

**'Child Soldiers: a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations?'**

**COMMANDANT MICHAEL KIERNAN**

**Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies.**

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth.**

**June 2005**

**Supervisors: Comdt Peter O'Halloran, Military College.  
Ms Linda Borys, NUI Maynooth.**

**MA (LMDS)**

**STUDENT DECLARATION**

1. I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.
2. Permission is given for the Military College Library and the NUI Library Maynooth to lend or copy this thesis upon request.
3. The views and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Command and Staff School or the Military College.

SIGNED

*M Kiernan*

Commandant

NAME

MICHAEL KIERNAN

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

**To: Audrey, Roisín, and Sinéad for all their help throughout, and  
to China Keitetsi for taking the time to talk to me.**

## ABSTRACT

The Irish Defence Forces have been continuously involved in United Nations Peace Support Operations since 1958. When the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion deployed to the United Nations Mission In Liberia (UNMIL) in November 2003, it represented the first time that Defence Forces personnel had been placed in a theatre in which the phenomenon of the Child Soldier existed.

This thesis was undertaken to explore the phenomenon of the Child Soldier and to attempt to determine whether the Defence Forces adequately prepares their personnel for situations in which Child Soldiers may be encountered, both in pre-deployment training and in theatre.

The research question was explored through a literary review of material available on the subject, through which the theoretical lens to be adopted of culture, globalisation and socialisation, was identified. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a former Ugandan female Child Soldier and a number of senior Irish Army officers who have served in UNMIL in a variety of prominent appointments.

The findings give the reader an understanding of the phenomenon of the Child Soldier; in particular an appreciation of why children become soldiers, what they are likely to experience at a very young age and why it can often be difficult for them to reintegrate back into society, post conflict. The findings also determine whether the levels of preparedness of our troops to deal with 'live' situations in which Child Soldiers may be encountered are adequate.

It is estimated that there are somewhere in the region of 300,000 Child Soldiers worldwide and that up to 15,000 were located in Liberia at the outset of the UNMIL mission. As a Defence Forces, we have a duty to ensure the safety and protection of our troops both at home and abroad. Understanding the Child Soldier in Liberia and thoroughly preparing to deal effectively with situations in which armed children may be encountered will ultimately enhance the safety of our troops in this theatre.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Declaration</i>	ii
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	iii
<i>Abstract</i>	iv
<i>Table of Contents</i>	v
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Objectives	1
Context	2
Personal perspective	4
Significance of study	5
Theoretical lens to be adopted	7
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b>	<b>8</b>
Introduction	8
Children at war – against the norm?	8
Child Soldiers – a legitimate African tradition?	10
What are the underlying causes?	11
What was the catalyst for action?	13
What is the legal perspective?	15
Child Soldiers – gender implications?	16
Child Soldiers – an aberration?	16
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>	<b>19</b>
Research approach	19
Why a qualitative approach?	20

Interviews	21
Ethical considerations	21
Methodological rationale	22
Interview 1: China Keitetsi	23
Interview 2: Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald	24
Interview 3/4: Lt Cols Moran/Behan	24
Interview 5: Commander Irish Special Forces	25
Summary	25
<b>Chapter 4 Findings</b>	<b>26</b>
Liberian Civil Wars (1989-1997, 2000-2003)	26
Interview findings technique	29
China Keitetsi – former Child Soldier	30
Interviews – Irish officers with UNMIL	33
<b>Chapter 5 Analysis and Conclusions</b>	<b>38</b>
Analysis of findings	38
Conclusions	40
<b><i>Bibliography</i></b>	<b>43</b>

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

...more and more of the world is being sucked into a desolate moral vacuum. This is a space devoid of the most basic human values; a space in which children are slaughtered, raped and maimed; a space in which children are exploited as soldiers; a space in which children are starved and exposed to extreme brutality. There are few further depths to which humanity can sink.

(Machel, 1996)

Government soldiers came and forced me and my father to join them. My father refused so they cut his throat ... my commander brought captured LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) fighters and told me to kill them. I tied them and cut their throats or shot them. I killed more than seven people ...I want to go home and do business selling goods.

P.K. aged 13 years. (Amnesty International, 2004)

### **Objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the phenomenon of Child Soldiers and attempt to confirm to what extent Child Soldiers may in fact pose a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations (PSO), especially through the Defence Forces participation in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

The United Nations estimates, in 2003, were that Liberia possessed as many as 15,000 Child Soldiers out of a worldwide total of 300,000 (IRIN, 2003). The Defence Forces in order to enhance the security of its troops in Liberia must understand the phenomenon of the Child Soldier, the reasons why children become soldiers and most importantly educate and train to react appropriately to situations in which Child Soldiers are encountered. Failure to do so, I believe, will confirm Child Soldiers as a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations.

The Irish Defence Forces deployed approximately 435 troops to UNMIL in November 2003. Until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 18 August 2003 Liberia had been in a nearly constant state of civil war for 14 years. The signatories in Accra, Ghana, included the former government of Liberia, both armed opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) together with political parties.

### **Context**

In 2000, a British Army patrol was captured in Sierra Leone as the Commander hesitated when confronted by a local militia of mainly Child Soldiers. Ten days later British Special Forces rescued the patrol. Unfortunately between 25 and 150 Child Soldiers and one member of the British Forces were killed in the rescue. (Singer, 2005). In my professional judgement, had the Commander dealt with the situation differently initially by thoroughly preparing for situations in which armed children could have confronted his patrol, the problem and subsequent loss of life might have been averted. This type of incident suggests a lack of training for such an eventuality.

While it is understandable that any adult may naturally hesitate when confronted by children even if armed with lethal weapons, the fact remains that to deal appropriately with such situations military commanders in UN Peace Support type operations must ensure that their personnel are trained to do so in order to prevent such situations from deteriorating into armed clashes.



The Irish Defence Forces have a long and distinguished continuous involvement in United Nations Peace Support Operations<sup>1</sup> since 1958. Following the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, UN Security Resolution 1509 of 19 September 2003 established UNMIL. The UNMIL mission represents the first time that our troops will be exposed to any significant degree to operational situations in which Child Soldiers may form the majority of the opposing forces. The tasks of the Irish contingent are:

- Be prepared to act as the Force Commanders 'Quick Reaction Force' (QRF) in the Monrovia<sup>2</sup> area.
- Act as the Force Advance Guard for the security of key locations. Conduct 'Cordon and Search' operations for weapons held in areas that are declared 'weapons free zones'.
- Assist in preparations for cantonment<sup>3</sup> and Demobilisation, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR).
- Ensure security and freedom of movement along the main lines of communication. Within capabilities provide security to civilians under threat of violence.

The nature of the varied tasks assigned to the Irish contingent clearly necessitates close and regular interaction with the indigenous population. This interaction will involve situations in which the phenomenon of the Child Soldier will be encountered especially due to the 'Quick Reaction Force' role that that has been assigned to our troops.

---

<sup>1</sup> Irish Defence Forces manual on 'Operations Other Than War' defines Peace Support Operations as 'a generic term covering a range of activity from Peacekeeping, Wider peacekeeping to Enforcement'.

<sup>2</sup> Monrovia is the capital of Liberia.

<sup>3</sup> Designated locality in which the DDR process is conducted.

