



Knock, Knock Resource Packet

RESOLVE
UGANDA



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Invisible children



US Campaign to
STOP
the Use of Child
SOLDIERS



August 2, 2007

Dear fellow northern Uganda advocate,

Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for not only your concern for what's happening in northern Uganda and the plight of exploited children around the world, but your willingness to back up that concern with action.

By taking part in this local lobbying initiative, you are directly sending the message to your leaders that you're keeping tabs on what they're doing, or not doing, to help bring peace to northern Uganda and put an end to the use of child soldiers. When you knock on the door of your local representative and meet them face-to-face, you're moving us closer to a peaceful resolution to the 21-year war in northern Uganda and at the same time, advancing the notion that our politicians' actions should reflect our concerns.

During the week of August 13-17, advocates from around the country will all be carrying the same message of hope and the same demand for action to their policymakers. And here's exactly what we'll be asking for them to support:

- #1: A peaceful resolution to the war in northern Uganda**
- #2: An end to the use of child soldiers**

With ongoing peace talks aimed at ending the war in Uganda moving closer to success and legislation that would restrict military funding to countries who use children as soldiers currently before Congress, the timing could not be better to bring these messages home.

The information included in the rest of this packet will give you a better understanding of how you can expect the meetings to go and everything that you need to do to get ready for them.

So thanks again for willing to give up part of your summer vacation and make a contribution to securing a peaceful future for children around the world. Your efforts are making social justice an actionable part of U.S. foreign policy, an achievement that extends far beyond your contribution to long overdue peace in northern Uganda, and are demonstrating that the real power for change lies not in Washington office buildings, but in local communities.

Good luck!

Sincerely,

Alison Jones

Director of Advocacy
Resolve Uganda

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I. KNOCK, KNOCK 101

Everything you need to know about your lobbying visit – start to finish.

Q. What do I need to do to set up the meeting?

A. If you signed up to join a delegation, then you don't need to do anything. We'll be in touch with you and let you know the time and place of where your meeting will occur. If for some reason you can't make it, you can consider setting up your own meeting at another time, or doing it when it works best for you.

If you signed up to lead a delegation, then we will send you the contact information for your local congressional office, and you will need to call them to set up the meeting time. You'll report back to us the details, and we'll then let everyone in your group know where the meeting is and when they need to be there.

Then, everyone will meet at the designated office and enter the meeting together. It's important to be on time.

Q. What should I wear?

A. It's important to show the member of Congress or staff person that you meet with that you are serious about your concern for northern Uganda. Therefore, we encourage you to dress up and avoid jeans and t-shirts.

Q. What do I need to do to prepare for the meeting, and what should I bring?

A. The only thing you need to do to prepare for the meeting is read through the materials in this packet, try to remember the two key messages (read below!) that you're sharing, and print out the documents at the end of this packet to leave behind with the person you meet with. If you want, you can also bring a copy of *Invisible Children* or anything else you think that you could leave with the person. Remember, you're doing something great that will help advance the cause of peace for the people of northern Uganda.

We have also included resources in this packet to help you spread the word through your local media about what you are doing. You don't have to do this, but it sure helps raise awareness about the war in Uganda. Especially if you are going to the meeting with a school, church, or other group, this is worth considering.

Q. Who will my group be meeting with?

A. Some groups may be able to arrange meetings with their member of Congress in person. But don't fret if this isn't possible. If your member of Congress isn't available to meet, you'll meet with one of their staff people who advise your member of Congress on this issue. That person may know a lot about the war in northern Uganda, or they may have never heard of it before. Either way, they'll report to their boss the results of the meeting.

And everyone is nervous for these meetings, so don't worry about it! The most important thing is that you are showing your elected representatives that you care about northern Uganda, which is all the impetus they need to do more about it. If you don't feel like you said exactly what you wanted to say, it's nothing to worry about.

