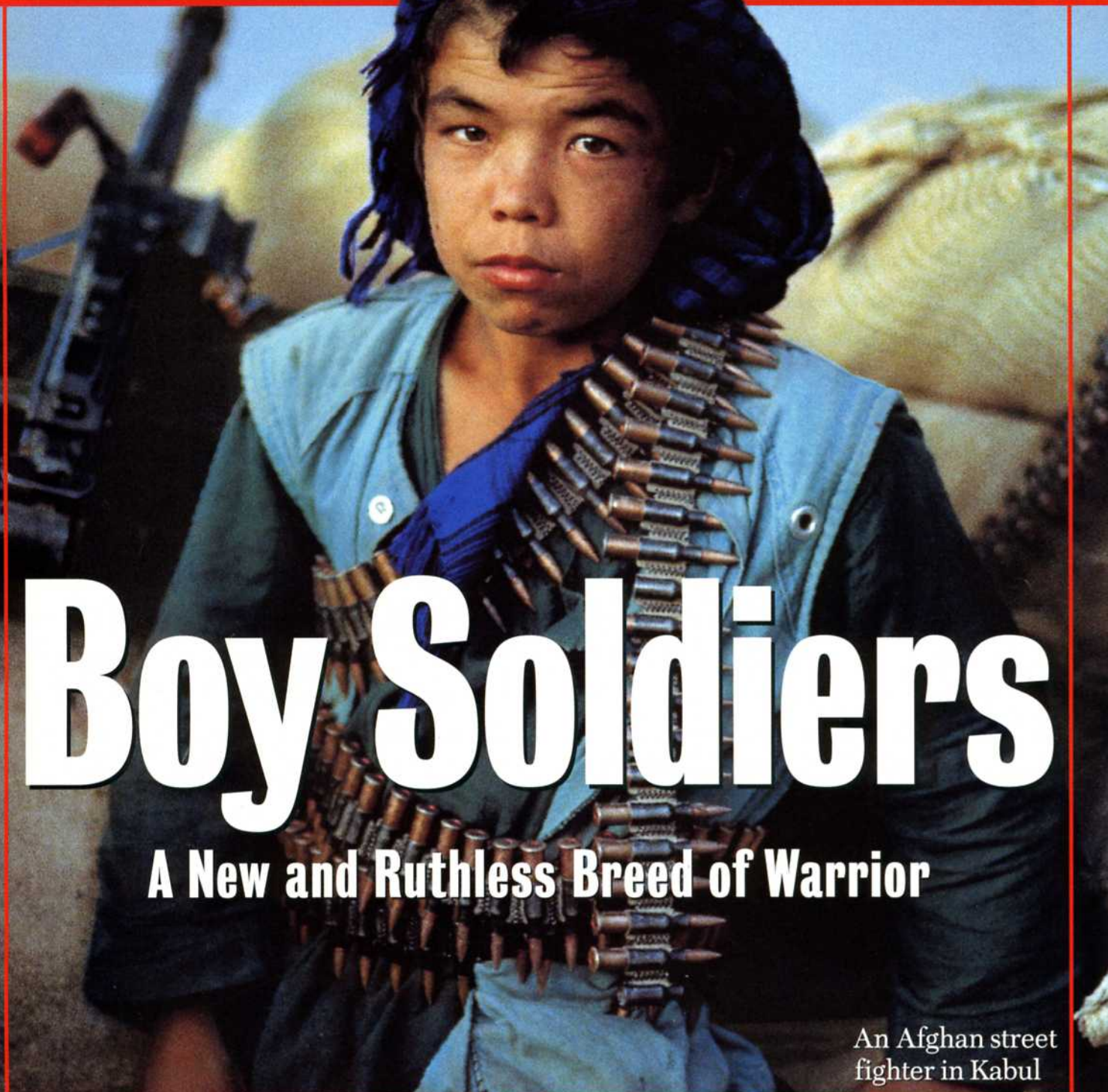


CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: WHO DESERVES TO DIE?

