Briefing Memorandum

The state of the child soldier problem and related issues

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Introduction

Many child soldiers (generally, combatants aged under 18) have been mobilized in present-day regional conflicts and civil wars. It is believed there are over 300,000 child soldiers today, mainly in Africa, Southwest Asia, and Central and South America. Children who participate in conflicts suffer from serious physical and mental wounds, which will not heal over a lifetime. Not only is the existence of such child soldiers a deep moral problem, it also complicates social recovery and development after conflicts. However, child soldiers are parties to conflicts as well as victims of them, making solving of the problem even more difficult.

1. Causes of child soldiers

Peter W. Singer of the Brookings Institute points to the following three causes for the use of children as soldiers. First is a change in the environment surrounding conflicts. The destruction of societies and the failure of economic development due to the globalization of economic activity, conflicts, and disease invite larger global conflicts, instability, and generation gaps, resulting in the generation of potential new recruits. For example, children living on the streets in impoverished regions are a good target for recruiting by armed groups. Second is a technical aspect, the development of high-performance small arms that can be handled even by children. The Kalashnikov assault rifle (AK-47), developed in 1947 in the Soviet Union, is typical. It weighs less than five kilograms, has only nine moving parts, and requires almost no maintenance. Its mechanism is so simple that even a child can learn to use it in about half an hour. Including knockoffs, there are 50 to 100 million AK-47s in circulation around the world. A used knockoff can be purchased in Africa or the Middle East for only 12 dollars. In fact, after the end of the civil war in Mozambique, it is believed there were about 6 million AK-47s in that country, versus a population of 16 million. The UN has placed an arms embargo on both the government and non-government sides in Sudan, but China continues to sell weapons there, including AK-47s. A peak age of recruitment of children is 10–12. That is the same age at which they become physically capable of carrying an AK-47.

Third is a change in the natures of conflicts themselves. For armed groups, conflicts are a means of making a living ("economic affairs," in a sense). Singer calls this "postmodern warfare." He

argues that it helps prolong conflicts. However, it is necessary to connect this to characteristics of the "new wars" that Mary Kaldor proposes. Kaldor describes the actors in these new wars as "members of transnational networks based on exclusivist identity." Religion and ethnicity are typical identities. Unlike ideology, identity is attribute that is extremely difficult or impossible to change. This makes it difficult to handle armed organizations bonded through identity. Confrontations centered on identity are at the same time rooted in attribute, so in most cases, one side would never give in to be merged by the other (in other words, it will not change its attribute). Thus, conflicts stem from the difference of identity tend to lead to ethnic cleansing or massacres of infidels. They result in large numbers of children being caught up in warfare as soldiers.

2. The demand-side rationality of child soldiers

To the armed organizations that create the demand for child soldiers, the use of children as soldiers is rational, in a sense. There is a certain utility value in having large numbers of children as recruits and making them soldiers with compact weapons. Using children as soldiers carries the cost of bringing worldwide condemnation. However, the fact that there are child soldiers in war zones around the world may be relatively lowering the cost. Moreover, child soldiers are less expensive economically than adult soldiers. Adults generally demand payment for participation in fighting, but children seldom do. This is not only because demands by children are suppressed by force, but also because when orphans living on the street are recruited as soldiers, they expect nothing more than food, shelter, and clothing.

Another reason of broad use of child soldiers is that they are easy to coerce. With their immature judgment, children are easily brainwashed. They will not shrink from dangerous missions, or in some cases, from carrying out atrocities. Moreover, repeated mental and physical hazing and abuse will numb children's sensitivity to brutality. Thus, the initial goal (desensitization to brutality) is easily achieved. Furthermore, children are able to be desensitized to the dangers of battle by drugs or alcohol without difficulty.

In most cases, children were not the first choice as soldiers for leaders of armed organizations. Even though they are inexpensive and able to use today's compact weapons, child soldiers cannot make as large a contribution to combat as adult soldiers. Thus, child soldiers are rationally used as "disposable" in order to prevent attrition of adult soldiers. In fact, inexpensive, easy-to-use, and relatively ineffective child soldiers are sacrificed in order to protect trained adult soldiers. Child soldiers are also used to clear minefields, opening the way for adult soldiers to safely advance. Child soldiers are used in raids and charges before full-fledged attacks in order to expend enemy ammunition. Due to the use of child soldiers as disposable assets, their casualty rates are often even higher than adult soldiers.