Q. Who will talk in the meeting, and what will be discussed?

A. Each meeting will be different, so it's impossible to say exactly. But generally, here are a few tips.

- **GROUP INTRO:** The leader can introduce the group, and the purpose for their visit being two-fold: peace in northern Uganda, and an end to child soldiers.
- **INDIVIDUAL INTROS:** Each participant can then introduce themselves, where they are from, and why they are interested in the crisis northern Uganda.
- **DELIVER THE MESSAGE:** Then, someone should deliver the two key messages (see next question, and documents at the end of this packet) about supporting peace talks, and supporting an end to child soldiers.
- **LET THEM TALK:** The person you meet with may want to tell you what they know about the issue, and what their office is already doing about it.
- **THANK THEM and HAND OFF MATERIALS:** At the end of the meeting, be sure to thank the person you meet with, leave them with the materials at the end of this packet, and inform them that you will be in touch with their office to follow up.

The meeting should last between fifteen minutes and an hour, depending on how much time the person has, and how much they are interested in talking about it at length.

Q. What is the key message to get across?

A. There are two key messages that, if nothing else, should be shared during the meeting. The first is that you want them to call the State Department and ask that they increase their support for the ongoing Juba peace negotiations. The second is that you want them to co-sponsor and support the Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007. For more details on this, read the leave behind materials at the end of this packet, particularly the one titled "U.S. Action for Peace in Uganda and an End to Child Soldiering". If you memorize anything before you go, memorize that one page!

Q. What do we do afterwards to follow up?

A. Following up is one of the most important parts of these meetings, as it sends the message that you're still watching to see if they're doing what you requested. The organizers of Knock, Knock will be in touch with you about how to follow up. But basically, we'll ask you to make one more phone call to the office you met with, and ask whether or not they have done what you asked (remember, YOU are THEIR bosses, because they rely on the vote of you or your family or your friends to stay in office!).

It would also be great if at least one person in the group could write up a quick report on how they thought the meeting went and what happened, and email it to alison@resolveuganda.org along with any photos that are taken. We'll post them up on the website!

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This is what you need to read to prepare yourself for the meeting you attend. It lays out the basic facts of the issues that are important, and explains why we're advocating for support for peace negotiations and an end to child soldiers.

A. Northern Uganda: Increase Engagement of the Juba Peace Talks

After two decades of neglect, peace may finally be on the horizon for the people of northern Uganda. Current negotiations between the Government of Uganda and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) present the best opportunity yet to achieve an end to this war, which has displaced millions of people and condemned generations of children to lives of insecurity violence and fear. But international support and engagement is urgently needed to ensure a peace agreement is reached and to address the longstanding consequences of displacement and insecurity. Having long overlooked the conflict, our leaders can now show decisive leadership to support the people of northern Uganda in their unwavering desire for peace.

The Consequences of War

The toll of this crisis has been massive, not only on the people of northern Uganda, but also on the surrounding region. The LRA is currently wreaking havoc in three countries, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, and causing widespread instability. The Ugandan government's strategy of moving northerners into "protected villages" has turned into a displacement nightmare for 1.7 million people – over 80% of the region – who now live in squalid camps and lack access to basic resources. According to recent reports, 1,000 people are dying each week as a result of camp conditions. And children are the primary victims. One-half of those displaced are under fifteen years of age. Tens of thousands of children have been abducted by the LRA. And for many years, upwards up 40,000 children "commuted" up to two hours every night to sleep on town streets to avoid abduction.

Attempts to Resolve the Conflict

Last summer, the Government of South Sudan agreed to mediate peace talks between the warring parties, a development widely hailed as the best opportunity for peace since the war began in 1986. In August, a breakthrough ceasefire brought relative calm to the region for the first time in years. Yet, negotiations have remained fragile due to lingering mistrust and a lack of international support to keep the parties at the negotiating table.

Role of the United States

Given this unprecedented opportunity for peace, the United States has a critical role to play in building confidence and supporting the negotiations. Despite this potential, the U.S. Government has remained largely silent. **For the Juba Peace Process to succeed, it will require that U.S. politicians overcome this legacy through serious engagement.** That's why we're asking for the U.S. to support the negotiations diplomatically, and make sure that this opportunity for peace is not lost.

**For further information, feel free to visit www.resolveuganda.org/getinformed*

B. Support for the Child Soldier Prevention Act 2007

One of the most shocking aspects of the war in northern Uganda is the forced abduction of children into the ranks of the rebel LRA. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not limited to northern Uganda. Children all over the world are exploited in armed conflict.