### **Personal perspective**

As an officer in the Defence Forces for over 25 years I have had the opportunity to serve overseas with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on four occasions in a variety of appointments in addition to a 12-month tour of duty in Croatia as an EU monitor with the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM). Overall I have found overseas service to be a most rewarding experience from both a personal and professional point of view. In each of my overseas missions I have been struck by the professionalism, good humour and in particular the innate humanitarian qualities of the Irish soldier whether from supporting the local orphanage in South Lebanon, to destitute families in local villages, to fundraising for identified self-help projects.

Despite the wide range of experiences gained from our continued involvement in United Nations missions since 1958, the UNMIL mission in Liberia represents the first time that any of our soldiers will face the phenomenon of the Child Soldier.

My military experience to-date includes almost four years service with the Irish Special Forces. With this experience, I would consider myself qualified to offer an opinion as to whether an Irish Special Forces soldier would or should behave in any different way to a regular Infantry soldier if faced with a Child Soldier scenario or vice versa. I do not believe so. While the Special Forces soldier may be the subject of more intensive training often incorporating specialised skills and equipment on an ongoing basis, if the level of training and preparedness of each individual non Special Forces soldier is up to the required standard then, I believe there is no reason

to assume that potential confrontational situations with Child Soldiers will not be dealt with in a professional manner by all members of the Defence Forces. The degree to which we as a Defence Forces prepare our soldiers for such situations will be examined in this thesis.

As an officer who is likely to serve with UNMIL in the next 12 months I see it as a duty to myself and more importantly to my subordinates to appreciate the Child Soldier phenomenon in as great a detail as possible, in order that situations encountered by Irish troops in theatre involving Child Soldiers will be dealt with in a thoroughly professional manner with the ultimate aim of resolving such situations without loss of life on either side.

Throughout this thesis I consider the use of children as Child Soldiers as an affront to humanity and if one is to agree with the statement of the German Theologian, Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) that “the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children” then as human beings and professional soldiers involved in United Nations operations in West Africa I consider it a necessary requirement that the Defence Forces understands and develops its understanding of the Child Soldier phenomenon.

### **Significance of Study**

While it is accepted that the accomplishment of the mission is of paramount importance for any military commander, the security and safety of one’s own troops is also vital in the context of UN Peace Support Operations. The concentration of the majority of our overseas forces in the West African state of Liberia places an even

greater burden of responsibility on our commanders when one considers the volatile environment in which our troops are expected to operate, an environment that is further exasperated by the estimated presence of 15,000 Child Soldiers.

The prospect of confronting children with weapons is something that heretofore was alien to our troops. That is not to suggest for one moment that Irish Defence Forces personnel would not react in an appropriate and professional manner in such circumstances. I believe that in order for this to happen it behoves us to clearly identify in our pre-deployment training that such situations may arise in theatre and to develop procedures on an ongoing basis to deal with Child Soldier related issues. Initial research indicates that while the Defence Forces has no specific doctrine on this issue it does recognise that the Child Soldier phenomenon is a real issue in Liberia by ensuring that each unit is briefed on the subject prior to their departure for UNMIL. The extent to which our procedures to deal effectively with Child Soldier situations are dealt with, both in pre-deployment training and from experience gained in theatre, will be examined in this thesis.

Training for situations alone however is not enough. Having identified that the phenomenon of the Child Soldier exists in Liberia we must develop an understanding in our troops of why children find themselves in situations where they are required to carry weapons instead of school books, what they have likely experienced as Child Soldiers and what we can do as members of a United Nations force to help in the process of Disarming, Demobilising, and Reintegrating (DDR) these children back into society.

This thesis will be of significance if our understanding of the phenomenon of the Child Soldier is enhanced.

### **Theoretical lens to be adopted**

I have found the identification of a suitable theoretical underpinning to this research to be most challenging. This specific topic, to the best of my knowledge, has not been addressed by any other military to date. Indeed it would appear that the subject is now only been given serious consideration in the West with recent publications by academics such as Singer (2005).

The catalyst for the interest in this area, I believe, is that this phenomenon has only recently been experienced by American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and British troops in Sierra Leone, for example. It is a phenomenon that heretofore was not a consideration for American or British or for that matter any of the Western militaries. It is a problem today because of the estimated 300,000 Child Soldiers worldwide many of whom are now operating in conflict areas in which the major western powers are deployed.

Through my research I have personally found the subject of Child Soldiers to be a hugely emotive subject and one that may be examined through a variety of theoretical lenses. However I have decided, based on my literature reviewed in Chapter 2, to focus the theoretical lens in this research to culture, globalisation and socialisation. This will be developed in the Literary Review through an examination of a number of themes.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

In my examination of literature available on the subject of Child Soldiers two things became quite apparent; firstly, there is little difference of opinion between authors/agencies on the general subject, rather common ground on the revulsion that children are being exploited to perform as soldiers and, secondly, that the phenomenon has only relatively recently received the attention it deserves.

#### **Children in war – against the norm<sup>4</sup>?**

As the most basic laws of war have been increasingly violated, there is a new, perhaps even more disturbing element. Not only have children become the new targets of violence and atrocities in war, but many now have also become the perpetrators.

(Singer, 2005:6)

Bennet (2000) suggests that the withholding of children from warfare in Africa has held true in almost every traditional culture. In pre-colonial African armies the general practice was that warriors typically joined three to four years after puberty. In the Zulu tribe, for example, it was not until the ages of eighteen to twenty that members were eligible for 'UKUBUTHWA' (the drafting or enrolment into tribal regiments). Paden (2003) claims that in the Kano region of West Africa, only

---

<sup>4</sup> The word 'norm' can have two meanings. It can describe ethical beliefs about what is right behaviour, but it can also describe the standard or most common practices of behaviour irrespective of ethics. (Singer, 2005:139).

married men were conscripted<sup>5</sup>, as those unmarried were considered too immature for such an important job as war.

Singer (2005) indicates that similarly in European history, the exclusion of children in warfare was a general rule. Though children did play military roles, it was not as active soldiers, rather, pageboys helped arm and maintain the knights of medieval Europe, while drummer boys and 'powder monkeys' (small boys who ran ammunition to canon crews) were a requisite part of armies and navies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such children fulfilled minor or ancillary support roles and were not considered true combatants; "they neither dealt out death nor were considered legitimate targets." (Singer, 2005:11).

While it is true that a general norm held against Child Soldiering across the last four millennia of warfare there have been some notable exceptions such as the Hitler Jugend in Normandy and in Germany itself during the last weeks of World War II. The Jugend were young boys who had received military-type training as part of a political programme to maintain Nazi rule through indoctrination. During most of the war, the youths only joined German military forces once they reached maturity. However, when Allied forces invaded German territory Hitler's regime ordered the Jugend to fight as well. Knopp (2000) describes how the lightly armed Jugend were usually sent out in small ambush gangs often resulting in scores of children being killed in futile skirmishes essentially occurring after the fate of the war had been decided.

---

<sup>5</sup> While Paden does not expand on the exact age bracket for 'married men' it can be taken to be in the context of the previously referenced statement, which is three to four years after puberty.

The deliberations of Bennet (2000), Paden (2003), Singer (2005) and Knopp (2000) concur with my personal stance that children in warfare are against the norm. Certainly there have been some exceptions but as a very clear rule of thumb, over the last four millennia, that is all they have been - exceptions.

### **Child Soldiers – a legitimate African tradition?**

Attempts have been made to justify the practice of conscripting Child Soldiers as being that of an African cultural tradition. While I may view this claim as morally indefensible it requires to be assessed through an understanding of what is entailed by culture and tradition.

