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Report: India's 3,000 Child Soldiers

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By Atish Patel



Rouf Bhat/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

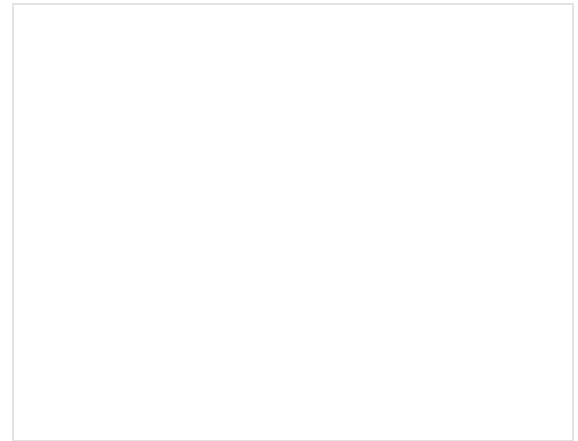
A child walked before a rifle barrel in Srinagar, Oct. 12, 2010.

At least 3,000 children as young as six are being recruited by insurgent groups across India, according to [a new report](#) published by a human rights group.

The New Delhi-based Asian Centre for Human Rights says the practice of using child soldiers is "rampant," with the majority recruited in Maoist-affected states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal.

Maoist rebels, also known as Naxalites, have been described by Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#) as India's greatest internal security challenge. They assert control over vast areas of land in central and eastern India. The insurgency was launched in the late 1960s in West Bengal. The rebels say they are fighting for the rights of indigenous tribes and the rural poor, and their ultimate goal is to create a communist society.

The report, which was submitted Thursday to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, says around 500 child soldiers have also been recruited in Jammu and Kashmir and parts of northeast India such as Manipur, where separatist groups have fought Indian forces for decades.



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India Real Time offers analysis and insights into the broad range of developments in business, markets, the economy, politics, culture, sports, and entertainment that take place every single day in the world's largest democracy. Regular posts from Wall Street Journal and Dow Jones Newswires reporters around the country provide a unique take on the main stories in the news, shed light on what else mattered and why, and give global readers a snapshot of what Indians have been talking about all week. You can contact the editors at indiarealtime@wsj.com.

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UNICEF [defines a child soldier](#) as a person “under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters [and] messengers.”

The Asian Centre for Human Rights said authorities in Chhattisgarh have admitted using around 300 children as “Balarakshaks,” which the rights group describes as child police officers. Seven children were also deployed in an armed police battalion. It didn't describe the roles these children played.

“We have a sufficient number of officers in our police force. Why would we send children to the conflict areas? Chhattisgarh police has 70,000 officers and only 300 ‘Balarakshaks,’ why would we require their help?” Ram Niwas, an additional director general of police in Chhattisgarh, told India Real Time.

“Our main motive is to support them economically. The children have lost their fathers fighting in service or other ways, so we help them. It's a goodwill gesture,” he said.

The Asian Centre for Human Rights' report said Mr. Niwas's colleague, Giridhari Nayak, admitted that children had to report for duty three days a week. “They are mostly asked to do soft jobs like carrying files from one table to another, but it surely affects their schooling,” the report quoted Mr. Nayak as saying.

India ratified the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict in 2005. The protocol requires countries to ensure that members of their armed forces who are under 18 do not play a direct role in hostilities. Governments must also take legal measures to stop independent armed groups from recruiting and using child soldiers.

In 2011, in its first report on the implementation of the [UN protocol](#), the government said India doesn't face any armed conflict situations. Therefore, child soldiers cannot exist, it said. The report, drafted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, will be examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in October.

The Asian Centre for Human Rights says the Indian government is in denial about the recruitment of child soldiers.

“Everybody knows there are so many armed conflicts in the country and the government of India has the audacity to tell the UN that they don't have any armed conflicts, possibly to keep away the international community,” said Suhas Chakma, director of the Asian Centre for Human Rights.

“The government of India doesn't want children to go into the [Maoist] fold, but you have to defeat them first and then you get the children out,” said M.A. Ganapathy, a joint secretary at India's Ministry of Home Affairs.

“Do you think any government would like small children to be involved in fighting?” he added.

The charity War Child estimates there are around 250,000 child soldiers in the world. 40% are girls.



Atish Patel is a London-born multimedia journalist based in Delhi. You can follow him on Twitter [@atishpatel](#).

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Asian Centre for Human Rights, Chhattisgarh, UNICEF, United Nations

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