

South Sudan's Army Promises to Release Child Soldiers

**AP**

Child soldiers of the
Sudan People's
Liberation Army in a
2001 photo

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

This week, the army of South Sudan signed a deal with the United Nations to release all remaining child soldiers. That means the world's newest nation could be removed from a list of countries that use children in the military.

Radhika Coomaraswamy is a U.N. special representative for children and armed conflict. She announced Friday in Juba that the deal could lead to two thousand more children being released soon.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army has released three thousand children since the peace agreement was signed in two thousand five. That agreement ended the civil war with Sudan. The SPLA is a former guerrilla movement. It fought Sudan for many years and secured South Sudan's independence in July. The South Sudanese people voted in January of last year to separate from the government in Khartoum.

Ms. Coomaraswamy says it is important for the army to act quickly on the new deal, signed Monday. The number of child soldiers in the military has grown because many came from rebel groups that accepted a government offer of a general pardon.

RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY: "The SPLA has been on this list since two thousand six. And it's very important that we delist them as soon as possible, and now that they are a national army, it becomes extremely important."

The U.N. diplomat visited South Sudan this week to inspect the conditions for children and to discuss South Sudan's progress in freeing child soldiers. But she was not able to visit the troubled state of Jonglei state. There, more than one hundred forty thousand people have been affected by ethnic violence this year.

Ms. Coomaraswamy expressed concern that traditional cattle raiding between competing communities had become increasingly deadly. She said children were often targeted in the killings and large numbers were kidnapped, along with women.

RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY: "We want to ensure that in the future there will be no impunity for those who abduct, but also we want to ensure that any reconciliation process may have to have a return of women and children"

The United Nations is looking to quickly remove South Sudan from the child-soldier list. But the diplomat says the Security Council is moving toward arms and travel restrictions and financial sanctions against countries where children are still used as soldiers. These include Ivory Coast, Somalia and the DRC.

On another issue, Ms. Coomaraswamy expressed concerns about areas in western South Sudan. These are still targets of cross-border attacks by Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army. His group has used child soldiers for years in border areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan and Uganda.

The situation gained international attention this month after an American group released an online video. It called for Joseph Kony to be captured and brought to trial at the International Criminal Court.

Ms. Coomaraswamy said bringing attention and getting young people to become active on the issue was good. But she said calling for military action could endanger the lives of children still trapped in the Lord's Resistance Army.

RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY: "And the last thing we want, and I hope this will not happen, is vigilantism. You know we have cases in South Sudan of people picking up a gun and deciding to go find Kony. This kind of thing is crazy. We want national armies, accountable to the Geneva Convention, who are going to go and find Kony."

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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