Culture is an amorphous concept denoting anything that contributes to the unique character of a social group, thereby distinguishing it from other groups ... tradition, which is the process of transmitting knowledge and beliefs to future generations is part and parcel of culture.

(Bennet, 2000)

Brett and Specht (2004) describe culture and tradition as that which provides the individual with a framework through which to observe and interpret what is happening, influencing the way they see and interpret things.

Singer (2005) believes that every culture withholds powers and responsibilities from youngsters and places them under the care and control of guardians. They are usually the parents but also include the broader community as well, which exercises its guidance through differing laws and practices that seek to regulate the treatment of children. Once they are judged to conduct themselves in a mature and fully rational manner, they are granted equal standing as adults.



In his examination of whether Child Soldiers may be considered a 'legitimate African tradition' Bennet (2000) notes that in preliterate societies, where it is not possible to keep exact records, movement from one age category to another is related to physical processes, such as puberty, and to social events such as initiation. There would appear to be a large measure of agreement between the fixed-age system of written codes and the more flexible African system on what should be regarded as a totally dependent infant. Both systems treat individuals under the approximate age of seven years as socially powerless. Adolescence however is a period of ambiguity, when individuals are to some extent capable of responsible behaviour but are still in need of guidance and protection. In these circumstances, the status as a child is flexible and thus open to manipulation to achieve ulterior ends.

From a personal perspective, I am in agreement with the referenced authors in relation to their interpretations of culture and tradition. Interestingly in my opinion, Keitetsi<sup>6</sup> (2004) appears to suggest that her former 'bosses' - even to this day - while publicly condemning the practice of the use of 'Child Soldiers' in fact comfort themselves in their belief that the use of 'Child Soldiers' in combat may be justified on grounds of culture and tradition. It is my intention to further develop this theme through the interview process in this thesis.

### **What are the underlying causes?**

War creates the environment for Child Soldiering in different ways. First, for young people war rapidly becomes the normal everyday background to their lives. Second, the war comes to them, rather than they going to look for a war to fight. Third, living in a situation creates the need for self-protection and to use violence to do so ....

(Brett and Specht, 2004:10)

---

<sup>6</sup> Ms China Keitetsi is a former Ugandan Child Soldier who was interviewed by me in the course of my research on 28/29 January 2005.

Brett and Specht (2004) submit that trying to analyse human behaviour and identify the specific factors or incidents that lead to one course of action rather than another is inevitably a complex and somewhat unsatisfactory process. Authors such as Machel (1996), McConnan and Uppard (2001), Brett and Specht (2004) agree that an examination of socio-economic factors such as war, poverty, education and employment, family and friends, politics and ideology, culture and tradition will assist in determining the main causes as to why children become Child Soldiers either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Singer (2005) points to the theory of globalisation and suggests that while positive in some terms; the developments of globalisation that have dominated the last quarter century have left many behind. The developed world has seen great prosperity from the opening of economies, but this certainly has not produced a homogeneous world economy or culture with affluence for all. Singer (2005) posits that the resultant exploitation of natural resources, the availability of countless numbers of cheap light weapons and the debt crises in many developing countries leading to increasing levels of poverty and social unrest are tangible examples in which it could be argued that globalisation has driven armed conflicts and the proliferation of Child Soldiers throughout the world.

I would contend that it is not within the scope of my thesis to definitively confirm the answers to all the questions posed by a research question. However, in this particular thesis – most likely aimed at a military audience that is lacking an understanding of the phenomenon to any great extent – I feel that I would be doing this work and the people that have agreed to assist me a disservice were I not to attempt to analyse the

associated underlying causes. Singer (2005), Brett and Specht (2004) have put their theories of socialisation and globalisation as factors to be considered, factors which will be examined in greater detail in this thesis through my interaction with selected interviewees.

### **What was the catalyst for action?**

Brett and McCallin (1996) describe children in armed conflict as the invisible soldiers in that those that employ them deny their existence and no record is kept of their numbers and ages, or their ages are falsified. The Cape Town Principles<sup>7</sup>, as observed by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), define a Child Soldier as:

any person under 18 years who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not therefore only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.

The necessity to face up to the reality of the Child Soldier issue was prompted by the 1996 publication of Graca Machel's study on 'The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' pursuant to the UN General Assembly resolution 48/157 of Dec 1993 to appoint an expert<sup>8</sup> to examine the issue. In the study, Machel proposes the elements of a comprehensive agenda for action by UN member states and the international community to improve the protection and care of children in conflict situations, and to prevent these conflicts from occurring. The study demonstrates the centrality of

---

<sup>7</sup> Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (Cape Town, 27-30 April 1997), [www.unicef.org/emerg/Cape\\_Town\\_Principles.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/Cape_Town_Principles.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ms Graca Machel widow of the founding president of Mozambique, Samora Machel, was Mozambique's Minister for Education from independence in 1975 until 1989. During the period the numbers of students enrolled in schools rose from 40 percent of all school-aged children to over 90 per cent for males and 75 percent for females. Prior to acceding to UN Secretary General's request in 1993 to become the expert in charge of the report of 'The impact of armed conflict on children', Ms Machel served as Chairperson of the National Organisation of Children of Mozambique and as President of the National Commission of UNESCO in Mozambique. Ms Machel married Nelson Mandela in July 1998.

these issues to the international human rights, peace and security and development agendas and serves to promote urgent and resolute action on the part of the international community to redress the plight of children affected by armed conflicts.

The Machel report provided the catalyst for UN action to be taken on the issue and galvanised children's advocates to lobby governments and armed groups to take seriously children's rights in armed conflict. The progressive and ongoing attempts by the United Nations to bring the issue of children in armed conflict to the top of the international agenda subsequent to the Machel report can be seen through UN Security resolutions.<sup>9</sup> From initially urging all parties to armed conflicts to ensure that the protection, welfare and rights of children are taken into account during peace negotiations and throughout the process of consolidating peace in the aftermath of conflict, successive resolutions develop the theme to include:

- Urging all parties to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of children in armed conflict. UN Res 1314 (2000).
- Provision for the protection of children, when considering the mandates of peacekeeping operations ... readiness to continue to include ...child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations. UN Res 1379 (2001).
- Supporting dialogue with parties to armed conflict in violation of the international obligations applicable on the recruitment or use of children in armed conflict ...to develop clear and time bound action plans to end the practice. UN Res 1460 (2003).

---

<sup>9</sup> See UN Res 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1460 (2003) and 1539 (2004).

- Takes note with deep concern of the continued recruitment and use of children ... in situations of armed conflict ... in violation of applicable international law. UN Res 1539 (2004).

From the above one can see a regular progression in maintaining the subject of children in armed conflict at the top of the agenda through appropriate UN resolutions.

### **What is the legal perspective?**

Underpinning international law efforts to address children in armed conflict issues are the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) and the Optional Protocol to UNCRC (2000), each of which have been ratified by Ireland. The Optional Protocol to UNCRC (2000) expands on the original UNCRC which defined a child as “any human being under 18 years of age” and recognized the need to increase the protection of children from involvement in armed conflict, by obliging all state parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities. In effect the spirit of the Optional Protocol urges all nations to raise their minimum age of recruitment to 18 years.

While Ireland has ratified the additional protocol it is the intention of the Irish Defence Forces to continue with its minimum recruitment age of 17 years and not 18 years, while taking the required measures to ensure that no soldier will serve overseas without having attained the age of 18 years. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) declares “conscripting or enlisting children

under the age of 15 years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities” as a war crime.