Child Soldiers Today

Today, thousands of children are serving in armed conflict in 20 countries around the world. These "child soldiers" include boys and girls, sometimes as young as eight years old, serving in government armies, government-linked militias, and armed rebel groups like the LRA. They serve in all aspects of contemporary warfare--as spies, messengers, guards, cooks, porters, security officers, and too often, as front-line combatants. Many female child soldiers are forced to serve as sex slaves or "wives" of military commanders.

Of nine governments worldwide implicated in the recruitment or use of children as soldiers, eight receive US military assistance, including Uganda. The government of Uganda has been found to accept children into its own military. Many of these children are former LRA combatants, who are recruited into the Ugandan army after escaping rebel captivity.

The other countries found to be recruiting children as soldiers include Afghanistan, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. The U.S. government provides military assistance to these countries in ways that range from small amounts of funding for military training to hundreds of millions of dollars in weapons, training, and military financing. U.S. tax dollars should not be used to support the exploitation of children as soldiers, and U.S. weapons should not end up in the hands of children.

Building U.S. Support for an End to Child Soldiering

The Child Soldier Prevention Act is bipartisan legislation that would restrict US military assistance to the governments described above until they end any involvement in the recruitment or use of child soldiers.

This bill will provide clear incentives for governments currently implicated in the recruitment and use of child soldiers to end this practice. It also encourages the United States to increase its funding to rehabilitate former child soldiers and to bring to justice rebel armed groups that kidnap children for use as soldiers.

Many members of Congress don't even know about this important effort yet, which is why it is so important that you bring them this message, and express your conviction that children should never be soldiers.

**For further information, feel free to visit www.child-soldiers.org*

III. TIPS FOR GETTING MEDIA COVERAGE

Getting your local press to cover your local lobby visit is a great way to let others know about the ongoing crisis in northern Uganda and multiply your efforts to help bring peace. If you have time, especially if you are going in a group, please take a look and spread the word to your local media.

The four best ways for spread the word about what you're doing and pick up coverage are:

- 1. A local human interest story*
- 2. Opinion Editorials*
- 3. Letters to the editor*
- 4. Blog postings*

Here's what you need to make that happen:

A. Human interest story

Local papers love to highlight action being taken by their readers, especially when the story is tied to a larger issue. But to pick up this kind of coverage, reporters in your area need to know what you're doing. The best way to let them know is by going to your local paper or tv station's website and finding the link to "submit a story." This option is usually highlighted prominently on the outlet's homepage. When submitting a story, it is helpful to include the following information:

- Type of event
- Sponsoring organization
- Name and number of person readers should contact for information. Name and number of person to contact BEFORE the event
- Name and number of person to contact AT the event
- Day of event
- Date and time of event
- Location of event
- Estimated number of participants
- Why readers will be interested in this event
- Specifics of event

B. Op-Ed

Opinion editorials are a great way to inform members of your community about the conflict in northern Uganda and to engage them in efforts to help end the war. Newspapers will often run pieces written by grassroots activists if they are well-written and timely, but you should check with your paper before submitting your editorial, as different papers often have specific rules and guidelines for editorial submissions from community members. Here are a few tips for writing your editorial:

- Keep it short: Most papers will only run editorials that are less than 750 words.
- Make it relevant: The closer you can write your editorial to a community event or significant development in the conflict, the better. Newspapers publish information that they feel is pertinent to their readers, so your op-ed is more likely to be published when it is tied to a current event (ie: lobby visits, legislative development, breakthrough in the peace talk, etc.)
- Make it personal: While your op-ed should include facts about the conflict, it should also reflect your personality. The best editorials explain why the issue or topic is relevant to

both the writer and the reader. Tell your own story and why you care about what's happening in northern Uganda.

- Include information on how readers can get involved: If you're writing an op-ed near the time that the lobby visits are taking place, make sure your editorial includes information on how readers can join your efforts. Even if it's just including Resolve Uganda's website, it's important that people reading your article aren't just overwhelmed by the severity of what's happening in northern Uganda, but also see that they can play a part in bringing about peace.
- Include your contact information: Newspapers need to know how to contact you if they're going to run your editorial.

C. Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor are another great way to spread awareness in your community about the conflict in northern Uganda and let people know about how they can get involved in efforts for peace. The key to getting your letter printed is making it relevant to your local community, whether that's letting readers know about the local lobby visits or asking your paper's editor to run more stories about the war in northern Uganda. Here are a few more tips for getting your letter published:

- Keep it short: Most letters to the editor aren't more than 150-200 words.
- Keep it focused: Unlike editorials, letters to the editor only allow you the space to make one or two key points. Focus on what you think is the most important thing for people in your community to know about the war and what they can do to help.
- Include your contact information

D. Blog postings

Online forums are another great way to lend your voice to peace in Uganda and let your friends and family know about what's happening in Uganda. You can use your blog, myspace page, or facebook profile to not only tell people about the conflict, but also invite them to join you in your meeting with your representative. Blogs are the perfect forum to invite people into a conversation about why the war in northern Uganda is happening and what we can all be doing to help end it. You can also encourage other bloggers to link to your post.

IV. WHAT TO BRING WITH YOU

Please print off the following five pages to leave with your Member of Congress or the staff person that you meet with.

That way, they know exactly what you want from them, and can continue referring back to it if they forget.

There are three documents that you should print out:

- The basic one-pager that covers what we're asking for, which is the most important document for you to review ("U.S. Action for Peace in Uganda and an End to Child Soldiering");
- A paper that goes more in-depth on northern Uganda, in case the member of Congress or staff person wants to read more about what's happening there and how they can help ("Key U.S. Action for Sustainable Peace in Northern Uganda and the Region"); and
- A paper that goes more in-depth on child soldiers and the Child Soldier Prevention Act that we are asking them to support ("The Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007")

The most important document is the first. In one page, it covers all the basics, and if all that you say in the meeting is what is written on that one page, that's a big success!

U.S. Action for Peace in Uganda and an End to Child Soldiering

BACKGROUND

For the past twenty-one years, the people of northern Uganda and the surrounding region have endured a conflict between the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. This conflict has destabilized parts of three separate countries and caused one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Nearly two million people have been forced into squalid displacement camps that lack basic services. Tens of thousands of children have been forcibly conscripted into rebel ranks, and rebel activity threatens peace agreements in both Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Children have been similarly forced into being soldiers in other parts of the world. Up to 250,000 children are exploited each day in national armies, paramilitaries and guerilla groups around the globe. They serve as combatants, porters, human mine detectors and sex slaves. Some of these children serve in the armies or government-supported paramilitaries of nations that receive U.S. foreign military financing and other military assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Peace in Northern Uganda:* Ongoing peace negotiations hosted and mediated by the Government of South Sudan provide the best hope yet to end the war. However, without additional external support and leverage, particularly from the United States, the negotiations are unlikely to achieve a durable agreement. The U.S. State Department is in the process of appointing a senior level advisor to engage the situation. The American people and their representatives in Congress must call upon the State Department to ensure that the diplomat appointed is based in the war-affected region and has a strong mandate that includes directly engaging ongoing negotiations and regional peace efforts.

→**ACTION ONE:** Please call Eunice Reddick, Director for East Africa at the State Department Africa Bureau at (202) 647-5242 and urge that the State Department immediately designate a senior official to support peace efforts in northern Uganda who is based in the region and who has a mandate that includes direct engagement of ongoing negotiations.

- *Ending Child Soldiers Worldwide:* The Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007 is designed to encourage governments to disarm, demobilize, and rehabilitate child soldiers from government forces and government-supported militias. This bill would place limits on the provision of U.S. International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Financing, and other defense-related assistance for countries in violation of the bill's standards.

→**ACTION TWO:** Co-sponsor and vote "yes" for the Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007 (S.1175 in the Senate and H.R. 3028 in the House of Representatives).

For additional information, please contact:

Alison Jones, Director of Advocacy for Resolve Uganda (Northern Uganda): alison@resolveuganda.org; 202-548-2517

Joseph Mettimano, Director of Policy for World Vision (Child Soldiers): jmettima@worldvision.org; 202-572-6300

Sponsors:



Additional Information on Uganda: Key U.S. Actions for Sustainable Peace in Northern Uganda and the Region

For the past twenty-one years, the people of northern Uganda and the surrounding region have endured a conflict between the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. This conflict has destabilized parts of three separate countries and caused one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Nearly two million people have been forced into squalid displacement camps that lack basic services. Tens of thousands of children have been forcibly conscripted into rebel ranks, and rebel activity threatens peace agreements in both Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Ongoing peace negotiations hosted and mediated by the Government of South Sudan provide the best hope yet to end the war. Already, due to increased humanitarian access and expanded freedom of movement for displaced people, the talks have led to gradual improvements in the lives of war-affected communities. However, without additional external support and leverage, particularly from the United States, the negotiations are unlikely to achieve a durable agreement.

