

# Combat Child Soldiering this Congress

February 12, 2017

Dear Member of Congress—

Tens of thousands of children are recruited and used in conflicts around the world. They are often abducted, beaten, and forced to commit terrible acts.

On the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, also known as Red Hand Day, we write to urge you to take effective action this year to prevent kids and adolescents from being trafficked into armed conflict, and to aid those who have been.

Thanks to the Congress's previous work, the United States government has a powerful tool—the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 (CSPA)—to combat this practice. However, since this law came into effect in 2010, the Obama administration largely circumvented its proscriptions.

The CSPA requires the State Department to identify all countries where the military or government-supported armed groups recruited or used children in the preceding year. Those governments are prohibited from receiving U.S. taxpayer-funded military assistance. However, the CSPA allows a 'national interest' waiver of the prohibition.

We understand the need for flexibility in making challenging national security and foreign policy decisions, but the waiver has been used so extensively as to render the prohibition meaningless. The administration allowed more than \$1 billion in assistance that should have been cut, while withholding only 4 percent of all taxpayer-funded military aid to countries such as South Sudan, where 17,000 children have joined combat since 2013.

Furthermore, State Department officials have consistently interpreted the CSPA as *not* including children recruited and used by police forces. This misinterpretation has allowed Afghanistan to avoid the prohibition, despite children—some as young as 10 years old—killing and dying in the fight against the Taliban or being used for sexual purposes by their commanding officers.

We ask that you make it your business and the business of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress to see the CSPA returned to its intended role as a tool to protect children and to hold governments accountable for grave violations against children. And we ask you to look for opportunities beyond that to ensure that the U.S. government is doing all it can to prevent children from being recruited and used in war and to aid those who have.

We look forward to working with you to make this happen.

Sincerely,

Margaret Huang, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

Lester A. Myers , President, Center of Concern

Reid Maki, Coordinator, Child Labor Coalition

Isabelle Guitard, Director of Programmes, Child Soldiers International

John Prendergast, Founding Director, Enough Project

Diane Randall, Executive Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Jesse Eaves, Director of Policy and Government Relations, Humanity United

Elisa Massimino, President and CEO, Human Rights First

Sarah Margon, Washington Director, Human Rights Watch

Holly Burkhalter, Senior Advisor for Justice System Transformation, International Justice Mission

Gerry Lee, Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Andrea Koppel, Vice President for Global Engagement and Policy, Mercy Corps

Jim Winkler, General Secretary/President, National Council of Churches, USA

Rev. Ron Stief, Executive Director, National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, Director, Office of Public Witness, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Emily Brewer, Executive Director, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Lawrence Couch, Director, National Advocacy Center, Sisters of the Good Shepherd

Rev. Michael Neuroth, Policy Advocate, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church

Eva Smets, Executive Director, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

Rich Stearns, President, World Vision