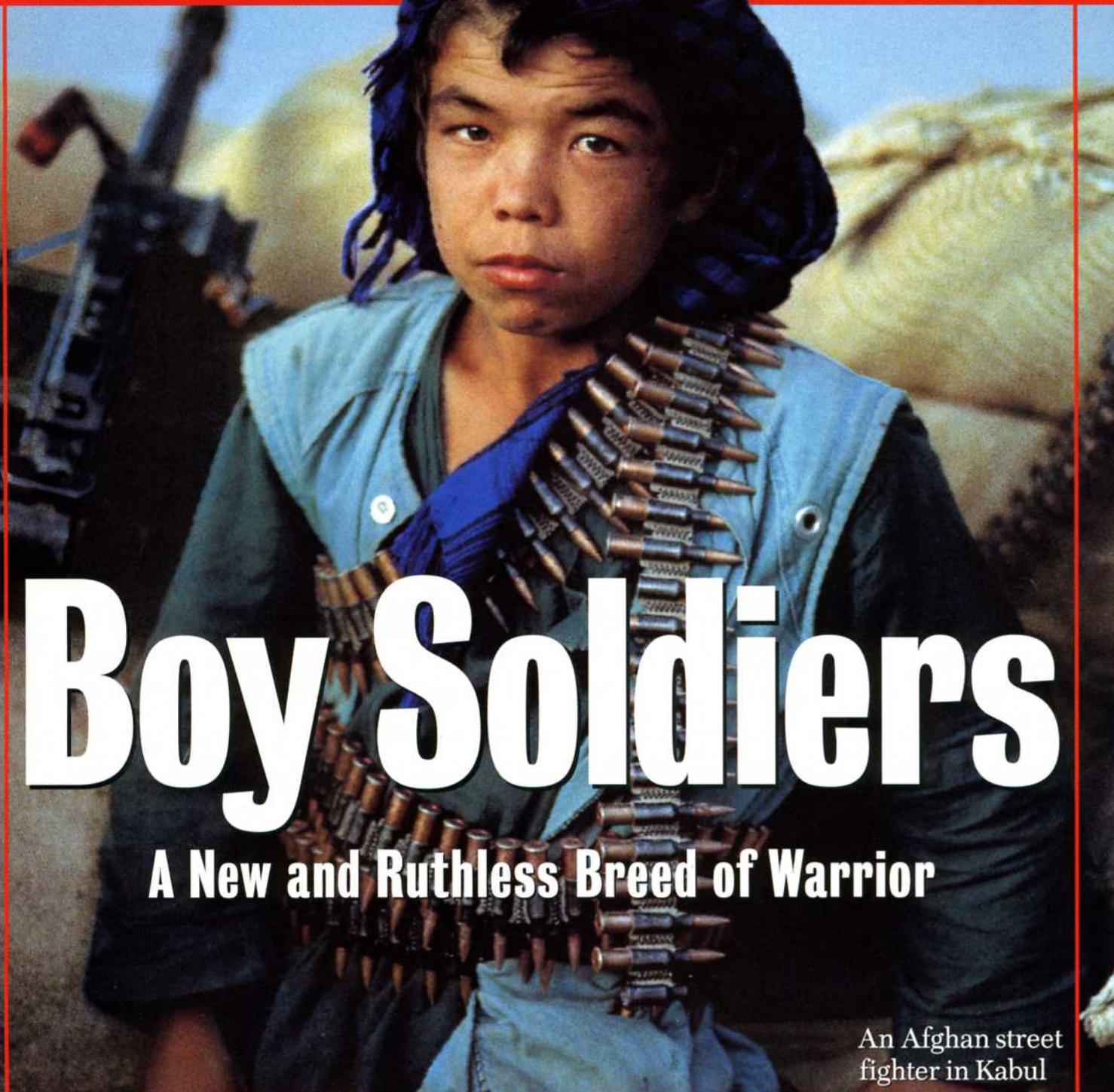


CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: WHO DESERVES TO DIE?

