

Nairobi, 25 March 2011 - With the escalation of fighting across Somalia since January, armed groups have reportedly recruited more child soldiers to their ranks, some even forcing teachers to enlist pupils.

In a recent offensive against rebel groups in Bulo Hawo town on the border with Kenya, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) stated on 17 March, "...children were involved as fighters and a significant number of them were killed. According to reports, intense fighting in the area between Dhusamareb and Ceel bur in Galgadud has also resulted in many child casualties."

"The TFG [Transitional Federal Government] forces, their allies, the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama, and Al-Shabab are all engaged in the recruitment. Al-Shabab [the largest armed opposition group] is the biggest culprit," said an official working with an NGO that monitors the state of children in the country. The official, who asked not to be named, did not suggest the African Union's TFG-supporting military mission in Somalia, AMISOM, was also using children.

He said although the exact number of child soldiers was unknown, his group suspected between 2,000 and 3,000 children were in different armed groups.

He added that Al-Shabab was forcing Koranic and other teachers to bring their charges to be trained. "We have noticed a major increase in the recruitment of children since January 2011. It coincided with the current escalation of fighting in Mogadishu and parts of south and central Somalia."

"Putting children in the line of fire, killing and maiming them in the context of an armed conflict are among the most serious violations of international law which all parties to the conflict are expected to uphold. The use and recruitment of children under the age of 15 years is a war crime," said UNICEF Representative to Somalia, Rozanne Chorlton.

The TFG denied it recruited children into its forces. "This government, as a policy, does not recruit nor does it encourage the recruitment of children into the military," government spokesman, Abdi Haji Gobdon, told IRIN.

He said that whenever an underage child was found among government forces they were immediately released and sent back to their families.

Gobdon invited anyone or any group interested "to go to any government military facility and see for themselves".

Missing

Hawa* is a 40-year-old mother of four, whose 13-year-old son was forcibly recruited. "I have been looking for him for the past 15 days," she told IRIN from a camp for the displaced on the outskirts of Mogadishu.

Hawa said Al-Shabab took her son. "I finally got a call from him on Tuesday night [15 March] and I could hear gunfire. He was in a fight. He is too young to be there. I want them to release my boy."

Hawa said she was not the only parent in that situation. "Many mothers are like me. They are looking for their little ones. Mine does not even look like a 13-year-old. He is too small. How can they take him?"

Jailed

The NGO official said children who were not recruited faced other problems as government security forces in the capital, Mogadishu, were reportedly picking up children on suspicion that they "may be working for Al-Shabab".

"There are a large number of children in government jails, simply because someone suspected that the child could be a militant," he said.

The official claimed he had evidence that many of the young people killed by government and AMISOM troops were children brought from Jowhar [90km north of Mogadishu].

In camps where tens of thousands of displaced are sheltering, or in hospitals in Mogadishu, the "vast majority are children", the official said. "Unfortunately, there is no safe place for them anywhere in this country."

UNICEF also said it was worried about reports of children captured by the TFG and its allies after the fighting in Bulo Hawa. "No detailed information is yet available on the conditions under which they are being held but UNICEF is making efforts to find out more, in order to support the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection."

Recruitment "widespread"

In an April 2010 report, the UN said research in June 2009 confirmed that the recruitment of children had become more systematic and widespread. The [report](#) says all sides, including the TFG, were recruiting children.

A local journalist, who requested anonymity, told IRIN many displaced families were sending their children to refugee camps in Kenya or to safe parts of Somalia for fear they would be forcibly recruited.

"They [parents] cannot protect them," the journalist said. "Any parent who tries risks losing his or her life."

According to UN estimates, at least 2.4 million Somalis need help across Somalia. These include IDPs in areas controlled by Al-Shabab: 410,000 in the Afgoye Corridor, 15,200 in the

Balad corridor [30km north of Mogadishu] and 55,000 in Dayniile, northwest of Mogadishu.

Some 600,000 Somalis are refugees in neighbouring countries.

Source: [IRIN](#)