Tears for Somali's "Baby Soldiers"

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Schools in Somalia are now virtually empty as children, some as young as 10 years are abducted and forced to serve as ‘soldiers or “wives” of al-shabab forces fighting against the government

First it was in Liberia. Later it spread to Sierra Leone. Now, war-ravaged Somalia is the place where the innocence of young children, some as young as 10, are denied by forcing them to become child soldiers to prosecute al-Shabab vicious, long-drawn battles with the central government in the East African country. Human Rights Watch, HRW, said entire classrooms of Somali children were now being forced to fight for Islamist militants. Majority of the children being forced to join al-Shabab are between 14 and 17 years old, but some are as young as 10. In addition, an unprecedented number of children have been abducted over the past two years. In these camps, boys are often sent to the frontline to serve as “cannon fodder” to shield adult fighters while the girls are used as “wives” for al-Shabab fighters. Though, the use of child soldiers is not a new phenomenon in Somalia, it has sharply increased in recent months. Human Rights Watch said in a report released last Tuesday, February 21, that the scale and level of violence that accompany the forced recruitment by al-Shabab has increased since 2010. “Over the course of the last two years, al-Shabab has increasingly been forcibly abducting children, not only from their homes, but also from their schools and playing fields,” Laetitia Bader, HRW researcher said, adding, “Nowhere is safe for children in Somalia any more.” The report is the result of more than 164 interviews with Somali children including 21 kids who had escaped from al-Shabab forces, plus chats with parents and teachers who had fled to Kenya. “Out of all my classmates, about 100 boys, only two of us escaped, the rest were killed,” a 15-year-old boy told HRW. He said in the 2010 incident, “the children were cleaned off. The children all died and the bigger soldiers ran away.” More than 70 children interviewed for the report described to the New York-based group how entire classrooms were kidnapped from their schools and forcibly taken to al-Shabab training camps. At the camps, many of them spent up to three months in training dumps where they were used as domestic workers and taught to use weapons, including AK-47, and how to throw hand grenades. In the camp also, children were also subjected to abuses and made to witness the assault and killing of people considered by the al-Shabab as its enemies while other children spoken with talked of “bodies of children littering the battle-fronts.” As a result, the Somali transitional government has come under heavy criticism for not doing enough to end the use of child soldiers in its ranks and those of its allies. Children have long been associated with war and instability since the Korean and Vietnam wars but their use was roundly criticised. That practice has not stopped. They are still used in many battle fronts across the world. The practice reared its head in Africa, during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars where the rebel groups forcibly enrolled and raised brutal children soldiers capable of killing and maiming at will. Till date, these societies are worse off for it as they have now acquired all sorts of deviant behaviour. Many attempts to rehabilitate these individuals back into the society have mainly failed. “It’s like mutating genes. What you sow in the mind of a child at that age sticks,” Adenike Adekanle, a sociologist with a non-governmental organisation, said. There are mixed reactions to this development. Some analysts say the use of child soldiers would soon be history because al-Shabab’s military position has been weakened by recent gains made by African Union troops in conjunction with Kenyan and Ethiopian forces. Al-Shabab controls many parts of southern and central Somalia. But forces allied to the UN-backed government pushed them out of Mogadishu, the capital, in 2011. But some other observers are wary. Al-Shabab recently announced it had joined al-Qaeda, and there have long been credible reports of foreigners attending terrorist training camps in parts of Somalia under Islamist control to boost the recruitment of child soldiers. Somalia is one of the two countries alongside Yemen listed as “key areas of concern” on the website of MI5, the British counter-intelligence agency while Andrew Mitchell, the country’s aid minister, recently said, “There are more British passport holders engaged in terrorist training in Somalia, than in any other country in the world.” In fact, Royal United Security Institute, a security think tank, recently estimated there are about 50 British nationals engaged in such training and warned they could return to the UK, to carry out terror attacks. The country has embarked on a major diplomatic push to restore stability in Somalia. The UK govern-ment held a conference in London, last Thursday, to try to find a political solution to the issue. Also, Britain hopes to take advantage of al-Shabab’s recent losses to help install a government in Somalia, which would take control of the whole country and close down the terror training camps. Britain’s interest goes beyond restoring peace in the troubled region. It wants to shore up its revenues already adversely affected by the high rates of piracy in the Gulf of Aden in Somalia. Britain is often acknowledged as the shipping capital of the world and the situation has not helped British economy. Al-Shabab is also of high interest to American authorities. The latest upsurge in the use of child soldiers worries Washington. Besides, several Americans of Somali descent have been arrested in Minnesota, US, on several occasions in the past two years of financing and laundering money to the terror group or of returning to Somalia to fight alongside Al-Shabab. The apprehension is not limited to foreign lands. Other neighbouring countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, which have large ethnic Somali population, also fear that al-Shabab could stage terror attacks on their territories, as it did in Uganda in 2010. Consequently, both countries have recently sent troops into Somalia to tackle al-Shabab. With the use of the children of these deprived people as soldiers, their conditions have just been made worse. New Legal Counsel for Abdulmutallab Anayo Ezugwu Another round of legal tussle is expected to commence in the next few weeks over the recent judgement of a US court which sentenced Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to life jail for attempting to bomb a US bound plane on December 25, 2009. The family of Abdulmutallab has recruited the services of Anthony Chambers as counsel to appeal the judgement delivered on Thursday, February 16. Already the Anthony Chambers has promised the family that