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Boy Soldiers

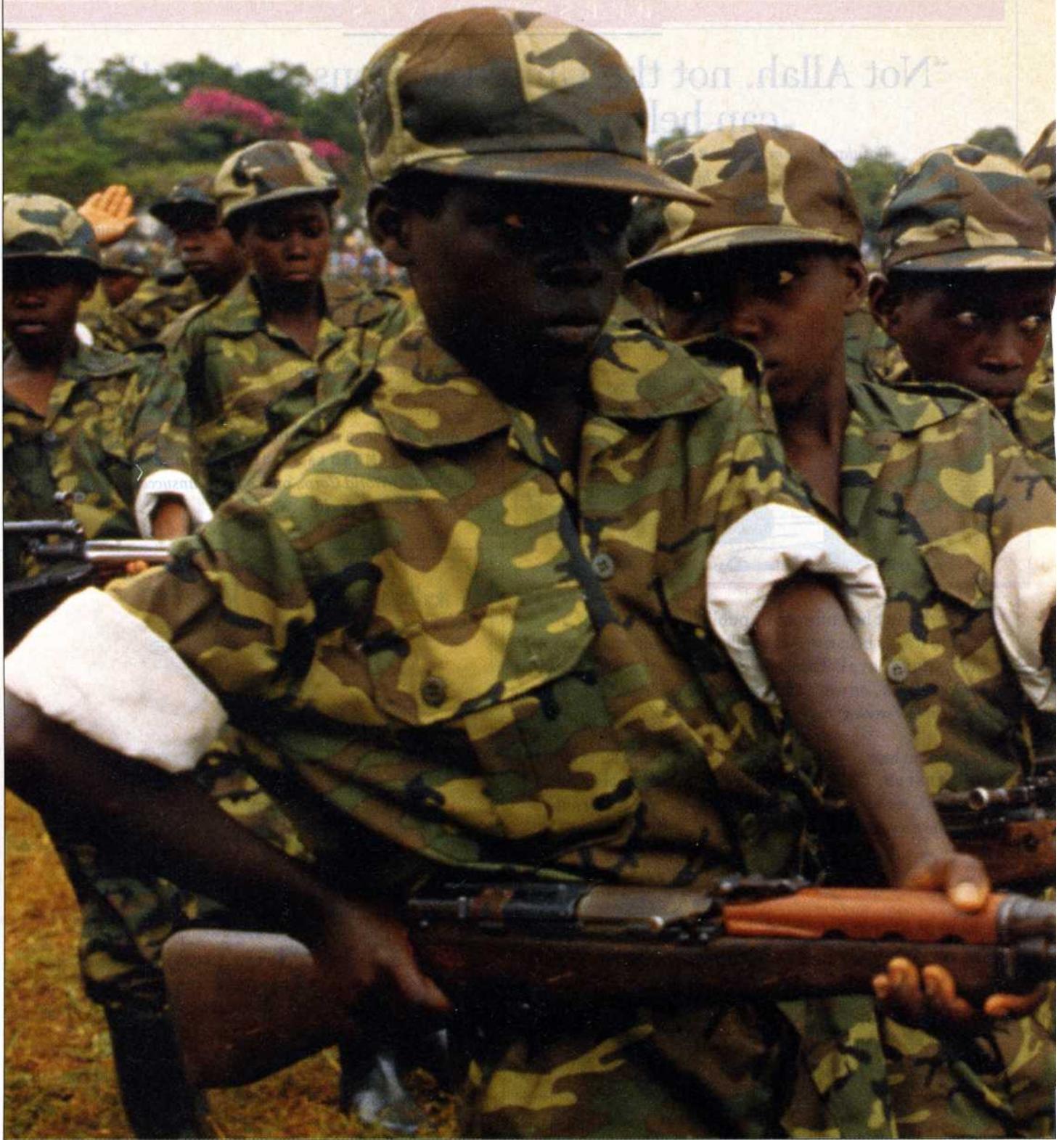
A New and Ruthless Breed of Warrior

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.