### **Child Soldiers – gender implications?**

Keitetsi (2004) provides a vivid account of life as a female Child Soldier in Uganda for over ten years from the age of eight. Her personal account outlines the tragedy of the Child Soldier issue, from the variety of reasons why she became a Child Soldier, to the horrific experiences both in and out of conflict that she had to face as a female Child Soldier, to the problems when attempting to reintegrate into society post conflict.

An investigation of Keitetsi’s personal account enables the researcher to temporarily get into the mind of a Child Soldier, to try and understand the fear associated with failure on the battlefield and that of abusive authority. Throughout it is necessary to regularly take stock of the situation and realise that the accounts being portrayed are those of a child, or perhaps a human being whose childhood has been stolen, a child who comes to realise that her leaders to whom she was regularly required to risk her life for, and abused by, were mainly motivated by personal greed and power. Perhaps the greatest battle for such children is that of post conflict and their attempts to reintegrate into society having been traumatised and stigmatised by their experiences.

### **Child Soldiers – an aberration?**

I want to advise people who want to be rebel fighters, young soldiers that they should learn from that we have gone through which is too sad an experience. Those children younger than we are should never be again involved in such a life anymore ... what I have seen and undergone is not for a child to experience.

Arthur, Sierra Leone (Brett and Specht, 2004:121)

Singer (2005:211) posits that “countless doctrines and modes of warfare have come and gone over the long march of history” and that “perhaps, history will look back upon this period of Child Soldiers as an aberration, a short phase when the moral norms broke down but were quickly restored.” I would contend that a real difficulty in facing this phenomenon is defining the means by which the problem can be truly tackled.

Is the solution to the Child Soldier phenomenon the implementation of the concept of total Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) as developed in McConnan and Uppard (2001)? McConnan and Uppard suggest that this process is vital to enable a society to move from conflict to peace and development through the collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons, the disbandment of military structures and the provision of means by which ex-combatants can adapt both economically and socially to productive civilian life.

Brett and Specht (2004) highlight the importance of addressing the factors that lead to child participation in a consistent, integrated, and coherent fashion and at macro and micro levels, while also working to relieve the reasons that cause armed conflicts to occur and to persuade the parties to resolve their disputes through social dialogue and other non violent means.

While Singer (2005) is in broad agreement with Brett and Specht in relation to tackling the factors or underlying causes identified as a necessary step in the process he is more direct in stating that preventative measures must also be taken to end

Child Soldiering. Rather than relying on an unlikely or ephemeral change of heart among leaders who abuse children to do their bidding Singer (2005) believes that realistic systems of sanctions and deterrence must be set up. Suggested measures include sanctions against Child Soldier leaders, supporters and enablers, and the wider application of child labour laws and of war crime tribunals to include this phenomenon.

While any attempt to find the definitive answer(s) to the Child Soldier issue is beyond the scope of this thesis, it will place emphasis on the recommendations of interviewees and their suggestions towards a timely resolution of the issue – ultimately assisting Singer's (2005) hope that perhaps “history will look back upon this period of Child Soldiers as an aberration.”



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Knowing what you want to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get that information

(Miles and Huberman, 1984:42; cited by Silverman, 2000:88).

#### **Research Approach**

I have decided that a qualitative research approach utilising semi-structured interviews with selected case study samples best suits my dissertation. The aim of this approach being to obtain data that is “valid, reliable and objective” (Silverman, 2000:91).

Up to now, this thesis has indicated that in order to delve into the research question a high degree of sensitivity will be required by the interviewer, whether in the context of interviewing a former female Child Soldier about her ‘lived experience’ or serving army officers who may naturally be hesitant in giving nothing but a ‘positive spin’ on their experiences in UNMIL. For this reason I believe that ‘semi-structured’ type interviews will best suit my attempts to retrieve relevant information for further analysis. Furthermore it is anticipated that use of the ‘semi-structured’ type interviews will assist me in utilising Brett and Specht’s (2004) advice regarding guiding principles for interviews in that this approach will provide the platform for the interviewer to actually listen to what the participant is saying and enable the interviewer to amend or alter further questions to suit the context. It will also assist me in trying to identify what the ‘inner voice’ of the interviewee is telling me rather

than that of the more 'public voice' and will provide a structure to move the interview 'forward' as appropriate.

My selected case study samples and the data derived therefrom will provide a combination of exploratory, explanatory and descriptive type studies. I feel this is necessary due to the fact that while much has been written in general on the subject of Child Soldiers, the research question points to a phenomenon that perhaps has either not been fully understood or given the required attention from the Irish military perspective.

### **Why a qualitative approach?**

I have selected the qualitative research approach for a number of reasons. I concur with Strauss and Corbin's (1990:11) answer to the question – "why do qualitative research? – One reason is the conviction of the researcher based upon the research experience ... also qualitative methods can give intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods".

Furthermore, from a personal point of view, I feel that I possess the personal skills necessary to conduct qualitative research. This is based on over 25 years experience as an officer of the Defence Forces both at home and abroad involving regular contact with troops and senior management; from experience as platoon commander at unit level to personal staff officer to the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and Aide de Camp to the Taoiseach<sup>10</sup>. This range of experience has enabled me to develop confidence in my interviewing techniques, to ask the difficult questions

---

<sup>10</sup> The 'Taoiseach' is the Prime Minister of Ireland.

where necessary in a sensitive manner, to identify relevant information and material and “to step back and critically analyse situations, to recognise and avoid bias, to obtain valid and reliable data, and to think abstractly” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:18).

### **Interviews**

Interviews are central to my methodology. I intend to interview Irish military personnel who have had recent experience of service in Liberia with UNMIL in a variety of senior appointments. I will also interview a female former Ugandan Child Soldier. While accepting that the number of interviews involved (maximum five) may appear small, from my theoretical sensitivity I consider the samples chosen and the interview technique to be applied, as developed by Brett and Specht (2004:151-156), will assist me “to enter, in an empathic way, the lived experience of the person or group being studied” (McLeod, 1994:89 cited by Silverman 2000:94). Throughout my research into the topic particular phrases have become dominant such as the need to acquire in my research ‘the lived experience’, ‘credibility’ and as Dr Anne B Ryan has indicated “samples must be rich in relevant information” (2005:4).

### **Ethical considerations**

From the outset of this research, I recognised that the subject would necessitate a high degree of sensitivity especially in relation to the schedule of proposed interviews. For this reason I am conscious of the requirement for ethical guidelines to be adopted prior to, during and after interviews. Each interviewee will be given an ‘Affirmation of Informed Consent for Interview’ form as adapted from Brett and

Specht's (2004) example, which was originally derived from Kent's (1996) outline on what is informed consent. The purpose of the form will be to:

- provide information about the research
- highlight the general areas to be covered in interview
- seek permission for the interview to be taped
- give the interviewee the opportunity to stop the interview at any stage
- give the interviewee the opportunity to review and change any information at the end of the interview
- acquire written consent from the interviewee for the interview to proceed

### **Methodological rationale**

I intend to conduct a brief case study on Liberia to outline the involvement of Child Soldiers in the Liberian civil wars (1989-1997, 2000-2003). The objective of the Liberian case study is to place the subject of Child Soldiers in context with an examination of how the phenomenon was exploited in the recent past.

I will also place emphasis on the data derived from my interview with a former Child Soldier. Although the person interviewed was involved as a Child Soldier in Uganda and not Liberia her deliberations on the subject will provide 'the lived experience' which will complement my research.

