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***Exposing without Sensationalising: The Christian Science Monitor and the plight of child soldiers in Africa***

**Abstract**

Founded in 1908 with a mission "to injure no man, but to bless all mankind", the Christian Science Monitor is now an international newspaper published daily online. Despite its name, the *Monitor* is not a religious-themed paper, and does not promote the doctrine of its patron church. Instead it has become a voice that champions human rights and exposes crimes against humanity while developing a reputation for a "distinctive brand of non-hysterical journalism". In the early 1990s it began publishing a series of articles on the plight of child soldiers in Africa and other parts of the globe. Since then it has consistently published articles on this issue with a particular focus on child soldiers in Sierra Leone and the activities of the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda. This paper looks at how the Christian Science Monitor has exposed the conditions endured by child soldiers in Africa without resorting to sensational journalism.

**Introduction**

During the 1990s an estimated 300,000 children fought in armed conflicts around the globe.<sup>1</sup> For over two decades UNICEF and humanitarian organisations have attempted to raise international concerns about the plight of these children. They have launched worldwide campaigns designed to provoke public sympathy for horrific experiences of child soldiers and thereby increase pressure on nation states to do something about the problem. As well as humanitarian organisations, a number of newspapers have taken up the cause with the *Christian Science Monitor* (CSM) being a leading voice on the issue of child soldiers in the USA. The paper looks at the role of the CSM in this crusade and how it has exposed the plight of child soldiers.

**Efforts to Prevent the Use of Child Soldiers**

In November 1989 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which proclaimed that under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights children are entitled to special care and consideration. According to the CRC, which went into force in September 1990, a child had the right to grow up in a family environment "in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding".<sup>2</sup> The four guiding principles of the CRC are the rights to life, survival, development, and non-discrimination. They include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, adapted to the specific needs of children and are covered by three main principles, namely:

1. The right to access basic services like education, health care and welfare

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<sup>1</sup> Kofi Annan, *We the Child: end of decade review of the follow up to the World Summit for Children* (UNICEF, 2001), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Preamble, Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Office of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, 1990), <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>> (accessed 20 September 2006).

2. Protection rights, including protection against all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation
3. The right to participation, including the freedom of expression, religion and association

These rights are based on idealised visions of childhood attainable only in economically and politically stable nations. They are goals that have little to do with the lived reality of the majority of the world's children.

Although most nation states provide basic child health and education services the effectiveness of these services derives directly from a nation's ability to protect its children. In 'failed' or 'failing states' children continue to be exploited and subjected to all forms of violence and rarely have access to state or NGO run welfare services. From 1990 humanitarian groups began campaigning for the CRC to specifically address two areas of child exploitation—the burgeoning child sex trade in Asia and the use of child soldiers in Africa, Asia, South America, Central Europe and the Middle East. While the CRC did specifically mention the problems of child prostitution and the plight of children in areas of armed conflict,<sup>3</sup> for many humanitarian organisations the issues were inadequately addressed and they launched worldwide crusades to stamp out these practices. After lengthy inquiries the UN General Assembly adopted two optional protocols on the Rights of the Child in May 2000. The first protocol required governments to do everything feasible to ensure that children under the age of 18 did not take part in armed hostilities and the second required states to outlaw the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Even though 165 states signed the first protocol and 167 the second protocol, this was just the first step. Since 2000 international organisations have had some success in curbing the child sex trade but efforts to stamp out the use of child soldiers have been especially protracted. The UNICEF inquiry, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, which was carried out by Gracia Machel and a team of UN investigators in the mid 1990s and led to adoption of the first protocol, explained why.<sup>4</sup> One of the Machel Report's main conclusions was that prolonged conflict inevitably led to the use of child soldiers. According to the Machel:

War violates every right of a child - the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality and the right to be nurtured and protected.<sup>5</sup>

Wars destroyed civil societies. They destroyed crops, education and health facilities, forced families from their homes and into refugee camps and undermined hopes for a better future. Simply growing up in a war zone placed children at greater risk of exploitation.

Machel noted that the children most likely to become soldiers were from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds with the most vulnerable being

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<sup>3</sup> Respectively covered by articles 37 and 38

<sup>4</sup> Gracia Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (UNICEF, 1996). Commonly called the Machel Report.