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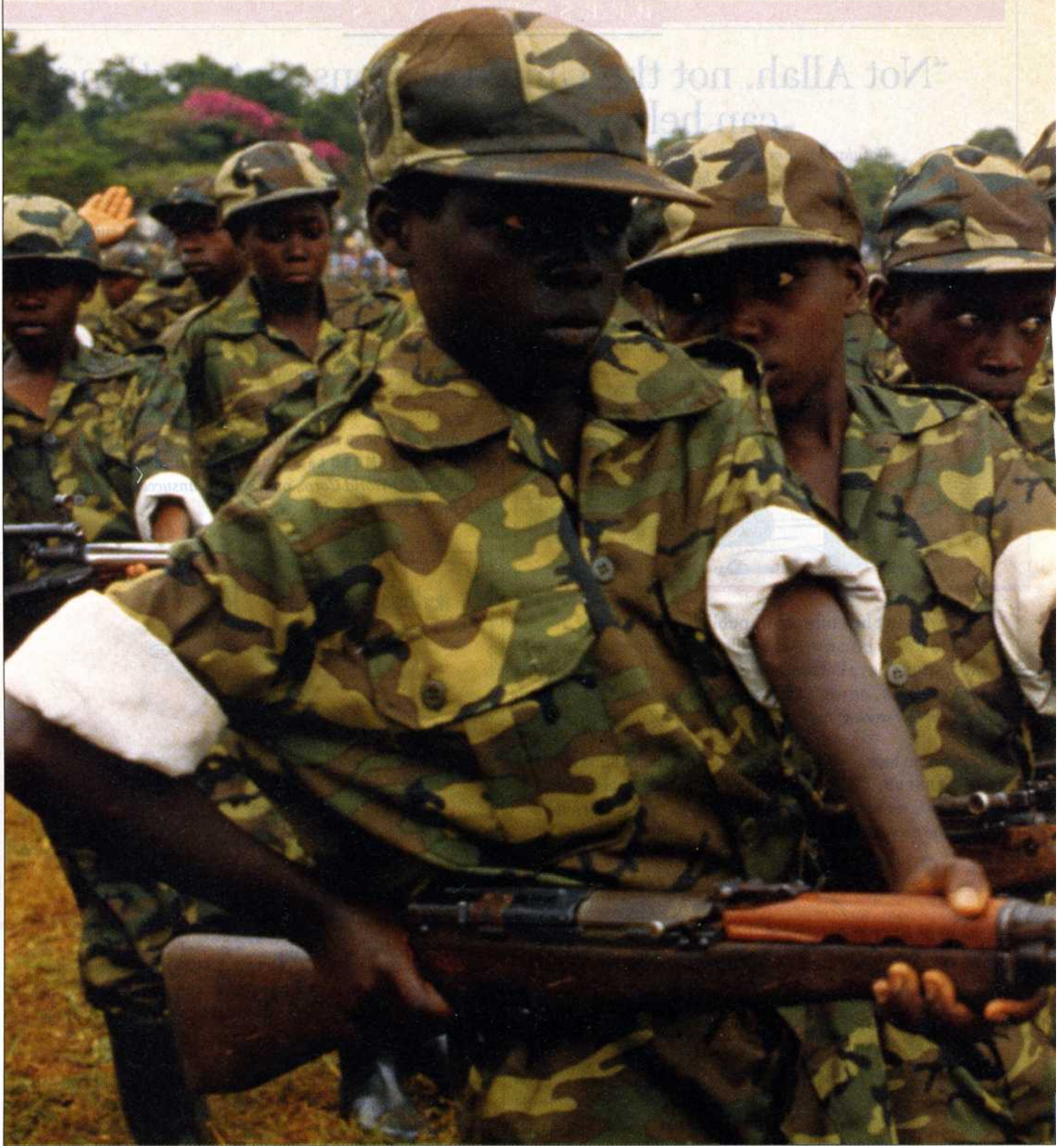
Boy Soldiers

A New and Ruthless Breed of Warrior

An Afghan street fighter in Kabul



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Boy Soldiers



Ugandan youth on baleful parade, a Kurdish refugee

MIKE GOLDWATER—NETWORK, PATRICK ROBERT—SYGMA (INSET)



Despite international agreements prohibiting the use of children under 15 in combatant roles, governments and guerrilla movements throughout the developing world are turning to the young to supply them with willing—and often ruthless—warriors.

