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Oral Statement to the 59th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights under Item 13

Delivered by Rachel Brett, Quaker UN Office, Geneva, on Monday 14 April 2003

### CHILD SOLDIERS

In all situations where child soldiers are involved, the majority of them are boys. However, girls participate in armed conflicts to a far greater degree than is generally recognised. The proportions vary but reports indicate that in some situations up to one-third of the child soldiers are girls.<sup>1</sup>

The experiences and needs of girl soldiers have been little considered and understood, often leading to their exclusion from essential policies and programmes. On the one hand, the common assumption that the main characteristic of girl soldiers' experience is sexual exploitation and abuse, can stigmatise those who have *not* in fact been sexually abused by limiting their future prospects and status in society. On the other hand, most girl soldiers engage in combat whether or not they are also sexual partners. They therefore need their role and experience as combatants to be taken into account during demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>2</sup>

Although in some situations, there is widespread abduction of girls, many girls in fact choose to join armed forces or armed groups. While their reasons for doing so are often the same as those of boys, there are also specific reasons. According to our recent research:

1. There is a significant correlation between girls' decision to join and domestic exploitation and abuse - physical, sexual or in the form of domestic labour;
2. Some girls join to protect themselves against the high level of physical and sexual abuse of girls in armed conflicts;
3. Other girls join in search of equality, skills-training, and recognition of their leadership and other abilities.

All of these reasons highlight issues about the status and treatment of girls in society. That girls are forced to seek such an alternative is shocking. It is, therefore, doubly shocking to learn that in a recent major demobilisation, benefits were only given to male soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Such behaviour is unforgivable and must never be allowed to happen again.

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<sup>1</sup> In the ILO Rapid Assessment of Child Soldiers in the Philippines, 20% of the respondents were girls.

<sup>2</sup> See Yvonne E. Keairns: *Voices of Girl Soldiers Summary Report* (New York, 2002), the report of the joint research project of the Quaker UN Offices in New York and Geneva; and Rachel Brett, "Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions" (December 2002), both available from the website of the Quaker UN Offices: [www.quno.org](http://www.quno.org)

<sup>3</sup> Refugees International: *Angola: Women's Access to Demobilization and Reintegration Program Funding Essential* (03/07/2003)