<sup>5</sup> Machel Report, 10, paragraph 30.

children who had become separated from their families. Mostly child soldiers were adolescents but rebel forces often used very young children, some being 10 years of age or younger. While the majority were boys, girls were also recruited; again more often into rebel forces. Initially children were recruited to provide support services in areas with manpower shortages. They acted as cooks, porters, messengers and spies; but as conflicts escalated they were placed into combat. This factor has special significance for the African continent where over 50% of the population is under the age of 18. When Machel submitted her report in 1996 Africa children had been or were involved in civil wars in Angola, Algeria, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Sudan. Since the tabling of the report ongoing conflicts in Somalia, northern Uganda and Sudan, plus the outbreak of the Second Congo War, have ensured a continuing demand for young recruits in these countries. As well children living in countries where fighting has spilled across state borders, such as Chad and the Central Africa Republic, have also been drawn into combat.

Early humanitarian campaigns against the use of child soldiers aimed at raising awareness of the problem. Following the tabling of the Machel Report they put pressure on governments to first support and then sign the optional protocols. Led by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers the campaigns used the shock value of images of young children waving rifles or children with horrific injuries to gain public support for the protocols. Since 2000 their campaigns have focused on the actions of individual countries and raising funds for rehabilitation programs for former child soldiers. Generally the media has fallen in step with their efforts. The first media report on the use of child soldiers was an article titled 'Children of Death', published in 1988 in the *World Press Review*.<sup>6</sup> This article discussed Mozambique's civil war and described how children between the ages of four and fourteen were being used as slave labour in guerrilla camps. Other newspapers quickly joined the fray, most notably the *CSM*, which has become one of the most consistent supporters of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

### **The Christian Science Monitor**

Founded in 1908, the *CSM* is the oldest national daily newspaper in the United States of America. It was published daily until March 2009 when declining circulation forced it to drop its print edition in favour of a seven-day online operation and a weekly print newsmagazine. Published by the Christian Science Publishing Society and owned by the First Church of Christ, Scientist, it is headquartered in Boston and circulated throughout the USA. Despite its title and ownership the *CSM* is a general newspaper, not a religiously themed publication. Except for one religious article published in the weekly print magazine and a daily news briefing from a Christian Science perspective, the pages of the *CSM* are devoted to reporting both national and international news. In the USA it is noted for its strong coverage of world affairs. Its readership is solidly middle-class. The average household income of its readers is just under \$94,000; the average age of a reader is 59; 61% are women; 72% have a four-year college degree and more than 40% have a post graduate

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<sup>6</sup> *World Press Review*, 35: 9 (Sept 1988): 23-4.

degree.<sup>7</sup> The current circulation of its online content is 13 million page views per month.

The founder of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, Mary Baker Eddy, began publishing the *CSM* as a reaction to the sensational yellow journalism that was rampant in the early 1900s. As the leader of a new religious movement, which attempted to “reinstated primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing”,<sup>8</sup> Mary Baker Eddy had been subjected to numerous and often libellous attacks in US newspapers. The *CSM* was her answer to these attacks. When Eddy founded the newspaper her guiding instructions were “to injure no man, but to bless all mankind”.<sup>9</sup> The aim of the newspaper was to be a genial persuader and promote the welfare of humanity. Eddy’s vision was supported by the paper’s first editor, Archibald McLellan, who wrote, “It will be the mission of the Monitor to publish the real news of the world in a clean, wholesome manner, devoid of the sensational methods employed by so many newspapers.”<sup>10</sup> Successive editors have adhered to these principals. As a result the *CSM* has developed a reputation for avoiding sensational journalism and is known for its distinctive brand of non-hysterical, fair and constructive reporting. It is also regarded as one of the most biased free of all news sources.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1950 the *CSM* has won seven Pulitzer prizes. One of the more recent was awarded in 1996 for a series of reports exposing war crimes in Bosnia. During this civil war a number of displaced or orphaned children were involved in armed conflict and it was around this time the *CSM* began publishing articles on child soldiers. Unlike Reuters and other US media organisations the *CSM* does not rely on wire services for its international coverage. Instead it maintains reporters in eleven countries with its African bureau being based in South Africa. These reporters provide first hand accounts of African affairs with many of them containing personal interviews with those directly involved. This aspect of the *CSM*’s reporting methods has given its news coverage an authenticity and authority lacking in other reports on the issue of child soldiers. Not only has the *CSM* consistently published articles on child soldiers in Africa, Sri Lanka, South America, Palestine and other ‘hot spots’, its reports have been syndicated through other media outlets. This means that in effect *CSM* reports often serves as a primary source on the plight of child soldiers and other human rights issues. Many of its articles have been cited in official USA and