From a personal point of view, I believed from the very beginning of this process that an interview with a former Child Soldier would greatly add to the credibility of this thesis. The fact that the former Child Soldier to be interviewed was female, relatively recently involved in the phenomenon, and that she agreed to assist me in

my work at a very early stage served to encourage me to follow this research question rather than any other.

The fact that the Irish Defence Forces are serving in Liberia and that several Army Officers have held significant appointments in the mission made it imperative, I believe, that I sought permission to interview those involved at both the operational and tactical levels to ascertain their views on issues related to the research question.

Limiting the qualitative research to five interviews is deliberate. I am conscious of the danger of 'saturation' (Ryan, 2005:5), the limited scope of the thesis and the ability to get the cooperation of the selected main players for the research. I contend that for the data that may be extrapolated from the interviewees (as set out individually below) the chosen samples are indeed "designed to provide a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of particular units which may constitute ... cases which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe" (Mason, 1996:92).

#### **Interview 1: China Keitetsi**

China Keitetsi (age 29 years) is a former female Ugandan Child Soldier. She served with the National Resistance Army (NRA) of the now President Museveni which overthrew the Obote regime in 1986, from the age of eight to eighteen years. After ten years as a Child Soldier, China fled to South Africa in 1994 where she remained for four years before being relocated to Denmark by UNHCR. Since her relocation to Denmark she has become one of the most prominent anti Child Soldier advocates working and lecturing for UNICEF and various NGOs such as Save The Children. In 2004 she published her first book – 'Child Soldier'. Through this publication I made

contact by email with China in August 2004. Almost immediately, she offered to assist me in my research. In the intervening months a bond of trust and respect was built up through email and several phone calls. Due to the delicate nature of some of the interview topics, I suggested that any proposed interview should take place face-to-face. China agreed and we met in Hamburg on 28/29 January 2005.

### **Interview 2: Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald<sup>11</sup>**

General Fitzgerald held the prominent appointment as Chief of Staff of the UNMIL Mission between October 2003 - December 2004. As the senior Irish officer in the mission and one of the key appointment holders in UNMIL comprising of almost 15,000 military and civilian personnel an interview with General Fitzgerald should enlighten this research in terms of how the issue of Child Soldiers in Liberia was viewed at the operational level in a UN Force Headquarters.

### **Interview 3/4: Lt Cols Moran and Behan**

The main focus of these interviews will be to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of the commanders of the first two Irish Battalions that served in UNMIL at the tactical level between Nov 2003-May 2004 (Lt Col Moran) and Jun 2004-Nov 2004 (Lt Col Behan). In particular, I want to ascertain from the two commanders the extent to which this issue was considered prior to deployment to UNMIL and during their respective tours of duty.

---

<sup>11</sup> Col Bob Fitzgerald was promoted to the rank of Brig Gen, on an acting basis, upon taking up his appointment in UNMIL. On repatriation at the end of his tour of duty he reverted to his substantive rank of Colonel.

### **Interview 5: Commander Irish Special Forces (Army Ranger Wing)**

While this officer has consented to interview, for reasons of military security this individual cannot be identified nor can the interview be taped. I will be permitted to publish, as an appendix, the general questions posed in the interview. However, the subsequent data findings may only be published with the consent of this individual. I decided to seek this interview because this officer has commanded his unit in situations in which Child Soldiers have been encountered. I want to ascertain to what extent as a special forces commander he considered Child Soldiers a threat to his personnel, how he and his unit prepared for and proposed to deal with possible 'live' Child Soldier situations and if there were any lessons to be learned.

### **Summary**

The focus of the research methodology for this thesis will be to conduct a qualitative research approach through using the technique of semi-structured interviews. Underpinning this approach at all times will be 'credibility', 'the lived experience' and that the samples chosen must be 'rich in relevant information'. Although the proposed schedule of interviews is limited to no more than five I am encouraged by the words of Silverman (2000:100), "it is often misleading to attempt to research the whole picture ... often the best research says a lot about a little."

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Liberian Civil Wars (1989-1997, 2000-2003)**

As for Child Soldiers ... there was no training, no recruitment of any kind ... they were not trained to fight with us, they were not given weapons by us. Some of the children would follow our soldiers, but we sent them away.

Sekou Conneh<sup>12</sup> (Oct 2003)

Civil War first broke out in Liberia in 1989 when the then rebel leader Charles Taylor, head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched an incursion from neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire. Between 1989 and 1995, a brutal civil war claimed more than 200,000 lives out of a population of 3,000,000, forced more than 700,000 people to seek refuge outside the country and left an estimated 1.4 million people internally displaced (Watchlist, 2004)<sup>13</sup>. After several failed attempts at a lasting peace agreement, a binding cease-fire was achieved in 1997. The same year, Charles Taylor was elected president of the country. Tensions and divisions continued in the corruption driven country and in July 2000, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), backed by the government of Guinea, launched an incursion into the northern county of Lofa from Guinea. This incursion resulted in a further three years of civil war to July 2003 by which time the main opposition group LURD and a breakaway faction, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) had besieged Taylor's Government of Liberia (GOL) forces around the capital Monrovia.

---

<sup>12</sup> Quotation from opposition group LURD Chairman Sekou Conneh to Human Rights Watch researchers (HRW, 2004) in Tubmanburg, Liberia, in which Mr Conneh denies the use of Child Soldiers in the civil war of 2000-2003.

<sup>13</sup> 'Watchlist' is a network of local, regional and international non-governmental organisations working to protect the security and rights of children in armed conflicts. Watchlist monitors the impact of armed conflict on children, compiles reports about children, including adolescents, and influences programs and policies to improve their lives.



In August 2003 Taylor stepped down as president and fled to Nigeria. A National Transitional Government, supported by the UNMIL mission, is now leading the country. Elections are scheduled for Autumn 2005.

The use of children as soldiers in Liberia dates to the start of the conflict in 1989. Charles Taylor's NPFL became infamous for the abduction and use of boys in war. Between 6,000 and 15,000 children are estimated to have taken up arms between 1989 and 1997 (Watchlist, 2004). Many of these children were used in groups known as 'Small Boys Units' (SBUs) throughout the 1990s. (Ellis, 2001). Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2004) points to the fact that the 1997 demobilisation plan was only partially successful in rehabilitating and reintegrating such children, resulting in many of the same children who had fought in the first civil war becoming easy targets for re-recruitment by government forces and non state armed groups when fighting resumed in 2000. Despite denials to the contrary, GOL forces recruited children, both forcibly and voluntarily, in Monrovia and other government-controlled areas. HRW (2004) reported that as the war around Monrovia intensified after 2002, parents stopped sending their children to school to avoid recruitment on the way to or at schools. In July 2003, UNICEF and the NGO Don Bosco publicly denounced the forcible and voluntary recruitment of girls and boys as young as nine years of age into the Liberian government armed forces.

I was still in school and on my way home to Congo town (Monrovia). There were government forces in my neighbourhood. They forced us to go with them to Lofa. They told us, 'we are looking for people to fight', not really asking you, just picking you up. There was no choice.

Charles Q aged 16 years (HRW, 2004)

LURD has been widely known to recruit and use children. During a June 2003

LURD attack on Gbarnga<sup>14</sup>, eyewitnesses reported children firing rocket-propelled grenades as well as automatic rifles (Watchlist, 2004). Ellen S. a female commander described her time with LURD:

When LURD came here, we were caught, lots of girls, and were carried back to Bomi. After training, I became a commander. There were thirty 'wives' in my group; only two died, we were strong fighters.