Securing lasting peace should be the primary goal. Significant challenges also remain in addressing emergency-level humanitarian conditions and in planning for effective post-conflict peace building and development. Addressing the deteriorating humanitarian and security crisis in the northeastern region of Karamoja is also essential to ensuring peace throughout the region.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

- **Use U.S. resources and leverage in the region to secure a sustainable peace deal:**

The United States has lacked a stated policy toward the negotiations process since it began in July of 2006. The U.N., African Union, and European Union are all directly supporting the ongoing efforts of the Government of South Sudan to secure a peace agreement, but the United States – which has significant clout in the region – has opted to play a role largely limited to private consultations with the government of Uganda. With the peace talks at a critical point, the United States needs to publicly demonstrate its interest in consolidating peace in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. Immediate action steps should include increasing diplomatic engagement of the talks in consultation with the mediator and U.N. Special Envoy, appointing an official U.S. observer, making available financial and technical assistance, and making high-level statements in support of the peace process. U.S. engagement will be crucial to addressing the regional dynamics of the crisis and providing guarantees for any agreement that is reached.
- **Ensure both short-term and long-term relief recovery plans are developed, funded, and implemented appropriately, by:**
 - *Improving humanitarian conditions:* Approximately 1.4 million people remain in the original displacement camps or newly developed “satellite” camps. Living conditions remain poor, and basic services are still severely lacking in both new and old settlements. While the Ugandan government must ensure that the northern population has equal access to basic services, the United States can do more to meet the immediate needs of displaced and returning communities.
 - *Using diplomatic and financial resources to support long-term recovery plans:* As internally-displaced persons (IDPs) begin to return home, the United States should use financial and diplomatic resources to encourage safe and voluntary return, ensure respect for land rights, help restore basic livelihoods, and assist in reintegrating former combatants, especially children. The United States should also help demilitarize the region and address protection gaps by supporting the deployment of civilian police, the development of the

judicial system, and the establishment of a viable mechanism for post-conflict justice and reconciliation.

- *Expanding focus to Karamoja*: Violent raids by cattle rustlers from the Karamoja region continue to create insecurity in northern Uganda, while a growing conflict between the Ugandan military and Karamojong warriors has caused civilian casualties, displacement, and worsening humanitarian conditions. Providing additional resources to address Karamoja's humanitarian crisis and reviewing the Ugandan government's forced disarmament strategy are immediately needed to address this threat to regional security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Administration:

1. Immediately designate a senior official to coordinate U.S. support for the ongoing negotiations and efforts to achieve sustainable peace and development in the region.
2. Utilize existing regional diplomatic capacity to maintain a consistent presence as an official observer to the negotiations, providing support to the mediation effort as needed.
3. Issue high-level statements of support for the talks as the process continues.
4. Send high-level delegations to visit northern Uganda and southern Sudan to demonstrate the priority status of this crisis.
5. Contribute sufficient funding for the peace process through the UN Juba Initiative Fund, administered by UNOCHA.
6. Immediately devote humanitarian resources to the Karamoja region of northeastern Uganda.
7. Assist in coordinating a regional protection strategy to deal with the threat of resumed hostilities, ensuring that national armies in the region act within their own borders.
8. Encourage the Government of Uganda to fully fund and implement its IDP Policy to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of displaced people, as well as its Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP), which outlines the imperative for the demilitarization and development of the region.

U.S. Congress:

1. Hold a public hearing to examine the U.S. response to the crisis in the north and its involvement in ongoing peace negotiations.
2. Direct increased resources to support:
 - Ongoing regional peace efforts;
 - An expanded humanitarian response that addresses emergency and longer-term needs; and
 - A peaceful resolution to the conflict including support for children affected by this conflict, including the reintegration of child soldiers and other combatants; support for community reconciliation, justice system reform, provision of peace incentive packages for combatants and compensation for victims; and a multilateral initiative to end all assistance to the LRA.

