



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**

### **Combatting Child Soldiering: A Pernicious Form of Child Trafficking**

**Wednesday, February 15, 2017**

**1:00 – 2:00 PM**

**2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to the first Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission briefing of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, on combatting child soldiering. I am happy to be here today with my colleague Randy Hultgren, the new Republican Co-Chair of the Commission. I want to welcome him and say how much I'm looking forward to working together, across party lines, to advance the noble cause of universal human rights for all people around the world.

I also want to welcome our distinguished panelists, and recognize their tireless efforts to draw attention to the situation of child soldiers and advocate on their behalf. And Mr. Dallaire, thank you for warning the world in 1994 that mass murder was being planned in Rwanda. I only wish people had paid attention and been willing to act.

I also want to thank the Congressional Human Trafficking Caucus for co-hosting our briefing today. Child soldiering is recognized as a form of human trafficking, but it receives less attention than sex or labor trafficking — even though it targets a terribly vulnerable population, children who find themselves in the middle of armed conflict, or caught up by its consequences.

Last Sunday, February 12<sup>th</sup>, was Red Hand Day — the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers. The aim of Red Hand Day is to call our attention to the unlawful recruitment or use of children for combat, or to carry out support roles in wars, such as cooks, porters, messengers, or guards. Besides being forced or coerced by circumstances into combat or labor, some child soldiers, especially girls, are also sexually exploited by armed groups.

The perpetrators of these practices may be official government forces, paramilitary organizations, or rebel groups. Whichever type of armed group is responsible, we should all be

very clear: child soldiering is a grave violation of basic human rights that does terrible damage to its victims.

In Colombia and Central America, from Sierra Leone to the LRA, I have personally seen the impact on children who were kidnapped or forcibly recruited. Many joined armed groups due to poverty, or because their parents surrendered them, or because they were seeking to escape a violent home, or even because they were seduced by the “glamour” of an adult soldier. In the end, all were exploited, and their emotional and psychological suffering continued for years after they escaped or were demobilized. I have been inspired by their courage, and the efforts of those who work to empower and protect them. But more needs to be done.

I also continue to be concerned about the way we view and address young boys and girls who are forced to join gangs because refusal means death, not just for the child, but often for their entire family. We view these children as criminals and delinquents, and not as the forced recruits and sex slaves they often are.

In his 2016 report to the Security Council on children and armed conflict, former Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon lists 58 parties to conflict around the world — 7 government security forces, 51 non-state armed groups — that recruit and use children. Child-soldiering is occurring in conflicts and countries where the United States has an important stake: Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, the Philippines, among others.

The U.S. has tools at its disposal to fight this crime against the world’s children, but its performance to date has been mixed. That is why we are here today. Our expert panelists will examine the U.S. record and explore ways to improve and deepen U.S. efforts to end the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. I very much look forward to hearing their recommendations.

Thank you – and I turn now to Co-Chair Hultgren for his remarks.