all judicial processes would be hastened to reduce the jail term since no passengers were hurt in the flight. Before the appointment of the Chambers, the family had appealed to the American Justice Department and the Federal Republic of Nigeria to help in reviewing the ruling. Abdulmutallab, son of Umaru Mutallab, former chairman of First Bank of Nigeria PLC and chairman of Vision 20:20:20, Nigeria’s economic think-tank, had attempted to bomb a Detroit-bound American aircraft on Christmas day in 2009. He had, in October last year, pleaded guilty to the charges. Nancy Edmunds, American district judge ruled that Abdulmutallab must spend the rest of his life behind bars for attempting to blow up the airline. Back home in Nigeria, mixed reactions have trailed the judgement. Damian Ugwu, executive director of Social Justice Advocacy Initiative, described the judgement as good and fair because it reflected the degree of the crime the convict committed. He also urged Nigerian security agencies to learn from the fair treatment and fair hearing which the Americans gave to Abdulmutallab. Mike Ozekhome, human rights lawyer, said the sentence was good, seeing the number of people that would have been victims of a person’s act if his mission was accomplished. He said an appeal should not even be entertained at all. “I don’t see the appeal sailing through. America is not Nigeria, where we re-consider sentiments. But Femi Falana, constitutional lawyer, argued that the judge should have considered his father’s role of alerting the US and Nigerian security agencies on his son’s activities. “I believe the judge should not have awarded the highest punishment, after all, it was a case of an attempt,” he said. Tight Security in Senegal Ojima Achimugwu Senegalese presidential election was held February 26, 2012 with Abdoulaye Wade, 85-year-old president of the country participating as a candidate. His participation had been a subject of intense criticism from in and outside Senegal. It was even the subject of several weeks of street protests which had caused political tension in the country. Fourteen candidates participated in the contest but only four were serious contenders. Wade contested under his Senegalese Democratic Party while Bamba Dieye, was the candidate for the socialism and democracy, Youssou N’ Dour, and Ricci Shryock were both independent candidates. But political analysts are of the view that Wade would win despite the opposition against his participation. His victory could lead to more street protests. He was seeking a third term as president. The constitution only allows two terms. The political turmoil in Senegal, a former French colony, is capable of undermining the political stability the country has enjoyed since independence. The crisis started in the West African country when Wade, president of Senegal, decided to contest the presidential election slated for February 26, for the third time. There have been series of protests by opposition parties in the country. The United States of America, USA, and other countries had prevailed on Wade, who is 85 years old, to step aside to pave way for younger candidates, but he refused. Protest against President Wade’s ambition led to a clash between members of opposition groups and security agents on February 17, resulting in the death of one person. During street battles, police fired tear gas into a mosque belonging to the Tidianes, the country’s biggest Islamic brotherhood, This prompted fresh crisis on Sunday, February 19. The African Union and the Economic Community of West African States sent a joint team to stop the violence in Senegal, ahead of February 26 , presidential election. Olusegun Obasanjo, former Nigerian president, is leading the mission. Wade has been in power for 12 years