

NOTE

## Child Soldiers

**Ernest Harch writes :**

Governments and armed groups that recruit children into their military ranks should no longer be allowed to 'slip through the net,' French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste Blazy told a 5-6 February conference in Paris. He warned that such 'lost children' represent a time bomb that could threaten stability and growth in Africa and beyond.

Mr Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, elaborated : "If young ex-combatants are not rehabilitated", he said, "they are at risk of becoming mercenaries. "They know how to use a gun.... there is a conflict next door offering \$100 a day and all you can loot, they will go back to that." While rehabilitating child soldiers is not easy, he cited his own experience: "I'm living proof that it is possible".

Called the Free Children from War conference, the event was organised by the French government and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Fifty-eight governments and dozens of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) signed a set of principles known as the Paris commitments, in which they vowed to 'spare no effort to end the unlawful recruitment or use of children by armed forces or groups in all regions of the world.'

The UN estimates that about 300,000 children (defined as those under 18 years of age) are currently engaged in military conflicts in a score of countries, nearly half of them in Africa. While the Paris Commitments are not legally binding, they do carry significant moral and political weight, conference participants noted. Foreign Minister Youssouf Bakayoko of Cote d'Ivoire called the agreement a 'breakthrough.' □□□