

More child soldiers in Somalia
By Kathryn Tanco, CNN
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Children as young as 10 years old increasingly face horrific abuse in war-torn Somalia as the Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab has targeted them to replenish its diminishing ranks of fighters, according to a Human Rights Watch report released Tuesday.

While the recruitment of child soldiers by the Somali insurgent group is not new, the report said the scale of child abductions over the past two years is like nothing documented in the past.

Shocking patterns have also emerged of children serving as human shields on the battlefields, according to Human Rights Watch.

"We're beginning to see more and more instances where children are essentially being used as cannon fodder," Tirana Hassan of Human Rights Watch told CNN.

Al-Shabaab fighters abduct young girls and boys from their homes or schools, in some cases taking entire classes, the report said.

Children can be sent out to recruit other children, according to the organization. One survivor told Human Rights Watch he was asked by a group of kids to play football at a nearby field. When he arrived, he and others were gathered up and sent to training camps, the survivor told Human Rights Watch.

The camps are places where children live in fear, said Hassan, an emergencies researcher for the international human rights group.

"They see injured and dead fighters, many of them children, coming back from the battlefield," Hassan added.

Recruits are taught to use weapons and to throw hand grenades and are subjected to a myriad of abuses including rape, assault and forced marriages, according to Hassan.

Dozens of recruits, mostly ages 14 to 17, are driven by truckloads to the front line, where they are told to jump out only to be mowed down by gunfire while Al-Shabaab fighters launch rockets from behind, according to Hassan.

A 15-year-old boy recruited by Al-Shabaab from his school in Mogadishu in 2010 told Human Rights Watch that "out of all my classmates -- about 100 boys -- only two of us escaped, the rest were killed."

"The children were cleaned off. The children all died and the bigger soldiers ran away," the youth told Human Rights Watch.

Somalia's transitional government also was criticized by Human Rights Watch for not ending its own use of child soldiers.

"Al-Shabaab's horrific abuses do not excuse Somalia's Transitional Federal Government," said Zama Coursen-Neff, the group's deputy children's rights director. "The TFG should live up to its commitments to stop recruiting and using children as soldiers, and punish those who do."

Gen. Abdulkadir Ali Diimi, the head of Somalia's National Army, said he was unable to comment on the report.

The 104-page report, released two days ahead of a Somalia conference hosted by the British government, grimly details countless violations against children based on more than 160 interviews

conducted over the last two years with Somali youngsters who escaped from Al-Shabaab forces, as well as parents and teachers who fled to Kenya.

"For children of Somalia, nowhere is safe," Coursen-Neff said.

On Thursday, senior representatives from more than 40 governments will converge on London in a diplomatic push to find political solutions to restore stability in Somalia.

(CNN's Jonathan Wald and journalist Mohamed Amiin Adow contributed to this report.)

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