(HRW, 2004)

MODEL split with LURD forces early in 2003. From its outset, MODEL continued practices initiated by LURD, recruiting children from refugee camps and recently captured areas. MODEL also recruited Liberian children and Ivorian children in Cote d'Ivoire. During the lead up to MODEL's capture of Buchanan<sup>15</sup> in July 2003, children were forcibly recruited from the countryside. A HRW researcher who visited Buchanan in August 2003 saw several armed children, including girls, guarding a high level commander at his base and participating in checkpoint duties on the main road to Monrovia (Watchlist, 2004).

This quick snapshot of Child Soldiering in the Liberian civil wars serves to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon in a region in which Irish Defence Forces personnel are now stationed. It is intended to illustrate some basic facts, namely, that the use of Child Soldiers was widespread involving all parties to the dispute including Government of Liberia forces with children often being recruited against their will. Furthermore children were used for active combat and it suggests that girls as 'wives' were available for physical and sexual abuse in addition to fulfilling combat roles.

---

<sup>14</sup> Gbarnga is a town in the Liberian county of Bong.

<sup>15</sup> Buchanan is the main town in the Liberian county of Grand Bassa.

### **Interview findings technique**

Having conducted the proposed interviews, as outlined in my methodology, and consolidated the data derived therefrom I have decided that this thesis will be best served by documenting the views of China Keitetsi independently of those views expressed by the military interviewees, which will be examined on a group basis.

The main reason for this approach is that I found the questions posed to each of the military participants were similar, thus providing a direct format for comparison, contrast and analysis of the main themes as identified in my Literary Review. In fact many of the questions posed to the military interviewees were driven by the information derived from China Keitetsi, which was my first interview. The interview with Ms Keitetsi is no doubt a stand-alone item of research for analysis. At the outset one of the main aims of this thesis was to enhance our awareness of the phenomenon of Child Soldiers. The frank, honest, vivid, thoughtful, sometimes emotional responses by China Keitetsi significantly assist in the achievement of this aim through the 'lived experience'.

Similarly, the military responses are derived from 'the lived experience' in Liberia. They provide relevant information for analysis to determine whether we as a Defence Forces place sufficient emphasis on the phenomenon in both our training at pre-deployment stage and on the ground fulfilling our mandate with the UNMIL mission, and furthermore, because each of the military interviewees have spent a considerable time in Liberia they are considered suitably qualified to offer opinions on other identified themes.

### **China Keitetsi – former Child Soldier<sup>16</sup>**

In describing the circumstances under which she became a Child Soldier, China Keitetsi reflects on a dysfunctional family upbringing in which her mother was forced to leave the family home when China was one year of age, her father remarried, subjected his daughters (of which China was the youngest) to severe and regular physical abuse until the age of eight years when she ran away from home in search of her mother. “In Africa as a child you have to find your own way or to help yourself – that’s how I think many come to be soldiers”. Found wandering in the countryside she was taken in by members of Y.K. Musevini’s National Resistance Army<sup>17</sup>. “...they took me in as a soldier and being there I knew I couldn’t go back to my family.”

Brett and Specht (2004) have suggested a wide range of socio-economic factors which lead children to becoming Child Soldiers, two of them being war and family, whether by absence of family, to family involvement in conflict, to abusive or exploitative family situations. This would seem to be borne out from China Keitetsi’s experience.

In developing the theme of why and how children become Child Soldiers, China generalises on the main reasons and points to a feeling of isolation and lack of choice in the lives of abducted children:

Most of the time when the rebel groups start fighting the governments, some kill the people in that district and many are [then] left with no parents ... so that they can have these children for the rest of their lives, because the kids won’t go back to where – nowhere.

---

<sup>16</sup> China Keitetsi often speaks in the interview in her own idiom. As a child in Uganda she spoke ‘Kinyankole’. She learned English after she fled from Uganda to South Africa.

<sup>17</sup> The National Resistance Army of the now President Musevini overthrew the Obote regime in Uganda in 1986 after a violent guerrilla war. Musevini has been in power ever since.

While indoctrination was briefly referred to in this thesis, relevant to the German Jugend in WW2, it is a feature that Keitetsi was anxious to expand upon at interview to emphasise how children often find themselves 'trapped' in their new lives as soldiers through being exposed to and perpetrating violent acts at an early stage of their indoctrination to the group:

We captured the enemies ... we would beat them ... we would tie their arms behind their back ... it is so difficult. For example for me, a man you didn't argue with, a man who had not beaten you, a man you had never met ... is there crying ... you are spitting at him, you are kicking him ... you had to pretend on your face that you hated him, because it was important that we hated our enemy.

In understanding the phenomenon of the Child Soldier, I was personally anxious to get an appreciation of why children did not simply run away at every opportunity. Indeed while many attempted to, many more stayed, possibly out of that feeling as referred already of there being 'nowhere else to go' or possibly as Keitetsi seems to suggest, a longing as a child to be loved:

I wanted my boss (commander) to recognise me, to notice me, to smile at me or to touch me on my shoulder, because many of our bosses were old and as a child you look at them wishing – I wish you were my father, so you had this [feeling] inside of you, yet [he was] abusing you. You were confused in between because many of us [children] wanted this love.

Keitetsi however is honest in her assessment that her 'bosses' never shared the desire to be loved:

Our boss never really cared about us. I remember as a bodyguard ... your boss goes out at 6 o'clock in the evening, drinks until 1 o'clock ... you are sitting in the car ... if you fall asleep he hits you and for girls of course you go back home and he sleeps with you ... this is very sad because you somehow give up your body just to be used.

After explaining how she participated in an ambush of government troops just two weeks after joining the NRA, I felt that in order to get to the kernel of the matter, to attain information to assist in the objective of understanding the Child Soldier, I had to ask the following question:

*What age were you when you first killed somebody and how did you feel about it afterwards?*

I can guess because sometimes ... you did not even know months or weeks....I could guess 10 ½ or so or 10 and for me it was very difficult. Still today and everything that happened to me ... my heart is still the same ... it was difficult to kill, not killing for you, but killing for your boss, which you had to do. But there were other kids and [they] enjoyed it, because our boss had told them that it was the enemy who killed their parents ... there were others like me [who] killed to make our boss happy.

Whether or not children appear to enjoy killing, it undoubtedly affects them emotionally and psychologically, something that Defence Forces personnel must be aware of in attempting to resolve peacefully any live encounter with Child Soldiers:

I think if I killed someone because I wanted to, because this person made me angry, I would not have nightmares, maybe. But killing, feeling sad inside, smiling on the face because you are making your boss happy is very difficult. The eyes... the blood of this man on his knees ... the sound of this man crying ... never goes away ... my commanders do not understand ...

When asked to develop on the comment that 'my commanders do not understand' Keitetsi drew the interview to the theory of culture and more specifically to whether she felt that Child Soldiering was an accepted part of African culture. In our discourse on this theme, I asked the following:

*Do you think your commanders thought it was normal for children to behave as soldiers?*

My commanders do not understand that you can have nightmares ... they think that you are mentally sick ... me and my boss, he was very tough, we went to the hospital where all the boys had no arms and the girls no legs. Coming out, [with] my boss ... I couldn't see anything [reaction] for he

might think it was normal ...it was casualties of war and I think ... my government don't accept my complaints because they feel it is normal and I have no reason to complain.<sup>18</sup>

In elaborating on a theme examining the difficulties of reintegrating back into society post conflict, Keitetsi outlined the problems, but more interestingly to this thesis reflected a different cultural outlook to the one expounded by President Museveni and the present leadership with regard to the implication that Child Soldiers could in a way be considered a 'legitimate African tradition';

Another thing was after being in the army, for many reasons, you can't go back to your family or to your village. Because, in Africa, as you are a kid you have to respect everyone in the community who is older than you. But, being a soldier, to have killed, to have been raped, to have been promoted, to having given orders, going back to your community is nearly impossible. You need to have someone to help you in the process because there is no respect of the village people who are older than you.