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<sup>7</sup> < <http://www.highbeam.com/publications/the-christian-science-monitor-p4036/june-1999>> (accessed 6 November, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> As cited in ‘What is Christian Science’ <<http://christianscience.com/what-is-christian-science>> History of Christian Science, (accessed 2 November, 2011)

<sup>9</sup> About the *Christian Science Monitor*, < <http://www.csmonitor.com/About/The-Monitor-difference>> (accessed November 2011)

<sup>10</sup> As cited in Linda K Fuller, *The Christian Science Monitor: an evolving experiment in journalism* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC Clío, 2011): 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Fuller, 9-15.

UN reports and in academic papers.<sup>12</sup>

### **Humanising and Supporting Child Soldiers**

The *CSM's* interests in exposing the dreadful experiences of child soldiers grew out of its humanitarian leanings. Since the mid 1990s it has published articles on a variety of children's rights issues ranging from AIDS and its impact on the child sex trade in Africa to child survivors of civil wars.<sup>13</sup> These articles adhere to a distinctive style of reporting. They are between 700-1000 words long, the usual length of a *CSM* expose, and feature personalised accounts of the children's experiences. Often individual children are named along with quotes from interviews with either the children concerned or aid workers trying to help the children. Coloured photographs accompany the articles. The photographs usually focus on the children's faces. In articles on child soldier the images underline the fact that these are young boys carrying dangerous weapons, which they know how to use. If the boys' names are known, they are published in the photograph captions.

Naming the child soldiers is a powerful way of connecting the reader to the children. It humanises them, reminding readers that in different circumstances the child soldier could be their own child. This is the *CSM's* main method of swaying its readers. It does not sensationalise its reports with graphic details of the violence the children have experienced; instead it relies on coupling the human faces of young boys with the discomfort caused by reading the children's or an aid worker's words. For instance, Corinna Schuler began an article on humanitarian efforts to rehabilitate Sierra Leone's child soldiers with the following words:

"Please, don't shoot," an enemy begged. But 11-year-old Tejan Bockarie followed orders.

"My commander gave me a gun, cocked it, and said; 'Kill him.' I just fired"

Today at 18, Tejan leans against the balcony at a beach-side rehabilitation camp outside Freetown, Sierra Leone, and flashes a cocky grin. He boasts of killing "many, many, many" people during seven drugged-dazed years of combat with the revolutionary United Front.<sup>14</sup>

This particular report, published in October 1999, marked the start of the *CSM's* active involvement in the campaign to stop the use of child soldiers and is typical of the approach taken in later news articles. The report concluded with a list of agencies readers could contact if they wanted to help. The *CSM* also helped by supporting the campaign to urge nation states to sign and ratify the option protocols which were presented to the UN Security Council shortly after Schuler's article was published. On 24 January 2000 the *CSM* editorial praised the Pentagon's decision to reverse its opposition to the US ratification of the first optional protocol by accepting

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<sup>12</sup> Cf Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Testimonies from Child Soldiers* (1997) <<http://www.worldrevolution.org/Projects/Webguide/GuideArticle.asp?ID=11>> (accessed September 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See Judith Matloff, 'In Africa, Money Isn't the Only Reason young Girls Are Sexually Exploited' (*CSM*, 12 September 1996) and Scott Peterson, 'Amid Algeria's Massacres: conquering Fear to Help Children' (*CSM*, 9 January 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Corrine Schuler, 'Helping child warriors regain their humanity' (*CSM*, 20 October 1999).

a compromise that would allow 17-year-olds to enter the armed services but keep them out of combat duty until they turned 18.<sup>15</sup> According to the editor the decision showed that, “the US can bend a bit to advance a worthy global project”.<sup>16</sup> And after the protocols were tabled in the UN General Assembly the *CSM* called on all nations to ‘Ratify the global ban on child soldiers’.<sup>17</sup>

Between 2000 and 2007 the *CSM* raised the problems experienced by child soldiers in the following articles: -