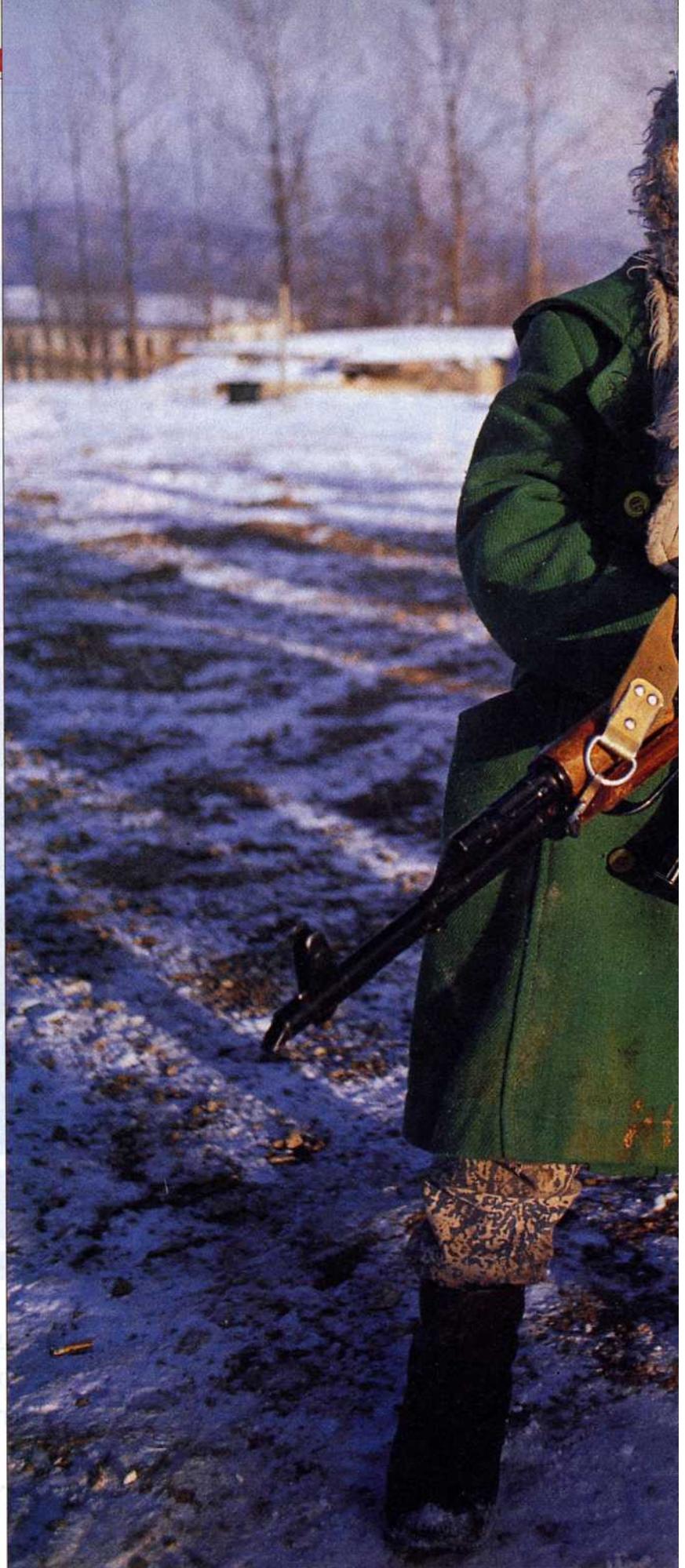
He's 12 now, and it's still hard to imagine him firing an assault rifle. Spindly and four feet tall, clad in shorts and sandals and a pink short-sleeved shirt, he looks more like a schoolyard troublemaker than a cold-blooded killer. Yet that's what he is. He admits easily to shooting a woman point-blank 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.

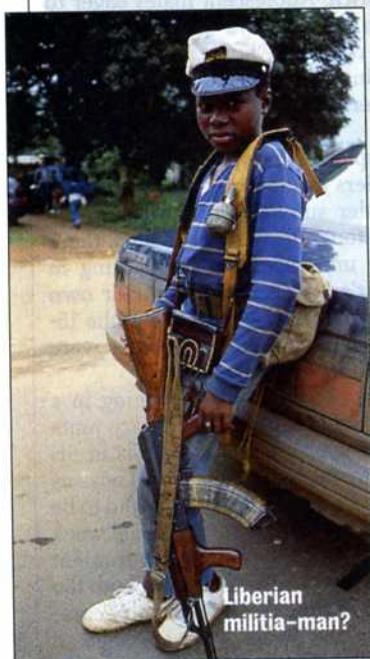
The psychic toll on these littlest soldiers is profound. Even if they survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society. 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 monthslong 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



In Afghanistan,
a triumphal
mujahedin

ERIC BOUVET—SAGA-MATRIX

now be fighting for his survival somewhere along the border.

