In most armed conflicts currently raging in different parts of the world, children under 18 years of age participate in combat. In many countries the child soldiers are in fact under 15 years of age – the minimum age for participation in hostilities and recruitment into armed forces stipulated in Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). There are even places, such as Liberia and Somalia, where children as young as seven or eight years of age carry arms.

Anyone who cares about children must be upset by the fact that they not only become the innocent victims of armed conflicts, but are also forced to become murderers themselves. It does not require a great deal of imagination to realize that such experiences have a profound and destructive impact. As a child you are, by definition, easily influenced and formed. To use violence against other people, and to see that violence condoned, leads to psychological wounds that are difficult to heal.

Rädda Barnen – Swedish Save the Children – has for many years campaigned against the use of child soldiers. This issue is not only connected to Article 38 of the CRC, but actually cuts across several of the core principles of the CRC. Children in armed conflicts are only one of the basic target groups that Rädda Barnen’s programme activities are devoted to. In 1995, the organization launched a new project on child soldiers in line with its previous efforts. The project has three basic components:

1. A newsletter which is produced in English and published four times a year;
2. A database with references to documents that contain information on child soldiers;
3. An international network of organizations and individuals concerned with the issue of child soldiers.

The newsletter

The newsletter, entitled “Children of War”, has been issued twice. The next issue will be distributed in June 1996. The primary purpose of the newsletter is
to arouse public opinion and stimulate action against the use of child soldiers. So far, the campaign section of the newsletter has dealt with the activities undertaken by United Nations bodies concerning the drafting of an optional protocol to the CRC which will raise the minimum age for participation in hostilities to 18 years of age, and that, hopefully, will also raise the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces to 17 or 18 years of age. The newsletter has contained background articles on the subject as well as sample letters directed to certain governments, together with the relevant addresses.

Another section of the newsletter is the media abstracts, where recent reports in the media on children bearing arms are quoted. This information is important because it shows the scope and magnitude of the problem, and increases the general understanding of the subject. Furthermore, Children of War contains information on activities undertaken by various organizations in relation to child soldiers.

To date, the newsletter mailing list contains approximately 1500 addresses. More than half of these addresses are located in countries outside Europe and North America. The newsletter is also available at the World Wide Web on Rädda Barnen's home page, hosted by Children's House in Norway. E-mail-subscription will be possible from the June 1996 issue onwards.

The database

The second main component of the project, the database, is underway and a foundation will have been created by the summer of 1996. The database is built in Lotus Notes, and the references will relate to documents that contain information on child soldiers, former child soldiers, the militarization of children and peacetime recruitment of children. Rädda Barnen’s aim at this point in time is to cover the most recent books and reports that exclusively deal with child soldiers, as well as books and reports that to a large extent deal with child soldiers. Documents containing a smaller amount of relevant information will also be included in the database as we come across them. Eventually, the database will also contain references to news articles, United Nations documents, videos and other documentation of interest.

All documents listed in the database will be read and supplied with key words, in order to make them searchable. Thus, once the database is established, it will be possible to search for, for example, “demobilization”, “injury”, and/or “rehabilitation”. Approximately 70 relevant key words will be developed besides those on countries, continents, authors, etc.

One difficulty has been the fact that the database not only aims at organizing the major documents on child soldiers, but also books, articles and other documentation dealing with child soldiers to a very minor extent. In order to