

# Child Soldiers in Chhattisgarh: Issues, Challenges and FFDA's Response

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Estimates assume that over 80000 children are participating directly or indirectly in the tribal State of Chhattisgarh in the armed conflict between the State and the non-state armed rebel groups. A primary survey revealed that there are over 12000 minor children used alone by the state-sponsored Salwa Judum in countering the Maoist (Naxalite) threat in the southern district of Dantewada. The Chhattisgarh Government officially recruited 4200 Special Police Officers (SPOs); many of them can easily be identified as minors. Although, it is very difficult to assess the number of child soldiers in the State, the Forum for Fact-finding Documentation and Advocacy (FFDA)<sup>iii</sup> got these figures from its reliable sources and as the result of continuous monitoring.

The state of Chhattisgarh, formerly part of the state of Madhya Pradesh, in the heart of the tribal belt of India has witnessed Maoist rebel activities since the 1970s. Till date, many strategies failed to settle the conflict between the Indian nation and the Maoists and so the insurgency is going on, not only in Chhattisgarh but also in many other parts of the country. The Naxalites in Chhattisgarh are mainly active in the remote tribal regions of the state covering 15 districts. The tribal population, the Adivasis, are the base of their recruitment. A dramatic turn in the conflict occurred in 2005 when the Salwa Judum was brought into existence. Far from being a peaceful campaign, as the name would suggest, the Salwa Judum has given hundreds of the cadres full military training as SPOs. FFDA was drawn to the child soldiers issue as several disturbing news of the use of child soldiers as SPOs by the Chhattisgarh State forces and the Salwa Judum movement spread in 2005. Directly in response to the Salwa Judum campaign the Naxalites increased their efforts to recruit more troops themselves, among them many children. FFDA started conducting a prima facie study to investigate the case.

(Photo: State recruited child soldier at work)

To get a clearer picture of the situation one can categorize the children according to the kind of involvement. On the Maoist side one can draw the distinction between the children militia and the members of the child revolutionary fronts. The former receive full military training, learn how to use weapons, to deal with explosives and are actively fighting in the conflict, while the latter get educated in the revolutionary thinking and work in the background providing food and intelligence news. The Maoists have always maintained a Children's Division among their forces, but it got restocked after the Salwa Judum began its work. Recruited aggressively, the Maoists added at least 1200 fresh minor cadres from tribal families at the end of the monsoon season 2006 alone. But not all are forcibly recruited – the Naxalites also use soft persuasion tactics with songs, chants and slogans luring the children into their regime.



Finding children among the ranks of an armed rebel group is not as surprising as learning that the government also uses children to fight in this war. The central government explicitly supports the use of “youths” in the armed conflict to ensure they end up on the rights side of the conflict. The Special Police Officers are already mentioned above. The SPO is afforded the same powers, privileges and protection; is required to perform the same duties; yields to the same penalties; and answers to the same authorities as regular police officers. No proof of age is required when applying for the SPO position. As of June 2007, 4500 Adivasi boys and girls have been recruited as SPOs in Dantewada district alone. The SPOs are coming mainly from a poor tribal background and are uneducated. Those who are more educated are recruited into the regular police force earning way more than the SPOs. Nevertheless the 1500 rupees per month are alluring to a child. Older Adivasi men would rather not work at all than risk their lives to earn this small paycheck. In many districts 40% of the police posts remain unfilled. More central forces would be required to have sufficient might to fight the Naxalites. In the eyes of the officials the use of SPOs is not only convenient but necessary.

Further on the state party side are non recruited children who are not fighting directly but are working as spies and helping carrying the equipment during operations and doing whatever they are told to do by the Salwa Judum and other state security officers. They do not get paid but are getting favours by their superiors such as food. The State of Chhattisgarh also employs children under 18 as child police officers who are posted at many sensitive police stations. The child police officers, employed with the sanction of the boy orderlies provisions in the state law, are working as regular police officers fulfilling the same duties.

FFDA has no specific information about the number of children in the revolutionary organizations, but it has primary information that they are present in all the 15 affected districts. The numbers of SPOs and child police officers are roughly known while the strength of the non recruited children is unclear.



(Photo: Naxalite child soldier at work)

In the case of the child police officers a complaint was filed with the National Human Rights Commission in September 2005 in which FFDA asked for intervention against the employment of 167 children as police officers all over Chhattisgarh and challenged the law. The abolishment of the degrading system of what is known in official parlance as ‘boy orderlies’ is a major target. It is part of the Madhya Pradesh Police Regulation Act and basically allows that Superintendents may give a certain number of appointments as constable to boys under the age of 18. No action was taken by the National Human Rights Commission.



(Child police officers at work)

A detailed study, published in book form, was conducted about the Special Police Officers and a media campaign started. All these measures didn’t prove to be successful. Subsequently a public interest litigation was filed in the High Court of Chhattisgarh in July 2007 seeking the release of all child combatants participating as SPOs or in any other capacity.

The Adivasi child already has a challenging upbringing. Faced with early childhood marriages, malnutrition, and exposure to grave diseases, the Adivasi child grows up in an extreme environment. Perhaps this is why the politicians and elite classes, especially in faraway Delhi, find it easier to turn a blind eye towards the use of tribal children in the Naxalite conflict. The lives at risk do not merit the attention that children born with opportunity merit.

(Photo: Subash Mohapatra of FFDA interviews girl child soldiers at govt camp)



These child soldiers suffer not only from injuries and disabilities, but the trauma of death and killing causes lasting mental scars. They are often recruited forcefully and torn away from their families. They are forced to fight against their own villages and sometimes even their own families. If they can't fulfil their duties laid on them there is no protection against inhuman punishment by their superiors. The whole situation is similar to slavery. Additionally, these kids do

not get any education and learn no useful skills for the time after the conflict.

The conflict won't be over soon as its solution is difficult and not seen at the horizon. But there must be various steps taken immediately to improve the situation of children. First and foremost it is essential to remove all children from the frontlines. This is easier done by the State forces and Salwa Judum than the Maoists, but even they might listen to the appeal of human rights groups and other NGOs. Further the full implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict is crucial. The existing domestic laws must be brought into full conformity with these treaties. The National Human Rights Commission must, according to its mandate, increase its activity in this area by conducting inquiries efficiently and reviewing constitutional and legal safeguards. Similar positive actions are requested from the Chhattisgarh State Human Rights Commission. Finally the cases filed by human rights organizations must be given utmost attention, speedy trials must be carried out and decisions implemented.

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<sup>iii</sup> FFDA's mandate is to promote, protect and respect human rights and it uses UN terms and definitions while monitoring human rights abuses. It understands that child soldiers are children under the age of 18 who directly or indirectly participate in a military or political armed conflict. These include children recruited for the state or non-state military organizations.