Rodrigo Novela is one of the lucky ones. He was among the thousands of boys who were kidnapped and forced to join the Mozambican National Resistance, a.k.a. Renamo, the anti-Communist rebels who roamed and terrorized the nation during a 15-year civil war that ended in 1992. His soiled T shirt conceals a scar left by a bullet that tore into the right side of his chest. A piece of shrapnel is lodged below his left eye. His feet are flat as desktops from forced 300-kilometer marches. Yet against all odds, his youthful optimism survives. Now, in his midteens, Rodrigo is trying to make up for his lost years. The shy, skinny youth has enrolled in an elementary school in Chibuto. Sharing classes with students half his age, he is slowly learning to read and write. "I want to work and start a family," he says. "The war is a phase that has ended. I want no more part of it."

Pressed to recount his combat experiences, he answers hesitantly: "I killed and I robbed, and I feel ashamed." He was forced to join Renamo when his village was overrun by the rebels. His grandmother and mother, taken at the same time, were later killed when government troops attacked the guerrilla camp. He was eventually assigned to a unit composed mostly of boys, some as young as 10. "Many died in the fighting. They buried them then and there," he recalls. Escape never seemed an option. After witnessing the summary execution of three Renamo field commanders for insubordination, he knew he'd receive similar punishment if he tried—and failed—to desert.

Savagery was the norm in Mozambique's civil war, in which children wore both government and rebel uniforms. In human-rights circles, Renamo was notorious for actually preferring children over adults as instruments of war. A study conducted by Save the Children and the Mozambican National

Director of Social Action found the average age of Renamo recruits in one region was 11.5 years. Renamo's leaders took advantage of an unpleasant yet undeniable fact. It is easy to turn children—immature, impressionable, easily manipulated—into killers. "Kids make more brutal fighters, because they haven't developed a sense of judgment. They're told to do something, and they do it," says Esther Guluma, a UNICEF worker in Monrovia, where she has helped rehabilitate hundreds of former child warriors.

In Mozambique, rebel commanders invented a ghastly variety of techniques to brutalize young conscripts and harden them to the cruelest violence. Boys were sometimes hung upside down from trees until their will was broken. They would be forced to commit an atrocity that would sever ties to their family and village. Children as young as 8 were

Call Them 'Reserves'

Nobody knows how many boys have died in Sudan's civil war. Kids as young as 11 have been drafted by both the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army since it began in 1983. The rebels have lured thousands of youths to camps in Ethiopia with offers of protection and education. Once there, they are given military training and held, indefinitely, as reserve troops. Human Rights Watch/Africa reports that as many as 17,000 boys might be in rebel hands.



A young SPLA irregular

CRISPIN HUGHES—HUTCHINSON LIBRARY

Young recruits are often brutalized by military trainers to inure them to violence

ordered to shoot their parents or slit their throats. "The method was to force the child to commit some act that would compromise him, that he would not do under normal circumstances," says Enrique Querol, an Argentine psychologist who has worked with young Renamo veterans. Rodrigo recalls feeling queasy the first few times he shot someone. "Later on," he says, "it no longer bothered me."

Before going into battle, Renamo commanders sometimes coaxed their young fighters to drink human blood, a rite that was supposed to ensure fearlessness. As in other bush wars in which child soldiers fight, field commanders also freely handed out drugs—commonly, marijuana or amphetamines—to keep their adolescent charges pumped up. Before battle in the Liberian war, children are often issued Valium tablets known in the ranks as "bubbles" or "10-10," a reference to the milligram dosage. The purpose: to dull their anxiety. Foreign correspondents have learned it is best to visit the militia camps in the early morning. By noon the teenage gunmen are apt to be drugged and trigger-happy.

Renamo spokesmen long denied that they used children to fill their ranks. But when the guerrillas began demobilizing last year, the very first to turn in his gun (at a ceremony attended by rebel leader Afonso Dhlakama and U.N. officials) was a 16-year-old who had been fighting under Renamo's banner for seven years. An embarrassed Dhlakama tried to minimize the incident. Child warriors, he said, are "a tradition of African liberation movements."

That is likely to give little consolation to Renamo "vets" like Françoise Sigauque. He was literally catatonic by the time he was

freed from a rebel training camp in 1988—at the age of 6. Abducted by the rebels, he had been forced at gunpoint to set fire to his family's hut in the Hlangamane district of southern Mozambique. He hasn't seen his family since. Years later, he still talks haltingly; his hard brown eyes avoid those of a visitor. Suffering from depression and anxiety, the moon-faced teenager was recently reunited with an uncle after bouncing for years through various rehab centers and foster homes. "I feel bitterness in my heart, but I can't express it," he says, struggling to get the words out.

