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Sierra Leone Rebels Forcefully Recruit Child Soldiers

RUF Targets Children for Fighting, Forced Labor, and Sexual Exploitation

 (Freetown) — The rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone is forcing children, including demobilized child soldiers, to join its ranks and engage in combat, Human Rights Watch said today. The rights group has documented abductions of children as recently as early May.

"The RUF has forced many children to join its ranks in recent weeks, placing them on the front lines of combat," said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "For child soldiers, the crisis in Sierra Leone is far from over." He called on all parties to the conflict in Sierra Leone to immediately stop the use of child soldiers and to release all abducted children and people under the age of eighteen.

Since taking United Nations peacekeepers hostage in early May, the RUF has forced many children, included demobilized RUF child soldiers who had laid down their arms, to join its ranks. Many other children have been abducted by the RUF in recent weeks to carry military equipment and looted goods, and female abductees are regularly raped. The RUF has a long history of using child soldiers.

Seventeen-year-old "Abubakar" (not his real name) told Human Rights Watch that he had gone to a camp for demobilized RUF child soldiers in Makeni in March 2000 after fighting as a child soldier in the RUF for four years. He described how the RUF regularly came to the demobilization camp to pressure children to return to the RUF, telling the children that they would be sold when they left the camp, or stating that the RUF had located their families and would help them reunite. On at least one occasion, RUF fighters came to the camp and told the children that the RUF would kill everyone in the camp if they did not rejoin the rebel army. Abubakar estimated that the RUF took at least fifty children out of the camp through the use of threats, false promises, and false rumors.

When fighting broke out in early May, Abubakar was forced to rejoin the RUF when he was abducted while walking near the demobilization camp in Makeni. "It was not my wish to go fight, it was because they captured me and forced me," he told Human Rights Watch, "There was no use in arguing with them, because in the RUF if you argue with any commander they will kill you." Abubakar took part in recent fighting in Lunsar, Rogberi Junction, and Waterloo. He and others were often forced to commit abuses. In Rogberi Junction, their commander ordered them to burn down the entire town after a counterattack on the RUF by government helicopters. RUF commanders also used looted U.N. vehicles to move looted civilian properties back to RUF bases. Abubakar finally managed to sneak away from the RUF and return to the demobilization camp, which was evacuated to Freetown soon after. On their way to Freetown, the large group of demobilized child combatants was harassed by the pro-government Kamajor militia as well as by the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), who beat them. Abubakar said the Kamajors got angry with the children for showing them demobilization documents, saying that the children were provoking them because it was known that Kamajors were not educated and could not read.

Fifteen-year-old "Foday" (not his real name) was abducted by RUF when he was eight years old and had gone to the Makeni demobilization camp after the Lomé peace accord. He told Human Rights Watch further details of the evacuation of the Makeni demobilized child soldier camp on May 23. He also said that RUF commanders regularly came to the camp to threaten and scare former child combatants into rejoining the RUF, and explained that the camp was evacuated early in the morning of May 23 because of fear that the RUF would attempt a mass abduction. On their way to Freetown, the eighty-six former child soldiers who left the camp were stopped by RUF and stripped of their possessions: Foday lost a new watch, his clothes, a radio, and some money. The RUF then forced Foday to join them to carry looted goods back to an RUF camp located twenty-seven miles away. He later managed to escape from the RUF, but was then harassed and beaten by Kamajors, who took away his remaining possessions and threatened to kill him until a commander intervened and stopped the abuse.

RUF forces have also abducted children to carry loads of looted goods and military equipment for them, and have abducted girls for the purpose of rape. Fifteen-year-old "Musa" (not his real name) was abducted from Port Loko during an RUF attack in mid-May, and forced to carry a heavy bag of salt for four days. He told Human Rights Watch that the rebels shot and killed his brother, twenty-year-old Lamina K., after Lamina complained that his load was too heavy. Musa showed Human Rights Watch a large bump on his head which he had sustained when he was beat by the RUF with rifle butts.

Rape of captured women and girls is routine. Twenty-year-old "Miriam" (not her real name), still nursing her five-month-old baby, was raped in front of her husband almost as soon as they were captured near Masiaka on May 21. She told Human Rights Watch that she was raped almost continuously by seven RUF fighters, including some as young as fourteen, over the next three days. Some of the girls raped after capture are very young. "Malikah," who told Human Rights Watch that she was ten but looked much younger, told Human Rights Watch that she was raped by an RUF rebel after being captured, and watched her twenty- year-old sister Mawa Kamara die after RUF rebels amputated both her hands and one foot.

"Children face some of the gravest abuses in this war at the hands of the RUF," said Takirambudde. "The RUF specifically targets children for recruitment as child soldiers, forced labor, and sexual exploitation."

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