be a greater focus on girls. Many girls, because of the traumatic experiences through which they have gone, are self-conscious about speaking out—thus they need the space and privacy to voice their stories. The process must allow support for girls with children and babies. During Sierra Leone's DDR undertaking, for example, girls were left out of the process. Ex-combatants had to have a gun in order to be reintegrated. Stronger actions on a policy and regulatory level are needed to protect and reintegrate children.

The magnitude of child vulnerability is enormous when facing issues such as AIDS, poverty, and war, but effective policy can have an impact. Local and international actors can be most effective by seeking long-term rather than quick solutions, and by encouraging a communal approach. Because families and communities are the primary resources for child safety and well-being, they must be supported and encouraged to believe that child soldiers can return back to normal childhood. It is often extremely difficult for families and communities to accept children back into the fold, so child protection community groups could play a major role in this regard. Policies that raise awareness of children's basic human rights also play an important role. Finally, collaboration between local and non-local stakeholders is essential. There are currently several programs that are having positive impacts reintegrating children, including the Save the Children Tracing Program in Angola, the World Vision Reception Center in northern Uganda, and the IRC reintegration camp in Sierra Leone. Such DDR programs that focus on children help to strengthen communities to make for a more secure future.