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One Hundred and Thirteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Ending the Use of Child Soldiers: History, Impact and Evolution”
2360 Rayburn HOB - Friday, September 19, 2014 - 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s hearing on *Ending the Use of Child Soldiers: History, Impact and Evolution*. I would like to welcome all of our witnesses today – thank you for your advocacy on behalf of child soldiers and for your tireless efforts to highlight their situation. I would also like to thank the staff of the Commission for organizing this important hearing.

The recruitment and use of minors – of children – as soldiers is prohibited under international human rights, labor, and criminal laws, yet there continue to be far too many instances in which both government and non-State fighting forces rely on child soldiers to carry out their missions. The proliferation of various non-state armed actors, such as organized crime, paramilitary groups, insurgent groups, and ethnic or sectarian militias, has deeply exacerbated the problem, especially in regional conflicts where the use of children in conflict has contributed to blurring the lines between civilian and combatant populations. Armed actors find the use of children attractive, because they are seen as easily manipulated, cheap, and expendable.

The toll on these vulnerable children is serious and enduring. Children associated with parties to conflict often face long-term physical and psychological trauma. Among the many challenges facing international, regional and local communities in combating the use of child soldiers is the aftermath: identifying and rehabilitating former child soldiers in an environment of strained resources and low awareness of their need for care.

Recent debate at the international level, including actions taken by the United States, make this an opportune time to highlight the challenge of child soldiers and to elevate the discussion. In May, the U.N. Secretary-General issued his annual report on children and armed conflict to the United Nations Security Council – a report which attempts to capture the global scale of this crisis.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury identifies and targets individuals connected with the recruitment and use of child soldiers by freezing and blocking their assets, and prohibiting all U.S. persons from engaging in financial or commercial transactions with such individuals. The U.S. Department of Labor also incorporates findings related to the

exploitation of children as child soldiers in its annual report on the worst forms of child labor.

More recently, the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 mandates that the Secretary of State publish a list of states that have “governmental armed forces or government-supported armed groups, including paramilitaries, militias, or civil defense forces, that recruit and use child soldiers.” The Act prohibits the issuance of licenses for commercial sales of military equipment and provision of security assistance to the listed countries.

However, President Obama issued “national security” waivers for five out of the ten countries listed on the 2013 CSPA list last year, potentially authorizing the sales of military technology and training to countries currently using child soldiers in armed conflict.

Given the continued scale of the use of child soldiers, we clearly have a long way to go in our fight to end the practice. In Colombia and Central America, I have personally seen the impact on children who were forcibly recruited or voluntarily joined armed groups. In the latter case, many of these children had few or no alternatives in their own communities. Their families often couldn’t afford clothing or food for their children, and would often surrender them to guerrilla or paramilitary groups because those groups promised to feed them. Others were escaping violent or abusive family situations or neighborhoods. Others were seduced by the power and perceived glamour of an adult soldier looking for young recruits. But all were exploited and too young to know the consequences of the choice they were making. In addition, from Sierra Leone to the LRA, I have met many young men and women who were forcibly recruited by violent armed actors and whose emotional and psychological suffering continues years after they escaped or were demobilized.

I also think a great deal about the young men and women I have met in Colombia and El Salvador who were forced to join violent criminal organizations or gangs because refusal was not an option. Those who do not join the gangs must either flee their communities, or face certain death along not just for themselves, but for every member of their family. I have been inspired by their courage, by the many community-based NGOs who work to empower and protect these young people, and by the programs they offer to create safe spaces and alternatives to a world dominated by gang life.

I look forward to hearing today about lessons learned from ongoing efforts to curb the use of child soldiers and what more can be done to stop violations from happening. It is also my hope that our witnesses will help to identify gaps in our foreign policy to ensure that the United States is a leader in ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers. With honest reflection on the scope of the problem at hand and an understanding of concrete ways to improve our engagement, today’s discussion can put us on a path to making sure children no longer face firsthand the horrors of war.

With that, I turn to the testimony of our witnesses. I would like to formally submit the written testimonies of all the witnesses, as well as reports provided by their supporting organizations into the hearing record.