- ~ More children going straight from playpen to front lines: Fewer child soldiers in Latin America and Mideast, says new report, but Africa, parts of Asia still recruiting (13 June 2001)
- ~ In Sudan, soldiers become children again: The UN returned the last of some 3,500 children to their villages this week. (6 September 2001)
- ~ Sierra Leone: aid agencies help to rid child soldiers of war’s scars (31 October 2001)
- ~ Hard return for Uganda's lost children: Rebels have abducted an estimated 15,000 children to serve as soldiers and slaves (27 August 2002)
- ~ Small voices in a forgotten war; For more than a decade, the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group, has terrorized northern Uganda, abducting children, forcing them to serve as fighters, workers, and concubines (2 October 2002)
- ~ New push to stop child soldiers (16 November 2004)
- ~ In Congo, former child soldiers get a window on a better future; Some 30,000 kids have been used as fighters. Re-establishing a normal life can be difficult (12 September 2006)
- ~ Ranks of child soldiers swell again in Congo (9 September 2007)
- ~ Lubanga trial: Is an army of Child Soldiers a War Crime? (8 October 2009)

As this list shows a fair number of the *CSM*'s reports supported attempts by human rights activists and the UN both to prevent the use of child soldiers and to improve their lives.

However these articles have produced some stereotyping of child soldiers. The *CSM* has followed a trend found in most studies of child soldiers and with the exception of one condescendingly titled article, ‘The Sisters-in-Arms of Liberia's War; some of the fiercest warriors in Liberia wear tube tops and polished fingernails’,<sup>18</sup> the plight of girls soldiers has been ignored. Even though the majority of child soldiers are in their mid-teens and around 30% are girls, the dominant image of a child soldier found on the pages of the *CSM* is that of a young boy. These boys are represented as both young fighters and victims. Articles focus on the drug-crazed conflicts the

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<sup>15</sup> The USA views the CRC as interfering with parental rights to raise according to their Christian values and saw the first optional protocol as potentially interfering with their ability to fill recruitment goals.

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, ‘Kids in Combat’ (*CSM*, 24 January 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Editorial, ‘Ratify the global ban on child soldiers’ (*CSM*, 24 June 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Nicole Itano, ‘The Sisters-in-Arms of Liberia's War; some of the fiercest warriors in Liberia wear tube tops and polished fingernails’ (*CSM*, 26 August 2003)

boys have engaged in rather than the more mundane tasks of soldiering. They are more likely to be shown handling a gun than carrying supplies or doling out food.

The emphasis on the use of drugs to control the boys partially absolves their actions while fighting and contributes to their image as victims of war. Moreover most of the child soldiers are represented as abductees. This is not the case. The Machel Report and numerous academic articles and UN reports have shown the children joined armed conflicts for numerous reasons including an ideological conviction about the justice of a rebel army's cause.<sup>19</sup> Representing child soldiers as abductees further enhances their image as victims of war. Despite the fact that child soldiers are known to have killed and maimed civilians, including other children, this is mentioned in *CSM* articles only within the context of the children being forced to kill. None of the *CSM* articles pass judgment on their actions. Instead their actions are absolved on the ground that they are in fact children who need to be rehabilitated, a point that is reinforced in articles on the return of child soldiers to their families.

### **Non-Judgmental Reporting**

Even though the *CSM* tends to gloss over the complexities that lead to the use of child soldiers and has developed a fairly stereotypic image of child soldiers, these are charges that can be levelled at all newspaper reports on child soldiers. Most portray child soldiers as victims; few (if any) newspaper reports directly link the use of child soldiers to ongoing socio-political and economic unrest in Africa; and few look at the underlying factors that force children into combat. In *CSM* articles this lack of analysis is offset by a determination to inform its readers about the experiences of being a child soldier. The bulk of *CSM* articles on child soldiering consist of quotes from the child's point of view or those of adults engaged in helping the children. This approach holds true whether the articles are focussed solely on the plight of child soldiers or on related issues.

The use of child soldiers is mentioned briefly in *CSM* articles on African civil wars and rebel organisation but their roles in any atrocities are down played. This in itself is a reflection of how the UN and humanitarian organisations approach the problem of child soldiers who have been involved in war crimes. Like many humanitarian organisations the *CSM* has been particularly concerned with the activities of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has been destabilising regions in northern Uganda for over twenty years. The UN has estimated that since 1990 the LRA has abducted around 20,000 Ugandan children, some as young as 8 years.<sup>20</sup> Boys are forced to kill or be killed and the girls are used as 'wives' for older LRA soldiers. Despite the atrocities committed by the LRA until recently both the Museveni Government and sections of the Ugandan community have been reluctant to hunt down Kony's rebels. Some of this reluctance can be attributed to the fact

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<sup>19</sup> The Machel claimed most children became soldiers for economic reasons. Machel Report, 12, paragraphs 39-42.

