

Department of National Defence Forum Review

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As a guiding expression of Canadian military priorities for the near and mid-term future, the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (“the Dallaire Initiative”) supports building upon the recent, proven experiences of the Canadian Armed Forces (“CAF”) within the broad spectrum of operations conducted at home and around the world, bridging uniformed military and civilian defence workers, civilian aid agencies and the governments of Canada and Canadian partners, with a re-conceptualization of the human security frontier. Working together with other Canadian diplomatic, humanitarian and developmental assistance efforts, the CAF should as part of its “whole-of-government” approach be empowered to make the protection of children and youth a priority, as was seen when Canada hosted the first international conference on war-affected children in 2000. This approach recognizes Canada as a middle power to whom all states, from the least developed to the most powerful, can rely upon as “honest brokers”; emphasizes Canada as a champion for the promotion of human rights; and permits us to reclaim a special place in the world of human security.

Realistic, contemporary threats to Canadian security have emerged both from domestic and international sources. A common theme shared among these threats has, unfortunately, been the exploitation of children and youth by those with ill-intent, whether taking advantage of porous borders and ethnic strife, failing political institutions, economic disparity or extremism. The recruitment and use of these children, whether as child soldiers or as part of a criminal enterprise, has exploited children not in spite of their age - but because of it. In addition, the recruitment and use of children is an early warning indicator for mass atrocities that has yet to be fully recognized by the international community. This recognition by Canada presents a very unique opportunity to promote tangible action that can contribute significantly to overall conflict mitigation.

This reality is no longer confined to failed and failing states abroad, but has reached back and affected Canadian households and Canadian interests. Assessing and addressing the effect of this recruitment and use of children as soldiers and members of criminal enterprises on Canadian defence policy is a complex issue, one that engages the whole of the Department of National Defence and the CAF across their spectrum of responsibilities – defence of Canada and continental North America, the advancement of national interests, and support to peace and security operations internationally and law enforcement agencies domestically.

However, this issue is also broader than DND and the CAF, engaging Canadian law enforcement, border services and other concerned federal and provincial agencies. By recognizing the unique challenges posed by children and youth recruited and used as soldiers and in criminal enterprise, training to address these challenges and working

cooperatively with concerned agencies and partners, the CAF will be uniquely poised to confront this issue at its earliest stages abroad, support and build capacity at home, and take a lead humanitarian role in the protection of children and human rights around the world.

It is also critical that we begin to see how better to utilize Canadian Police expertise both for international missions as well as to resolve domestic threats that have international linkages and consequences. Deployment of Canadian police personnel to peacekeeping operations has steadily declined to an all-time low. Yet the contributions that can be made by Canadian police officers to help build capacity in conflict zones, to train, mentor and lead by example in both Francophone and Anglophone contexts has not been truly understood. Corruption in many police forces around the world, combined with the very nature of police operations that requires more contact with civilian populations, means there is a critical juncture to impact change by well trained and vetted Canadian Police personnel.

The recruitment and use of children as soldiers internationally has been shown to share many commonalities with the recruitment and use of children in criminal enterprise, and in being prepared to support Canadian law enforcement and civilian authorities the CAF must be ready to face this phenomena. This readiness, honed around the world and across the spectrum of conflict from the earliest days of Peacekeeping through to the subsequent period of Peacemaking and full combat operations within an environment of “whole-of-government” engagement, will enable the CAF to take on a multitude of roles in support of contemporary operations, including:

- As trainers and capacity builders to other forces in a prophylactic approach to regional and domestic violence and instability by instructing in the effective, lawful and humanitarian establishment of security conditions and the protection of civilians through a child centric approach;
- By focusing on the demonstrated link between the recruitment of child soldiers and subsequent outbreak of the worst forms of violence, Canadian intelligence, empowered and knowledgeable in the phenomena of child soldiers, will be well sited to foresee conditions leading to regional instability. By seeing the early warning signs of impending violence, conflicts that historically have employed the worst forms of humanitarian abuse can be prevented or contained, leading to earlier resolution of conflict and reduced humanitarian need.

It should also be noted that resource or personnel constraints need not be a hindrance to advancing this new niche for the CAF. It is entirely possible that experienced CAF Veterans, who are looking to stay engaged in meaningful work, can be a resource to compliment the training and capacity building role of CAF in this realm. As an example, the Dallaire Initiative is partnering with Wounded Warriors Canada to train CAF veterans in a skills transition program that is specifically designed to assist the Dallaire Initiative’s training and doctrinal outreach around the world. This could be equally extended to retired Canadian police personnel.

In working within the contemporary world of UN peace operations, operations in support of Canadian interests at home and abroad, and other missions to counter threats to international peace and security, CAF personnel are increasingly being exposed to the very worst forms of violence and abuse of the most vulnerable members of any society – children. Studies have demonstrated a significant link between exposure to children in armed conflict by soldiers and subsequent rates of associated operational stress injuries. By educating and training CAF personnel in recognizing and constructively addressing the phenomena of child soldiers, they are better prepared to face this psychologically and emotionally corrosive reality. To quote our founder, LGen Roméo Dallaire (ret'd), *“The abuse of youth as instruments of war is a reality that can’t be resolved on the day you face them in the field.”*

The Canadian Government has now very publically stated its desire to reengage at the United Nations. It is important that Canada has a clear strategy for what this reengagement may look like. Given the CAF roles outlined above combined with civilian expertise in Canada, we have an opportunity to align ourselves with key priorities of the United Nations while also claiming our niche in the world. The UN SG’s commitment to a “Rights Upfront” approach can be augmented with a “ChildRights Upfront” approach that is championed by Canada.