LAST NOVEMBER, SAMUEL BULL LAID DOWN his weapons for good. For years he had fought in the bush as a member of one of the unruly militias that have battled each other across Liberia. His facility with an AK-47 assault rifle and fearlessness in combat earned him an honorific stripe: "Captain Bull," a battlefield promotion in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, commanded by warlord Charles Taylor. "I killed three men with my gun," he boasts of his exploits in a fire fight against the West African peacekeeping force known as ECOMOG. "Charles Taylor says I'm very brave."

But that was long ago, at least by his reckoning. After barely surviving a heavy attack near the town of Gbarnga, he'd had enough. When a chance came last fall to surrender to a group of United Nations observers, he did. He could only scrawl an "X" across the formal paperwork, for he had never learned to read or write. That's not really surprising. After all, when he was conscripted to fight in Taylor's force, Samuel was 8 years old, a student in kindergarten. Abandoned by his parents when the NPFL captured Buchanan from government troops, he took up the only opportunity open to him. He became a weapon in the militia.

He's 12 now, and it's still hard to imagine him firing an assault rifle. Spindly and four feet tall, clad in shorts and sandals and a pink short-sleeved shirt, he looks more like a schoolyard troublemaker than a cold-blooded killer. Yet that's what he is. He admits easily to shooting a woman point-blank when she refused to hand over some food. At the privately run Children's Assistance Program in Monrovia, where aid workers are slowly trying to repair the damaged lives of dozens of adolescent Liberian warriors, Samuel is classified as a "hard-core client." For months after his arrival, he acted as if he were still at large in the outback, ordering other boys to address him as "Captain" and to fetch his food and bath. An aura of violence still hovers about him. "Yesterday he said to me, 'The next time someone comes into my sock drawer, I'll take my knife and kill him,'" says Seton Korte, a social worker. "I knew he meant it."

BY
MARK FRANKEL

with
Joshua Hammer
Joseph Contreras
Ron Moreau
Christopher Dickey
and bureau reports

Across the developing world, images of wild-eyed children and haggard teenagers firing assault rifles or shouldering grenade launchers have become as commonplace as the smell of cordite. Look closely at the ethnic armies of Central Asia, examine the rebel militias in the African bush,

and you'll find children. You'll find them in the ranks, on the barricades and, with heart-rending frequency, in hospital beds and in hastily dug battlefield graves. International conventions are supposed to bar anyone under the age of 15 from serving in combat. But that hasn't stopped either governments or rebels in Africa, Asia and Latin America from routinely rounding up children for military duty. If anything, it's a growing trend. The world's population is becoming steadily younger; technology has made infantry weapons deadlier and easier for children to handle; the chaos of disintegrating nation-states spawns one insurgent army after another. Samir Basta, a former director of the United Nations Children's Fund in Geneva, be-





Armed and ready
in Armenia

Few of the kids forced to fight have any ideology. Sucked into the chaos of combat, they battle for food, protection and comradeship.

lieves as many as 50,000 children are fighting in wars around the globe. Other estimates put the figure as high as 200,000.

Call them what you will. Boy soldiers, child warriors, kid militiamen. (So far, few girls have been drawn into the armies.) By any name, forcing children to bear arms is a blatant violation of the Geneva Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by 176 nations. Children have always been among the casualties of war, of course. In the last century, drummer boys often marched into battle in both Europe and America. Adolescent males eager to prove themselves men have always dreamed of running off to war and returning home as heroes, as NEWSWEEK Contributing Editor David H. Hackworth, a highly decorated veteran of three wars, writes in an accompanying article.

Yet none of that explains the spread of the child armies; underage soldiers are reported in 24 conflicts now underway. Consider sub-Saharan Africa, where boy soldiers are ubiquitous. By some estimates, there are as many as 6,000 underage soldiers fighting in Liberia alone; in Taylor's NPFL they have their own regiment, the SBU, or Small Boy Unit. During the 15-year Mozambican civil war, battlefield atrocities were committed by rebel soldiers as young as 8.

