

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
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Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law

"Casualties of War: Child Soldiers and the Law"

Tuesday, April 24, 2007 at 10:00 a.m

Senator Russ Feingold
Opening Statement

Thank you Mr. Chairman. First, I want to thank you for holding this important hearing, and for introducing - along with our colleague, Senator Brownback - the Child Soldiers Prevention Act. This legislation is a critical step toward ending the use of child soldiers around the globe by prohibiting U.S. military assistance to countries recruiting or using child soldiers in hostilities.

I would also like to thank all of the witnesses here today, who have experienced or witnessed what child soldiers are forced to endure and who each devote tremendous time and energy to fighting injustice. Thank you for coming to teach us about this tragic practice- one that has gone on for far too long in too many places.

The Child Soldiers Prevention Act takes a multifaceted approach to dealing with the problem and encourages more robust programming for the demobilization, disarmament, and rehabilitation of child soldiers, and the communities from which they come. I am pleased to cosponsor this bill because I feel very strongly that the United States must do more to end the exploitation of children, whatever form this abuse takes and wherever it occurs.

By helping to ensure that US military assistance is only provided to countries whose policies respect human rights, this bill will send a strong message that the use of child soldiers is not acceptable.

The exploitation of children violates the basic human rights of one of society's most vulnerable populations, and yet, for far too long, children have been not only the passive victims of military campaigns but also active, if unwilling, participants.

In Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and particularly in African countries like Uganda, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, children as young as eight are routinely abducted and forced to participate in acts of extreme violence, sometimes against their own families. They are forced to carry out murders, mutilations and other human rights abuses, even as abuses are inflicted upon them. Many child soldiers are also subject to coerced drug addiction, physiological

manipulation, and sexual abuse. At least one-third of the estimated 300,000 child soldiers today are girls, who are often enslaved for sexual purposes by militia commanders.

Even when hostilities cease, these children continue to suffer the loss of their childhood, connection to their families and communities, and the tools to successfully pursue a non-violent life. Often uneducated, traumatized, and stigmatized, many of these young people remain trapped in cycles of brutality and abuse long after militias are disbanded.

In the past two decades, the use of child soldiers has gone from being merely morally reprehensible to being a criminal violation of international law. The U.S. has demonstrated its commitment to ending the use of child soldiers around the world by ratifying and implementing the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children and Armed Conflict, and last winter, Congo's National Assembly transferred a former militia leader to the International Criminal Court to face charges of recruitment of child soldiers. Next month, the Special Court of Sierra Leone is expected to deliver the first two convictions on charges of enlisting children to actively participate in hostilities, which the Court considers a "serious violation of international humanitarian law." These are all important steps - across multiple levels - towards ending impunity for this reprehensible practice.

The conscription and abuse of child soldiers is not new, but a growing awareness of what these young people are forced to endure and the lasting damage caused requires that we work diligently here at home, as well as with the international community, to monitor and end the use of child soldiers, hold governments accountable for their violations, and improve programs of prevention and rehabilitation.

The use of child soldiers poses a threat to the stability and security of communities, countries, and society at large. Ending these abuses should be a priority for the United States and for governments around the world.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing to raise awareness and encourage action to protect children around the world.