3. The supply-side rationality of child soldiers

Population demographics in conflict-prone areas are a supply-side factor of child soldiers. As of 2005, 17 percent of the population in Japan was under 18, while its ratio in Afghanistan was53 percent, in Iraq 47 percent, and in Sudan 46 percent. Life expectancy in these countries has always been low, creating a pyramid-shaped population structure by age, with a high percentage of young people. By reason of prolonged conflicts leading to chaos and economic stagnation, educational systems break down and youth unemployment soars, making it is not difficult for armed organizations to recruit child soldiers. In short, the combat personnel involved in conflicts in Africa inevitably become younger.

The presence of children who voluntarily join armed organizations because of their hard living environments complicates the problem. This can be called "supply pressure" for child soldiers. In places where income levels have always been low, when policies to promote industrialization to relieve poverty are advanced and development aid from international financial institutions and developed countries is accepted, rapid structural adjustment is required. Such policies exhaust economies and lead to greater income inequality within countries. Thus, poor people become unable to support their families. In farm villages, a shift to cash crops destroys communities based on self-sufficiency, so mutual aid no longer functions inside them. In terms of spreading poverty and destroying communities, prolonged conflicts bring about similar effects on poverty. Conflicts not only bring economic activity to a halt, they generate many refugees and internal displaced persons. Naturally, this destroys families and communities, forcing children to live as refugees or internal displaced persons. In Sudan, for example, refugee camps sometimes become bases for the recruitment and training of child soldiers. The reason that child soldiers are a profound problem is that because of supply pressure due to poverty and other causes, the life of a soldier is at least temporarily more comfortable for children who become soldiers. One former child soldier of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) even told a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Child Protection Advisor, "I had three meals a day and friends to play with. It was much better than when I was living on the streets." This comfort is a major obstacle when reintegrating child soldiers to society.

4. The existence of two contradictories

Movement to address the problem of child soldiers using legal rules (international treaties, national laws, etc.) has long existed. This existence indicates that in some respects those legal rules have not been very effective. Therefore, in addition to governments in relevant countries, international organizations, aid donor nations, NGOs, and other institutions have begun taking multilayered approaches to the problem of child soldiers. Even so, there has been no major improvement in the situation regarding child soldiers. The only contributions international

organizations and NGOs have made to solving the problem has been to bring to light the issue of child soldiers in post-conflict reconstruction and development and to focus world attention on it.

One may presume, then, that under current conditions, the use of children as soldiers is a rational choice, at least in the short term, for the parties involved (children and armed organizations). Obviously, mass mobilization of child soldiers not only tends to prolong conflicts, it delays the restoration of order after conflicts, and simply demobilizing child soldiers does not turn them into an effective labor force. This forms a significant barrier to reconstruction and development. In short, the child soldier problem includes aspects of both ensuring post-conflict security (disarmament and demobilization) and economic development (basic education and vocational training). That is to say, failure to solve the child soldier problem is an obstacle to post-conflict reconstruction in terms of both ensuring security and economic development. Laws and regulations are incompetent before the market rationality, and it must be eliminated to solve the problem.

Investment in the education of children can be expected as an effective means of eliminating that rationality. It holds promise through increasing the opportunity cost (lifetime earnings) of using children as soldiers. However, it is not a simple matter to provide education and vocational training to former child soldiers and reintegrate them to society to be able to live independently. First, countries that have experienced warfare are generally unstable in terms of politics and public order. This both hinders the provision of basic education and vocational training to former child soldiers and makes it extremely difficult for society to provide them sufficient job opportunities once they have completed that education and training. Former child soldiers who cannot make a living are therefore very likely to be recruited again by anti-government armed groups. Indeed, there is a danger that the effort will backfire, since children who have completed basic education become more valuable as soldiers. Second, because countries in the process of post-conflict recovery have limited financial means, they tend to prioritize matters that show even small results in the short term over matters that will take a long time to bear fruit. To the developed countries and international organizations that provide development support to such countries as well, matters that demonstrate results quickly are easier for their taxpayers and investors to understand. That means there are two contradictories: one is contradictory between the micro and the macro, in which an imbalance is generated between behavior rational to individuals and society as a whole, and the other is one between the short term and the medium/long term, in which what is rational in the medium/long term is not rational in the short term. Unless these contradictories are overcome, no solution to the child soldier problem can be expected.

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