In Burma, thousands of children are fighting in a multisided struggle between the ruling military junta and a half dozen ethnic warlords. Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka "enlist" (kidnap might be a better word) boys as young as 9; scores of boys and girls were reported to be among the 182 dead insurgents counted late last week after the rebels launched attacks on four government bases. Underage soldiers were also fixtures of both the governments and rebel armies that fought in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s—and continue to fight in Guatemala today. During the 1994 peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, reporters watched as 30 children ages 6 to 15 performed military drills at a schoolyard under the command of a Zapatista officer. Angola, Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Iran: the list runs on and on.

The psychic toll on these littlest soldiers is profound. Even if they survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society. In Liberia, Samuel Bull eats alone, keeps to himself socially and, despite his shows of bravado, lives in terror that he will be killed by other children, themselves veterans of rival militias. The idea of remorse doesn't exist for him. "I liked the gun sound. It sounded like music," he says, recalling the adrenaline rush of war, the feeling of power over both his peers and his elders. Should peace

Turning Killers into Kids Again

ARMIES CAN TURN BOYS INTO MEN. ORGANIZATIONS like the Children's Assistance Program try to make them boys again. Founded in 1992 by a Liberian social worker named Thomas Teage, CAP operates from a dilapidated complex of classrooms, playgrounds and dormitories on the outskirts of Monrovia. It has reintegrated several hundred adolescent warriors into what remains of Liberian society. Of 189 boy prisoners turned over to CAP by the West African peacekeeping force in 1992, only nine returned to the battlefield, according to the United Nations Children's Fund. The organization has kept up its work despite intensifying fighting in the countryside, which has forced

five of six CAP centers to close and made it impossible to reunite ex-soldiers with their families, a key element of the project. "This is a children's war," says Teage. "Kids use guns to achieve wealth and prestige. We offer them alternatives."

Communicating those alternatives means breaking through thick layers of mistrust, hostility and trauma. Many boys come to the center addicted to drugs. Others suffer from war-induced hallucinations, phobias, depression or nightmares. Most are also deeply suspicious of the staff. "Some won't tell you their real name," says Anthony Hubbard, the director of the project, which now contains 34 ex-combatants. "One child flatly refused to let us take his photograph for



Liberian militia-man?

an ID card. He was afraid we'd use it for prosecution." The biggest obstacle, staffers say, is the kids' lack of discipline and their sense of superiority. Says Hubbard: "They don't think they should take orders from anybody. To bring them back to being kids you have to deflate that ego."

How? CAP puts its charges through a months-long regimen of literacy training, vocational study, music, chores and sports. Merit points are awarded for good behavior, exchangeable for prizes such as T-shirts and sneakers. Psychologists talk with the boys about their experiences in private and group therapy. Some tales are chilling. A 13-year-old admitted slitting open the abdomen of a pregnant woman with a bayonet. Others recounted tying prisoners' hands behind their backs and tossing them into swamps or septic tanks. One boy broke down as he told of being forced by his commanding officer to chop the hands off a to-be-released prisoner after losing the key to his handcuffs. "He said, 'I hear that man's screams in my dreams. Every time I think about him I regret it,'" says Christopher Delitho, a clinical supervisor. "That was a breakthrough."

JOSHUA HAMMER in Monrovia



Zapatista warriors, with sticks

Modern weaponry doesn't require much human

one day arrive in his devastated country, it's doubtful such a damaged child will be able to find a way to live in it.

At his post guarding a rickety bamboo bridge over the Moei River dividing Thailand and Burma, Ye Htut serves proudly as the first line of defense for his village. He lives in Bho Paw Hta, a bastion of the Karen National Union. Two years ago, when he was 12, Ye Htut was drafted into the Karen National Liberation Army, which has been fighting for greater autonomy from Burma since 1949. His father was dead; his mother had fled their home, fearing persecution for her support of Burma's banned democracy movement. The chubby-faced boy wasn't on his own for long, though. Guerrillas from the KNLA picked him up almost immediately. They gave him two weeks of basic training, and taught him to field-strip and reassemble an M-16 rifle blindfolded. Although he occasionally sees his mother, the KNLA is his new family. He sleeps and eats with nine other teenage soldiers in a small bamboo hut next to the bridge. There's not much off-duty time, but in his free hours Ye Htut swims or goes fishing. Like soldiers everywhere, he loves to gamble, playing poker with his comrades for fistfuls of coins.