Imagine being 11 years old and obsessed with death. Watching it. Wanting it. Rajab Hassanein is a veteran of the *intifada* waged by Palestinian youths against Israeli troops in the occupied territories. Although the peace accords signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Israeli government in 1993 were supposed to bring an end to fighting in the streets, the children's war in many respects continues.

Rajab threw his first stone when he was 9. Today he is a recruit for Hamas, the Islamic fundamentalist movement opposed to the current peace talks with Israel. His life's ambition, if one can call it that, is to be a suicide bomber someday. "I am prepared to load myself up with explosives against the Israelis," he says with quiet pride. But that will not be for years, and first he has much to learn. He must memorize the Koran, learn martial arts and know how to attack the foe. "And if I am worthy, when I am 22 or 23 I will be allowed to become a martyr."

The intifada has given sociologists and social workers a rare

Remembrances of a Teenage Warrior

JIMMY SPARKS WAS MY BEST FRIEND when we were both 15. We were serving in the U.S. Army near the city of Trieste. It was 1946, and the cold war was just beginning. American and Yugoslav troops patrolled the Adriatic port while diplomats haggled over which side would get it. In our off-duty hours, Jimmy and I entertained ourselves as boys always will. Hiding behind a stone wall, we'd toss a rock into the midst of a passing Yugoslav patrol—and then imitate the sound that a WWII fragmentation grenade made when it activated. The Yugoslavs, thinking themselves ambushed, would hit the dirt, cursing and moaning. Jimmy and I laughed ourselves silly. Years later I told the story to Gen. Anton Tus, the then chief of staff of Croatia's armed forces. He guffawed and grabbed me in a bone-cracking bear hug. "My unit was in that area," he whooped. "I was 14."

For boys like Jimmy and Anton and me, war was sport, glory and romance, a wild adventure. In the closing months of World War II, when I was 14, I lied about my age and enlisted in the U.S. Merchant Marine. A year later I joined the army the same way. In those days they would take anyone capable of fitting into a uniform, counting cadence to four and hefting a

rifle—no questions asked. On the battlefield we were either braver than brave or dumber than dumb. The older I get, the more I think it was the latter.

During the Korean War I led an all-volunteer unit of U.S. Army Raiders. I was "the old man" at 20. Our job was to slip behind enemy lines and blow things



The author as a 15-year-old GI in 1946

ROGER JOB (LEFT); COURTESY DAVID H. HACKWORTH

up, kill enemy soldiers or take them prisoner. One typical member of our unit was Johnny Watson, a boy pushing 16 from a coal-mining town. He was like many teenagers with guns: reckless, careless and totally without fear. He didn't seem to care what a burning piece of shrapnel could do to a soldier's kneecap or what a single bullet could do to his chest. Our patrol came under fire one day, and afterward we hauled Johnny to a first-aid station bleeding from more holes than he had places. It was obvious that he would never walk again. Maybe he knew it. But he laughed and cracked jokes all the way.

On our last mission, only six of the unit's 70 Raiders came back unhurt. Many had been hit two or three times, but they refused evacuation. They didn't want to let their comrades down. That Raider unit was the closest thing to a real family a lot of those kids ever had. The horror of what they had lived through would dawn gradually. And then it never goes away. The younger the combatant, the deeper the burn. Late at night, alone, you refight the old battles. You see the carnage, the broken bodies, the faces of the fallen: the children you loved as brothers, and trusted with your life.

DAVID H. HACKWORTH

chance to study in depth the psychology of kids growing up in war zones. The years of constant strife, they have found, spawned a sort of "lost generation" of Palestinian youths. Mired in grinding poverty, denied an education, with few avenues for a decent livelihood, the children can see no future. Once-close families' ties have been ruptured by decades of Israeli occupation. Palestinian fathers who have suffered repeated humiliations at the hands of Israeli troops have lost their standing in the eyes of their children. "These are patriarchal families, but the intifada has turned this structure upside down," says Philip Veerman of the Defense for Children International office in Jerusalem. Membership in Hamas restores the children's missing need for discipline, self-respect and status. Taught by Hamas from an early age to honor the memory of those who have willingly destroyed themselves for the Palestinian cause,

Wounded in War, Cheated in Peace

How many children fought with Renamo during Mozambique's bloody civil war? A 1994 UNICEF report placed the total at 2,300—a low figure, considering that 100 ragged boy soldiers reportedly took part in a single rebel attack outside Maputo in 1992. Save the Children, by contrast, estimated that 100,000 boys were conscripted into the insurgent forces over the course of the war. Their hardship continued after the war ended in 1992: the United Nations refused to pay anyone under age 16 the cash and other benefits handed to demobilized rebel troops.