<sup>20</sup> Estimating the number of children abducted children is difficult and this 2003 figure is debatable. See Terra Manca, 'Innocent Murderers? Children in the Lord's Resistance Army', 7: 2 (*Cultic Studies Review*, 2008): 129-166 (E-version accessed 20 November 2011).

that the majority of the LRA's combatants are children and the Ugandan people are well aware that they could be prosecuting their own children.

Since 2002 the *CSM* has run a series of articles on atrocities committed by the LRA and the difficulties of capturing Kony's army. It applauded when the International Criminal Court decided to charge Kony with crimes against humanity in 2005. Even though the articles roundly condemned Kony, they displayed a willingness to understand the issues that have made punishing LRA soldiers difficult. In a 2004 article explaining why the Ugandan people were willing to prosecute Kony for war crimes but offered amnesty to LRA soldiers, its reporter wrote:

A major reason for the forgiveness is that so many LRA fighters were abducted as children. They were often forced to kill civilians - or be killed themselves. "The child was innocent - taken forcefully and forced to commit the crime," says Sheik Musa Khalil of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative. "Forgiveness is the only way to solve this conflict."<sup>21</sup>

The non-judgmental tone of this article is typical of the *CSM*'s brand of journalism and the reason why the newspaper has gained a reputation for unbiased reporting. This view of the newspaper is strengthened by its reporting style, which consists of multiple quotes presented from multiple points of view.

#### **Reporting Multiply Points of View**

In keeping with *CSM* policies the opinions of its reporters are never expressed. Nor does the paper take an editorial stance on most issues, unless there is a strong human rights component involved.<sup>22</sup> Instead the paper attempts to express all points of view, even on controversial matters. For instance, in June 2010 the UN Security Council held a debate on the resurging use of children in combat, issuing a list of the "most persistent violators" which included the LRA, Sudan, the Central Africa Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia. In its coverage of the debate the *CSM* noted that while the US Ambassador called on all parties to cease child recruitment and release those children already fighting, the US backed Somali transitional government relied on children to fill its army ranks. The *CSM* claimed that roughly one quarter of the government's soldiers were children and cited experts who concluded that US assistance was paying "the pittance salaries of Somali child soldiers".<sup>23</sup>

Similar when President Barack Obama waived legislation requiring the USA to cut off military aid to countries recruiting and deploying child soldiers in the case of Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Yemen, the *CSM* did not directly censure his decision. The article began by paraphrasing the presidential memorandum on the decision stating that, Obama had "determined that it is in the national interest of the United States" to waive the application of the Child Soldiers

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<sup>21</sup> Abraham McLaughlin, 'The End of Uganda's Mystic Rebel?' (*CSM*, 31 December 2004).

<sup>22</sup> This was evident in the paper's support of the optional protocols although its stance was given in 'opinion' pieces.

<sup>23</sup> Howard La Franchi, 'UN condemns Somalia's use of child soldiers, but US aid still flows' (*CSM*, 16 June 2010).

Prevention Act for these four countries. Instead of criticising the decision the *CSM* choose to quote a World Vision policy adviser on children in crisis who said:

We are very concerned and disappointed with this decision, ... It appears to send the message that you can get away with failing to stop using children in combat as long as your country is strategic enough to the US.<sup>24</sup>

This is typical *CSM* reporting style. Rather than reveal the paper's opinion on this particular matter it chooses to use the views of all parties concerned.

For some this response to the seemingly black and white issue of preventing the use of child soldiers might seem like a cop-out. But for journalists of the *CSM* they were simply upholding the paper's century long tradition of reporting the news in a non-sensational, unbiased fashion. The *CSM* does not indulge in the sensational and graphic images of violence found in many articles on child soldiering. Nor does it engage in rhetoric designed to sway its readers on particular issues. The editors still uphold the directive of *CSM*'s founder, "to injure no man, but to bless all mankind". The newspaper's task is to report the news and not pass judgement on the actions of those making the news. This approach has earned the *CSM* recognition as a 'quality' newspaper and its readers trust the honesty of its reports. Whether this is an effective way of reporting on the highly emotive issue of children in combat is up to the readers to decide.

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<sup>24</sup> Jesse Eves as quoted by Howard La Franchi, 'Obama waives sanctions for four countries that use child soldiers' (*CSM*, 29 October 2010).

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