### **Interviews – Irish Officers with UNMIL**

As indicated, interviews in relation to the research question were conducted with the following Defence Forces officers who have served in Liberia:

- Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald, Chief of Staff, UNMIL Headquarters (Oct 03 – Dec 04).
- Commander Irish Special Forces (Nov 03 – Feb 04).
- Lt Col Moran, Battalion Commander 90 Inf Bn, (Nov 03 – May 04).
- Lt Col Behan, Battalion Commander 91 Inf Bn, (Jun 04 – Nov 04).

---

<sup>18</sup> Off tape China Keitetsi discussed this theme with me in more detail concluding that while the present Ugandan leadership publicly condemns and denies the use of Child Soldiers, privately they considered it 'normal' for African children to have been recruited to fight in the armed struggle against the Obote regime. This is based on her experiences in the 'bush' directly with the leader of the NRA – President Museveni.

The research question posed by this thesis ‘Child Soldiers: a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations?’ requires, I believe, a number of issues to be addressed from the Defence Forces point of view:

- Is the subject of Child Soldiers adequately addressed in pre-deployment training?
- Are our troops thoroughly prepared to deal with Child Soldier issues in theatre?
- What are the lessons to be learned on this issue from our experience in Liberia, to date?

When asked *‘were you aware of the phenomenon of Child Soldiers before you took up your appointment in UNMIL?’* each of the respondents replied that they had been to varying degrees. Gen Fitzgerald admitted that having been appointed to the mission headquarters at relatively short notice, which required that he take up his appointment some two months in advance of the first main body of troops, that he personally was aware of the issue of Child Soldiers before departure to the mission area but “not to any great degree”. Both the Commander of Special Forces and the two Battalion commanders indicated that they were very aware of the phenomenon. Commander Special Forces, who deployed to the area one month in advance of the main body, personally undertook to acquire all available intelligence relative to the subject prior to the departure of his unit, to brief his personnel thoroughly on the situation and to complete detailed contingency plans on how to react to potentially volatile encounters with armed groups consisting of Child Soldiers. Lt Col Moran confirmed that by the time he departed for Liberia with the 90 Inf Bn, two months after General Fitzgerald, he and his troops had been thoroughly briefed on the



phenomenon from various Defence Force Headquarters personnel and a British officer who detailed the 'Sierra Leone 2000' incident as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. Lt Col Behan also confirmed that he received detailed briefings from Defence Force Headquarters personnel on the subject prior to his departure to the mission area with 91 Inf Bn and from staff officers of the 90 Inf Bn during the 'hand over'<sup>19</sup> period.

Conscious of the fact, as alluded to on several occasions in this work, that the UNMIL mission represents the first time Irish troops will be exposed to situations in which Child Soldiers are encountered I wanted to ascertain how the troops were briefed and trained to deal with such situations in theatre. The response from each of the commanders was consistent. Each commander sought to instil in his troops in briefings prior to patrol that there should be no distinction in the perceived level of threat from an adult or a child in possession of a weapon. Gen Fitzgerald stated:

I spoke with the [Irish] battalion commanders who were senior officers [Lt Cols Moran and Behan] and I was very specific and categorical in stating that any threat they met out there [Liberia] in regards to weaponry; that they had to impress upon their soldiers, their officers and NCOs particularly that it didn't matter whether it was a man, woman or a child who was pointing the AK 47, the grenade or whatever. If they felt their life threatened, they were to eliminate that threat by any and all means available.

Furthermore, Gen Fitzgerald emphasised to his commanders that "they had to be prepared for this mentally" and that this message was passed "consistently throughout the 12 months I was there." This approach was confirmed by each of the commanders interviewed. Lt Col Behan explained:

Our operational view of Child Soldiers was that irrespective of age an armed person is an armed person and the dangers attaching thereto were very much

---

<sup>19</sup> A period of time, usually one week, during which the incoming Battalion takes over command from the outgoing Battalion.

considered by operational commanders on the ground and equally we had to be aware that Child Soldiers might even be more volatile than adult soldiers.

Commander Special Forces, due to his specific mission, regularly encountered Child Soldiers both in Monrovia and in the 'bush'. Further to the instructions of Gen Fitzgerald, Special Forces contingency plans for violent encounters included attempting at each incident to identify the leadership, who were often a few years older although "they still might only be between 17-20 years of age", on the basis that if the encounter became violent, elimination of the leader or leaders would enhance the possibility of the situation being resolved without further serious loss of life.

Both Battalion commanders served in Liberia for six months, while Gen Fitzgerald did so for almost 14 months. Their experience in the area of operations, in my view, qualified them to give a credible personal opinion on the issue of whether they believed that Child Soldiering was considered in some way an acceptable culture in Liberian/ African society. The question posed led to differing responses:

I had this debate many times overseas in Liberia. What is a child? I came across individuals who were quote "Child Soldiers" unquote. They had a bush wife, they had three kids and he was 16 years old. Is this person a child? In Africa people come to puberty around the age of 12, 13, 14. Married at 13 or 14 in accordance with their particular culture. They are almost adults at that stage ... so what is a child? We could debate this forever, why are they involved in soldiering? Well the most effective soldier is the younger soldier because they don't appreciate the dangers...

Gen Fitzgerald

Well, I wouldn't say it's an accepted culture. It is certainly seen by warlords or local leaders with vested interests as a method, a cheap method, of providing manpower for their armed activities and the fact that society, as we know it, has more or less broken down. These children are available and susceptible and they will continue to use them. Obviously the more enlightened elements of Liberian society are appalled by this phenomenon. Thankfully, there are still people who are appalled by it ...

Lt Col Behan

In conclusion when asked whether the commanders considered 'Child Soldiers: a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations?' each was of the general opinion that any perceived 'threat' was minimised if and when every Irish soldier was clear in his own mind before proceeding on patrol that *anyone* encountered in Liberia in possession of a lethal weapon must be considered capable of using that weapon at anytime.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

#### **Analysis of findings**

The stated aim of this thesis has been to examine the phenomenon of Child Soldiers and attempt to confirm to what extent Child Soldiers may in fact pose a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations (PSO), especially through the Defence Forces participation in UNMIL.

If one was in any doubt as to how the subject of Child Soldiers is clearly that of a very emotive subject, one has only to look at the findings of the interview with China Keitetsi. I believe that two points raised by Keitetsi stand out above everything else in this respect; firstly, while still finding it difficult to talk about killing another human being at approximately 10 years of age, she confirms that she did so only “to make our boss happy”, and secondly, despite being physically and sexually abused by her ‘boss’ she saw him as a father figure and longed to be loved. These are two illustrations that may serve to enhance our understanding of the Child Soldier.

