

Statements made by youth representatives at the Red Hand Day Campaign culminating event

February 12, 2009, New York, NY.

Anna-Maria, Germany:

As a little child, I often lay awake and dreamed of helping people in poor villages in other countries. I wanted them to have enough to eat and drink and good and safe housing. Later on, I heard about relief organizations like Terre des Hommes and together with some friends, founded a Terre des Hommes child rights team.

When I learned about child soldiers, and that children are taught to fight and kill people, it shocked me and touched me very deeply. It made me want to stop it. I'd like to make it clear that people in Germany and around the world want it to stop.

Together with many individuals and groups from our schools and churches, we collected handprints for the international Red Hand Day Campaign. It was mainly children and youth who let their hands be painted red. All of them were shocked when they heard about children of their own age being recruited as soldiers in other countries.

We didn't expect so many people to take part in the campaign. We collected handprints on the streets and at festivals. Everyone stopped and wanted to see what was going on and wanted to participate. In Germany, red hands are still coming in every day. This week, we received 25,000 more.

The sheets of paper we brought with us contain handprints from people of all ages and social ranks – from Germany, France, Belgium, and others. We received hands from more than 20 different European countries.

However different these people might be, there is one thing they all have in common: they are united in their protest against the use of child soldiers. With their handprint they want to light a beacon and show they care.

You see how far my childhood dream has developed. Today I speak in front of you on behalf of people from all over Europe, and on behalf of an organization committed to upholding human rights. The children in the conflict areas of the world need our help. It is our duty to make sure that no child becomes a child soldier ever again, and that the abuse of these children ends.

Therefore I am asking you, Mr. Secretary-General and the delegates of the United Nations, for everything in your power to realize this aim.

Thank you.

Yina, Colombia:

In Colombia, thousands of children serve in the armed groups. These are youth that have never been youth, children that don't know what it means to be a child!

The majority of child soldiers are recruited from the poor rural areas. Just by being born in these regions, they already face the danger of recruitment or of becoming victims to the armed conflict. They go in because they have no opportunities where they live. Upon entering, they lose their human rights. They lose their rights to a family, to have an education, and even the right to adequate food. They have to live under the strict rules of the group, or face harsh punishment. Also, some youth are abused as informants by the Colombian forces.

Even those who leave the group often can't go home because they may execution from the group that recruited them. And in the communities, people believe we are a danger to them. They treat us with reproach, even if we were recruited at very young ages.

That's why we are here today, that has to change! Not one child should live what I have lived, because in my hands they have put a gun instead of colour pencils. They transformed my days of being a girl into days of an adult woman. Let us stop the recruitment of children into armed groups.

Please receive these hands, with our voices, that demand that the rights of every child be respected to live out their childhood in peace.

Julia, United States:

I've grown up in a country where I have a lot of privileges, and have been taught that once you hear of something going on that is wrong, and you know that it is wrong, it automatically becomes your responsibility to do something about it. That's why I feel it is my duty to use my voice to speak for those who are voiceless. That's why I'm speaking out today for the Red Hand Campaign.

Through the Red Hand Day Campaign, we have been able to educate people about the use of child soldiers. When my fellow students and people in the community find out that children as young as 9 are recruited and forced to kill, they are shocked and appalled that such atrocities occur.

We've had Red Hand Day events at local festivals and awareness assemblies at schools to talk about child soldiers. At my school, we set up tables on our outdoor quad to collect red hands. When students saw the red hands and found out what they represented they got excited about being able to help and got their friends to sign. In 45 minutes, we collected 973 red hands. Students were lining up to participate.

In Los Angeles, 10 schools participated in the Red Hand Day campaign. We collected 10,561 red hands. Tuesday, members of our student task force went to the city council of Santa Clarita, asking them to declare today, February 12, Red Hand Day. Our members are also visiting consulates from governments that have not ratified the Optional Protocol, to present them with red hands and ask them to ratify. We've also given red hands to our members of Congress and asked them for their support.

The Red Hand Day campaign shows that people all over the world are against the use of child soldiers and want to act. Those of us who have a voice have a job to speak out. We want all countries to ratify the optional protocol and to follow through and enforce it. We are asking the leaders here today to use their influence to pressure every country to uphold international standards and to advocate on behalf of child soldiers.

Thank you.

Madeleine, Democratic Republic of Congo:

I am from South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I was only 12 years old when soldiers came to my home and kidnapped me from my parents. I felt so bad. I was the youngest in my family. I didn't want to go, but they took me by force.

Our commanders were not our protectors. If you got sick, you had to heal yourself. If you were hit by a bullet, it was your friend who helped you.

There was not a single day when I felt good. In the camp, we were trained to use guns. We were told to do things that children our age should not have to do. If you were scared to go to war, they gave you marijuana, and apply witchcraft, and made you go. There were many of us girls and boys in the camps. When we went home, many girls went home with babies. The parents of the girls would ask "who is the father of your child?" and the girl had to say, "I don't know," because it is all of the men in the camp who do these things.

In the community, everyone knows you have been a child soldier. We feel we are rejected, because when people talk about you, you feel alone. The reality of being a child soldier is so bad. Instead of being in school and learning to be successful in life, you are used to do bad things. You realize that your life has been destroyed and that you can't go back to how it was. We need support so that we can believe we can change our lives.

Since last year, the fighting has gotten much worse. Hundreds of children have been recruited and are being forced to fight. Many families are afraid that their children will be taken. I'm glad that the international community, through the International Criminal Court, ICC, is taking decisive step to prosecute those who recruited child soldiers in the Congo. I hope they will be sentenced and the impact will be stronger protections for children.

Even in the middle of this war, children have participated in the Red Hand Day Campaign. Children in Uvira and Goma have collected over 9,000 red hands in their schools and communities. Today I am representing their voices. One reason why I came to the United States was so that people can hear our experiences and feel our stories. I have to do something not only for me, but for other child soldiers, for other girl soldiers. I am asking everyone here to help punish the leaders who recruit children, to help local communities say "no" to the use of child soldiers, and to give children the support they need to change their lives.

Thank you.