Drafting children for military duty has become almost a way of life in Burma. The ruling clique—known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council—periodically sweeps through villages and towns in its territory, rounding up youngsters for its 300,000-



LILIANA NIETO DEL RIO—JB PICTURES

muscle; spindly boys easily wield assault guns capable of firing 600 rounds per minute

strong army. So do various other rebel movements, from the ethnic Mon and the Wa insurgents to the Shan Mong Tai, a private militia controlled by the alleged heroin kingpin Khun Sa. Years of constant warfare have drained villages of adult males; most are either dead or in uniform—or have fled, many to neighboring Thailand. “Kids don’t have a doctrine or ideology. They are merely sucked up by one side or another and put to work,” says Brian Milne, a British social anthropologist. Becoming a member of this or that faction offers a child protection, food, the sense of belonging to a “family” that would otherwise be missing. To win their allegiance, the faction also offers recruits something they could never get on their own: the opportunity for vengeance.

Technology, meanwhile, has worked a revolution in warfare. “Before the invention of gunpowder, it would have been pointless to send a child against a swordsman. He would have been killed with the first blow,” notes John Keegan, the British military historian and author of “The Face of Battle.” But physical stamina and strength count for less and less. Newer versions of the Soviet-designed AK-47 and the American M-16 weigh little more than three kilograms each; they are easily wielded by a child. Capable of firing 600 rounds per minute, they are deadly even in the hands of undertrained, excitable boys. They are, genuinely, “equalizers.”

Who'd Rather be a Monk?

Some Burmese are fighting to keep their kids out of uniform. Last year when the KNLA stepped up drafting kids, Buddhist villagers in Manperplaw had their boys ordained as monks, who are exempt from service. The Karen rebels' Christian leadership retaliated by forbidding the ordination of any more holy men. Outraged, 500 Buddhist KNLA troops mutinied—and joined a Burmese assault against the rebels.

Ye Htut in KNLA uniform





War as romance:
Tamil guerrillas

GREG GIRARD—CONTACT

An aid worker worries about the future: 'They are only trained to fight and kill'

Warfare in the 20th century has long embraced such concepts as "total war" and Marxist "people's war." Both have led to the mobilization (and targeting) of entire populations, erasing long-held distinctions between civilians and combatants. The end of the cold war, oddly enough, has accelerated the trend. As Washington and Moscow cut funding to their regional military proxies, some national militaries and guerrilla movements turned to kids, who (to put it bluntly) cost less than adults. The boy warriors of Liberia's NPFL, for example, receive neither salary nor rations. They sustain themselves on what they can rummage and steal from civilians on loot-and-destroy missions called "snake patrols."

Not all youths must be coerced into the army. For many poor children in rural Burma, as elsewhere, conscription represents a step up in life. They get a clean uniform with bright insignia, their first pair of shoes and a weapon: symbols of power and status that few enjoyed beforehand. For many, it will be the first time they can count on three meals a day and medical care. Hundreds of war orphans adopted into the ranks of the Ugandan Army have been fed, educated and—in a few cases—sent to university. Ye Htut, for instance, has won a job as well as a gun. Though he has only a fourth-grade education, he's been given a relatively soft job check-

ing the travel documents of outsiders entering the village. "My mother is worried," he says, "but I like being a soldier." He cultivates a soldier's mien, wearing his bush hat at a jaunty angle and a bandoleer across his chest.

The innocence of these Burmese youngsters is astonishing. They sling M-16s over their shoulders, but few realize just how lethal modern weapons can be. Some wear Buddha amulets around their necks; the tokens, merchants assured them, would ward off enemy bullets. Not long ago on the Thai border, Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist and longtime observer of Burma, watched as several young KNLA troops stood on top of their bunker in the middle of a fire fight with some government soldiers to test the merchants' claim; two boys were immediately picked off.

For a long time, Ye Htut managed to escape his baptism by fire. But when NEWSWEEK interviewed him last March, a powerful force of Burmese pro-government troops had begun advancing on Bho Paw Hta. If he felt the pressure, his uncreased face did not register it. "I'm not afraid," he said in a soft voice. Since then, his village has been captured by the Burmese Army and its allies. Most of the villagers fled to Thailand, according to Karen sources, while the soldiers melted into the jungle. If he is still alive, Ye Htut may

