

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 13, 2003

The Honorable John Negroponte
Ambassador and Permanent Representative
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017-3505

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

On December 23, the United States formally ratified an important treaty designed to end the exploitation of children as combatants during war – the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The U.S. Senate gave its unanimous advice and consent on behalf of this treaty in June of last year, and we are proud that the U.S. is giving leadership to the important effort to end the use of child soldiers by becoming party to the protocol.

We write today with regard to the role that the United States should play in the upcoming U.N. Security Council debate on children and armed conflict, scheduled for next week. The Security Council recently received a report from the Secretary-General that, for the first time, explicitly names governments and armed groups that recruit or use child soldiers in violation of international obligations. This list is a powerful tool to expose violators and hold them to account. The list names twenty-three armed parties to conflicts in five countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Burundi, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

Our concern, however, is that when the Security Council requested this list, it restricted its scope based on a somewhat arbitrary standard. Only a relatively small number of countries currently on the Security Council's active agenda will be discussed. As a result, some of the world's worst violators are excluded. Among these are parties to conflict in Burma, Colombia and Uganda.

Burma is believed to have the largest number of child soldiers in the world. Human Rights Watch recently documented the widespread forced recruitment of boys as young as eleven by Burma's national army. Children are routinely picked up off the streets, forced into the army, and never see their families again. Many are forced to fight against armed ethnic opposition groups and carry out human rights abuses such as burning houses, rounding up villagers for forced labor, and even massacring civilians. Armed opposition groups also recruit children, though in far smaller numbers.

OL 20030113 11

Since the mid-1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has waged a civil war against the government of Uganda and abducted between 10,000 and 16,000 children from Northern Uganda to serve as soldiers. Girls as young as twelve are given to commanders as "wives." Children are forced to participate in acts of extreme violence and are often compelled to help beat or hack to death fellow child captives who have attempted to escape. Some abducted children have managed to escape, while others have died from disease, mistreatment or combat wounds. In recent months, abductions have increased dramatically, and one local NGO estimates that 4000 children have been abducted just since June.

Colombia's children have long been caught up in that country's devastating conflict, including some 6,000 to 14,000 who are currently being used as soldiers by armed groups, paramilitaries and militias. Boys and girls, some as young as eight years old, are often recruited forcibly and used as combatants, spies, human shields, messengers, porters, kidnappers, guards, cooks, sexual companions or slaves, or for placing/removing bombs. Girls in armed groups and paramilitaries are particularly at risk of sexual abuse.

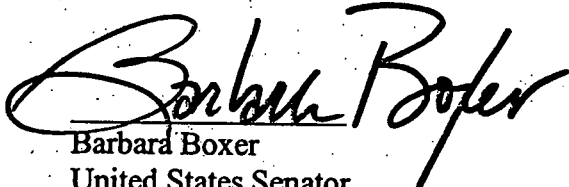
We believe these groups should not escape the Security Council's scrutiny, and that both the United States and the U.N. should do more to end these abuses of children.

For the upcoming Security Council debate, we respectfully suggest you support the following measures:

- **A specific request by the Council that the secretary-general submit another list to the Security Council next year, naming ALL governments and armed groups that illegally recruit and use child soldiers, not just those in countries currently on the Security Council's agenda. This would ensure that parties like Burma's Army, the Lord's Resistance Army and the FARC come under Council scrutiny for their use of child soldiers.**
- **Active monitoring of the governments and armed groups that have already been named;**
- **Direct dialogue with the governments and armed groups in order to develop action plans to end the use of child soldiers;**
- **Request a report detailing progress in six months. In cases where no progress is shown, consider further action, including sanctions, if appropriate.**

We believe that the use of children as combatants is one of the worst aspects of contemporary warfare. Ending these abuses should be a priority for our government, and we welcome your leadership in addressing this issue at the United Nations.

Sincerely,


Barbara Boxer
United States Senator


Lincoln Chafee
United States Senator