Rodrigo, in school

MARK PETERS FOR NEWSWEEK

ful of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to rehabilitating young warriors, many boys show symptoms of severe mental and emotional disorders (box). Aid workers worry that thousands of these underage fighters will never be able to readjust to normal life. Some predict we will see a global wave of delinquency and criminality. These kids "have no idea about society, or what their role is. They are only trained to fight and kill," says Dr. Haider Rafiqi, deputy director of UNICEF in Jalalabad, who has spent years tending to young victims of the Afghan war. Underage veterans of the Salvadoran Army plague not merely their own country. Some, in fact, have begun popping up in Los Angeles, where they roam the streets as gang members.

Still, there's reason for hope, for not all juvenile soldiers are

Rajab and many of his friends embrace martyrdom as the ultimate symbol of manhood.

One does not have to grow up amid the squalor of Gaza to experience similar frustrations. Decades of war, industrialization, urbanization and mass migration have damaged or eroded traditional social structures across Africa, Asia and Latin America. Not least among them: the elaborate web of extended family and clan ties that formerly governed social behavior. Many of the forces that helped spread the phenomenon of child armies—lack of education, few opportunities, the glorification of violence and fragmentation of families—are also found in America's inner cities, many of which are overrun by armed and dangerous juveniles.

Child warriors emerge with all sorts of wounds. At the Children's Assistance Program in

Monrovia, one of a hand-



In Gaza, a Palestinian boy takes aim

An accord raising to 18 the minimum age

permanently scarred. Psychologist Querol, in fact, has been struck by the lack of lasting emotional damage to the young Renamo conscripts he has examined in Mozambique. Often, he says, "they are better prepared to withstand psychological blows than a [Western] child." How so? "Their lives of deprivation have developed a capacity to overcome problems vastly superior to our own." Nothing is more important than restoring, whenever possible, lost boys to their parents. "The vast majority of families want their children back," whatever atrocities they might have committed, says Helen Charnley, a social worker who has worked extensively in Mozambique with Save the Children, U.K.

Last year a working group of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights convened in Geneva to discuss ways to bar child soldiers from the world's battlefields. The debate has swung largely on the question: when does a child stop being a child? At puberty? At majority? "I can't see how a child of 14 can make a decision to become a soldier. If he can't make decisions about his



ESAIAS BAITEL—GAMMA-LIAISON

for combat would be meaningless without any penalties for violation

life and the society he belongs to, he shouldn't be recruited to die for the state," says Graca Machel, the former First Lady of Mozambique who is heading a U.N. study into the effects of war on children. Cultural values are bound to clash: in many traditional societies, such as Afghanistan's, any youth old enough to grow a wispy beard is considered man enough to fight.

The most likely outcome of the U.N. debate? Adoption of yet another protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, most likely featuring a "minimum age" of 18 years for military service. Setting a higher age limit would make it easier to police the battlefield, say proponents of the measure. It's not always easy to differentiate the ages of underfed Third World youths, but clearly, few 13-year-olds can masquerade for someone nearly 20. The United Nations proposal has run into opposition from unexpected quarters, however. Western industrialized nations—Britain, the United States,

New Zealand, the Netherlands and France—have long traditions of accepting volunteers into the military at age 16 or 17, so long as they have their parents' permission. Japanese teens can join the Self-Defense Forces as early as 15. American officials have sided with those from Pakistan and Austria in holding out an exemption that would permit 17-year-olds to fight voluntarily.

In the end, raising the age at which a child can fight may be an empty gesture. "They're talking about increasing the minimum age, but we already have violations of the current rules of war in the most god-awful ways," says Bruce Abramson, a lawyer who works for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva. And clearly, rebel groups like Renamo won't be likely signatories to a U.N. covenant. What the world needs is a more rigorous method of enforcing existing statutes against child conscription. Strictly speaking, violators of the international codes are war criminals. At the very least, child soldiery amounts to child abuse, carried out on a global scale. It's time for the West to stand up and speak out. ■