**Stolen innocence: Children forcefully recruited into armed conflict in Sudan**

Conflict related violations against children has been happening in Sudan for decades. However, the situation took a turn for the worst when an armed conflict broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April 2023. The warring parties have been involved in the commission of grave violations against children including the recruitment of child soldiers. Regardless of how children are recruited and their roles, child soldiers are victims, whose participation in conflict bears serious implications for their physical and emotional well-being. The children are commonly subjected to abuse and most of them witness death, killing, and sexual violence. Many are forced to commit violent acts against other children and civilians and and resultantly suffer serious long-term psychological consequences from such violations.

The Paris principles on the involvement of children in armed conflict defines **a child associated with an armed force/group** as any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes This is not limited to a child who has taken direct part in the conflict but those indirectly involved too.

Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in April 2023, approximately 1 million children have been displaced by the fighting between the SAF and the RSF leaving them vulnerable to violations. The number of children being recruited in to the conflict is worrying and the most affected areas are the marginalized areas in Darfur and Kordofan regions. The presence of child soldiers in videos making circulation on social media and eye witnesses accounts have also confirmed the involvement of child soldiers as young as 14-years-old in battle fields. ACJPS recently [documented](https://www.acjps.org/shelling-and-a-rain-of-bullets-in-nyala-south-darfur/) incidents where at least 20 children were recruited by RSF in South Darfur. In September 2023, the SAF released 30 child soldiers to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Witnesses have accused the native administration for their involvement in the recruitment process using coercion, fear and manipulation with promises of material or monetary gain. This is because young people lacking basic necessities like food find themselves drawn to armed groups as the only means of survival. RSF has been guilty of using child soldiers since the beginning of the conflict. However, as the conflict intensified, SAF also adopted the trend and recruited several children. The conduct of the both the SAF and RSF in Sudan clearly shows contempt and total disregard for the international and regional human rights and international humanitarian laws which require the protection of children in conflict situations.

There are several international human rights and humanitarian treaties under which Sudan can be held accountable for this crime. The additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions to which Sudan is party prohibit all recruitment of children under the age of fifteen or their use in hostilities. This standard is binding on both national and non- national forces. For example, Article 77 (2) of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) Geneva, 8 June 1977 provides that “parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, the parties to the conflict shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest”. Additionally, Article 4(3)(c) of the 1977 Additional Protocol II provides children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities.

Under international human rights law, Article 38 (3) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Sudan in 1990 obligates state parties to shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. “In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest”. Additionally, the [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/?page_id=8823) to protect children from recruitment and use in hostilities ratified by Sudan in 2004 further provides that states will not recruit children under the age of 18 to send them to the battlefield, conscript soldiers below the age of 18. It also obligates the state parties to take all possible measures to prevent such recruitment –including legislation to prohibit and criminalize the recruitment of children under 18 and involve them in hostilities, demobilize anyone under 18 conscripted or used in hostilities and will provide physical, psychological recovery services and help their social reintegration and requires armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a country not to under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities anyone under 18.

Under article 8 (2) (b) (xxvi) and (e) (vii) of the 1998 ICC Statute, conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces or groups constitutes a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflicts.

Regionally,Sudan is party tothe African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which requires States parties to take all necessary measures to ensure that no child takes a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from recruiting any child.

Therefore, Sudanese authorities and the RSF must take immediate steps to comply with these international human rights and humanitarian law it ratified by ending all recruitment of children, demobilizing or releasing all children from their ranks, and facilitating their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The international community, particularly, the Committee on the Rights of a Child and African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of a Child should strongly condemn violations against children in Sudan and demand that all parties uphold their obligations under the regional and international human rights treaties.

Ms. Sharon Aacha Ojema

Program Officer, Monitoring and Documentation

ACJPS