Additional Information on the Child Soldiers Bill:
The Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007

SENATE LEAD SPONSORS (S. 1175): Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Sam Brownback (R-KS)
COSPONSORS (as of August 1, 2007): Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD), Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA), Tom Coburn (R-OK), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Susan Collins (R-ME), Russ Feingold (D-WI), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Chuck Hagel (R-NE), Tim Johnson (D-SD), John Kerry (D-MA), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Bill Nelson (D-FL), Jack Reed (D-RI), Pat Roberts (R-KS), Olympia Snowe (R-ME), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)

HOUSE LEAD SPONSOR (H.R. 3028): Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE)
COSPONSORS (as of August 1, 2007): Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Donald M. Payne (D-NJ)

Q: What Problem is Being Addressed?

A: Up to 250,000 children are exploited each day in state-run armies, paramilitaries and guerilla groups around the world. Called “child soldiers,” they serve as combatants, porters, human mine detectors and sex slaves. Their health and lives are endangered and their childhoods are sacrificed. Some of these children serve in the armies or government-supported paramilitaries of nations that receive U.S. foreign military financing and other military assistance. These countries and these children are the focal points of this legislation.

Q: What is the Goal and Strategy of the Bill?

A: *The Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2007* is designed to encourage governments to disarm and rehabilitate child soldiers from government forces and government-supported militias. This bill would place limits on the provision of U.S. defense-related assistance in our foreign aid programs for countries in violation of the bill’s standards. Countries that are clearly identified as recruiting or using child soldiers in government armed forces or government-supported paramilitaries or militias in violation of international standards would be eligible only for military assistance to address the issue of child soldiers and otherwise professionalize their armed forces until the problem is remedied.

Q: Why Was This Bill Introduced?

A: U.S. military assistance should not go to finance the use and exploitation of children in armed conflict. Such practices directly contravene the goals of our country. It is also in our own national security interest to reduce the incidence of child soldiers in the world, especially as our military leaders do not want U.S. troops to confront the specter of an armed child in a combat situation. The proposed bill is in alignment with U.S. policies and goals to help professionalize military bodies abroad.

Children suffer higher mortality, disease, and injury rates in combat situations than adults. The lasting effects of war and abuse may also remain with them long after the shooting stops. Both girls and boys may be stigmatized and traumatized by their experience and left with neither family connections nor skills to allow them to transition successfully into productive adult lives. This bill both underscores the importance of the issue within United States foreign policy and provides concrete means and incentives to help countries end their reliance on children as soldiers.

Q: What U.S. Foreign Assistance Programs Are Involved?

A: The programs involved are known as Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Direct Commercial Sales (DCS), Excess Defense Articles (EDA), International Military Education and Training (IMET), and Foreign Military Financing (FMF).

Q: What Countries May Be Affected?

A: Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda could potentially be affected.

Q: Does the Bill Include Waivers, a Phase-In Period, or “Safety Valves?”

A: The bill takes into account that there may be circumstances that require flexibility to allow for strategic military engagement or diplomatic positioning or other national interests. This bill will not automatically cut off aid to countries that are identified as using or tolerating child soldiers. Countries that are seeking to implement demobilization measures would be eligible for assistance in that process and in the professionalization of their armed forces for up to two years before prohibitions on assistance would be imposed. Moreover, the bill provides the President of the United States with the authority to waive restrictions if he determines that such a waiver is in the national interest.

Q: Doesn't the U.S. allow 17 year olds to serve?

A: In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, obliging governments to take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces that have not attained the age of 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities, and prohibiting any compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 into governmental armed forces, or any recruitment (whether forcible or “voluntary”) or use in hostilities of children under age 18 by non-state armed forces. The Optional Protocol allows government armed forces to accept volunteers into their armed forces from age 16, with certain safeguards such as parental permission and informed consent.

The United States ratified this treaty in December 2002, and subsequently, the U.S. armed forces adopted new deployment policies to prevent the use of seventeen-year old soldiers in combat situations. In fact, in order to meet U.S. legal obligations, the policies adopted by the armed services are quite restrictive: the US Army's policy is not to assign or deploy soldiers less than 18 years of age outside of the continental United States, Puerto Rico or territories or possessions of the United States. The U.S. Navy will not assign members under age 18 to commissioned vessels or operational squadrons. Instead, it will extend training or assign soldiers to shore duty until they turn 18.