I have stated, based on the literature reviewed, that I will focus my theoretical lens in this research to culture, globalisation and socialisation. I contend that the theory of globalisation as put forward by Singer (2005) and the socio economic factors outlined by Brett and Specht (2004) and McConnan and Uppard (2001) are intertwined in the examination of why children become Child Soldiers. The elements of war and family were indeed the catalyst for Keitetsi becoming a Child Soldier – a

life in which she quickly felt trapped by, primarily because of the indoctrination that she and other children faced almost immediately.

If there was one message that Keitetsi attempted more than anything else to convey to me in interview, it was her determination that Child Soldiering would not be considered 'a legitimate African tradition' or an element of African culture. While this has been expounded upon in the literary review through Bennet (2000) and Paden (2003) in particular, and alluded to by Singer (2005) and Brett and Specht (2004), I believe that Keitetsi best illustrated the point – perhaps unintentionally – in describing the reasons why it would be difficult for Child Soldiers to reintegrate into society

...in Africa, as you are a kid you have to respect everyone in the community who is older than you ...but being a soldier, to have killed, to have been raped ...you need to have someone to help you in the process [reintegration] because there is no respect of the village people who are older than you.

The research question posed asks whether Child Soldiers are a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations. The implied task in this thesis is that we must gain an understanding of the phenomenon of the Child Soldier. This I believe has been achieved through the review of literature and the views expressed by China Keitetsi, but it does not necessarily reveal the extent of the threat to the Irish soldier. The real threat to the Irish Soldier, I believe, is not the fact that the phenomenon exists in Liberia or the fact, as has been illustrated, that children are capable for whatever reasons of performing terrible acts, but that we as a Defence Forces may deploy to areas such as Liberia unprepared for situations in which Child Soldiers may be encountered.

From an analysis of the interviews with Irish Army officers who have served in Liberia in a variety of senior appointments it would appear to me that our troops are indeed made aware of the phenomenon of the Child Soldier in their pre-deployment training and that clear and concise briefings are held in theatre before troops go on patrol with regard to how all armed personnel must be treated in confrontational type situations. This evidence suggests to me that a recurrence of the experience of the British Army patrol in Sierra Leone in 2000 is unlikely.

### **Conclusions**

This thesis has attempted to increase our understanding of the phenomenon of the Child Soldier and tried to determine if we as members of the Defence Forces pay enough attention to the phenomenon both in our pre-deployment training and in theatre, in order to assist in ensuring the safety of our troops in Peace Support Missions.

I believe the work to be significant, in that the research question – ‘Child Soldiers: a threat to Irish Peace Support Operations?’ has not been addressed previously in any other work.

Thankfully, from a professional point of view, it appears to me from my research that the subject is given the attention it deserves at home and abroad and perhaps the proof of this is the fact that since our deployment to UNMIL in November 2003, no incidents involving confrontations between Irish troops and armed Child Soldiers have resulted in violence. That is not to suggest that we as a Defence Forces involved in missions should not continually seek to update and improve our procedures in this

area. The research suggests that we are dealing with this situation adequately; however, as mentioned in the introduction, while we prepare our troops for Child Soldier scenarios it does not appear in Defence Forces doctrine. This, I believe, is an issue that requires to be addressed, due to the fact that it is likely that Irish Defence Forces will continue to serve, in the future, in regions in which the phenomenon of the Child Soldier will exist.

From a personal point of view I feel this work is most significant in that it attempted to delve into the world of a former Child Soldier - China Keitetsi. I found that all my prior research, with the exception of the military interviews, paled into insignificance once I sat down and listened to the 'lived experience' of China, some of which has been recorded in this work. My interaction with China has assisted this work in understanding the phenomenon of the Child Soldier, the reasons children become Child Soldiers, what they are likely to experience as Child Soldiers and the problems associated with attempts at reintegration back into their societies post conflict.

It is perhaps this latter point which more than any will require further research, that is, based on our experience in Liberia for the past eighteen months and perhaps for another year, can we analyse and contribute to the debate on whether the accepted practice of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) is the way forward for Child Soldiers post conflict?

This journey into Child Soldiering has proven to be a hugely emotive one, but one that I have had no regrets in embarking upon. There is hope, as with China Keitetsi's response to my final question:

*Are you hopeful for the future?*

Oh yes, one year ago, five months ago, two years ago, I just smiled ... just like in the army [when] you are rolled in the mud, beaten, punished, you had to come back and say 'thank you, sir' smiling. But, today when I smile I feel it is really from my heart. A lot has changed. Now I can look in the mirror and I can accept my face. I have accepted so many things ... I am building a home for my kids. I have so much hope; like my son is going to school ... I don't of course know [the whereabouts] about my daughter<sup>20</sup>, my perfect daughter. I have my little family.

---

<sup>20</sup> China Keitetsi had a son as a Child Soldier in Uganda. Family members cared for him when China fled Uganda. She met her 15 year old son for the first time in ten years in August 2004. She had a daughter during her time in South Africa. This child was given up for adoption. China is now trying to trace her daughter.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amnesty International. (2004) *Liberia: The promises of peace for 21,000 Child Soldiers*. <http://web.amnesty.org/wire/May2004/Liberia>
- Barnitz, L. (1999) *Child Soldiers: Youth Who Participate in Armed Conflict*, Washington, YAP International.
- Bennet, T.W. (2000) *Using Children in Armed Conflict: A Legitimate African Tradition?* (Essex, UK: Institute for Security Studies, 2000).  
<http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/Issues/Texts/Soldiers002.htm>.
- Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). <http://www.chatna.com/theme/morality.htm>.
- Brett, R. and Specht, I. (2004) *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose To Fight*, London, Rienner.
- Brett, R. and McCallin, M. (1996) *Children: the Invisible Soldiers*, Radda Barnen, Swedish Save the Children.
- Ellis, S. (2001) *The Mask of Anarchy*, New York, NYU.
- Human Rights Watch. (2004) *How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia*.  
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/liberia0204/>
- IRIN (2003), United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks, 24 September 2003. <http://www.irinnews.org>
- Keitetsi, C. (2004) *Child Soldier*, London, Souvenir Press.
- Kent, G. (1996) *Informed consent*, in *The principled researcher*, unpublished manuscript, Social Science Division, The Graduate School, University of Sheffield, 18-24.
- Knopp, G. (2000) *Hitler's Kinder*, Munich, Bertelsmann.
- Machel, G. (1996) *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. Report of the expert of the Secretary General, Ms Graca Machel, submitted pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157*. <http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/KeyDocuments>
- Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching*, London, Sage.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, A. (1984) *Qualitative Data Analysis*, London, Sage.

- McConnan, I. And Uppard, S. (2001) *Children Not Soldiers*, London, Save the Children.
- McLeod, J. (1994) *Doing Counselling Research*, London, Sage.
- Paden, J. (2003) *Muslim Civic Culture and Conflict Resolution: the Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press.
- Pham, J.P. (2004) *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State*, New York, Reed Press.
- Ryan, A.B. (2005) 'Methodological issues', *paper presented to 61 Command and Staff course in NUIM*, 10 February 2005.
- Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2000). <http://unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/protocolchild.htm>
- Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8 (1998). <http://www.child-soldiers.org>
- Silverman, David. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, London, Sage.
- Singer, P.W. (2005) *Caution: Children at War*, New York, Pantheon.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>
- UN Security Council Resolutions 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1460 (2003), 1539 (2004) *on Children and Armed Conflict*. <http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/KeyDocuments>
- Watchlist. (2004) *Nothing Left to Lose: The Legacy of Armed Conflict and Liberia's Children*, <http://www.watchlist.org/reports/liberia.report.php>