

ROMÉO DALLAIRE

ALL HUMANS ARE HUMAN

THE ROMÉO DALLAIRE CHILD SOLDIERS INITIATIVE is not only reducing the length and scale of wars, but also affecting the way wars are being fought. If wars must happen, then our hope is that the people who fight in these wars will conduct themselves according to the laws of armed conflict and that they will respect the premises of these humanitarian laws, which have taken centuries for us to develop. We hope that these people will not simply go at each other like a bunch of savages, but will instead come to the battlefield with an ethos—a set of values that reflects the needs of the societies that depend on them. In order to achieve this aim, we have particularly focused on the use of child soldiers.

To give you a better sense of what we are doing, I would like to start with an anecdote that addresses the question of whether or not children are all the same and, by extension, whether or not all humans are human. The anecdote I would like to use is a real event that occurred during the sixth or seventh week of the Rwandan genocide. There were people caught behind the lines of the two warring factions—the two ethnic groups—and they were under the protection of the U.N. As the two armies were fighting, there was usually a lull every now and again. During one of these lulls I was able to negotiate the safe transfer of some people between the two lines before the fighting resumed. As I was driving these people through No Man's Land, I saw a boy in the middle of the road a couple hundred metres ahead. This immediately raised concerns, as we knew that the extremists were using children to block convoys of food, water, wood, and medical supplies for the nearly four million people who were displaced. If the children refused to stay there, then they would simply be killed, and if they agreed to stay there and the convoys stopped, then the extremists would attack and steal whatever they wanted. As we slowed down, I jumped out with several soldiers, expecting an ambush, but nothing happened. All we saw were huts along the road. We looked to see if somebody was there, but all we found were the

bodies of people who had been killed weeks beforehand. The child looked to be around seven years old, but as we were trying to find somebody to take care of him he disappeared. We began to look for him, as there had been fighting in the area and it was covered with mines and God knows what else, and we found him in a hut with two adults—male and female—and two children, who were half-eaten by dogs and rats. He was just sitting there among those corpses as if it were his home. So I picked him up, brought him back to my vehicle, and looked at him. He was mangy, dirty, and smelly. He was wearing nothing but rags, he had flies all around him, and his stomach was bloated from starvation. But what I saw in the eyes of that little boy, in the midst of that slaughter, was exactly what I saw in the eyes of my own seven-year-old son back in Quebec City. They were the eyes of a human child, and they were exactly the same. That child was just as human as my son. There was no difference. Their lives were equal. They both had the same right to live, hope, and aspire.

So the reason why I'm engaged with children in far-off lands, as well as children at home who are being recruited to go and fight in far-off lands, is because I consider these children to be equal to my own children. They may be used as weapons of war, but they are still children, and in my mind there is no argument that can refute this premise. Nothing will ever convince me that there are some humans who are more human than others, and the failure to accept this premise—the failure to recognize that all of humanity is equal—is what creates frictions that all too often degenerate into catastrophic failures, where people simply slaughter each other because of whatever the other person has. I believe one day this will stop. It may take a couple of centuries, but if we keep fighting for human rights and we keep trying to insert ourselves into the process I truly believe that we're going to resolve these frictions without having to use force and destroy other people. It's going to happen if we keep at it.

In order to forward my argument, I want to explain what's going on out there, as we currently find ourselves stumbling into a new era. Since the end of the Cold War a number of countries have imploded and become failed states. This is largely due to the fact that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are no longer exercising as much control over these states, and the World Bank and other organizations are forcing many countries to become democratic practically overnight. As a result, many nations have attempted to overthrow dictators, which has led to civil wars. U.N. peacekeeping forces suddenly

find themselves facing a new kind of conflict. It's not that we aren't peacekeepers anymore; it's that the nature of peacekeeping has changed. Peacekeepers used to be people who were well-liked and whose job was simply to observe and assist, but the scenario is now completely different. When I was deployed to Rwanda, for example, my initial mandate was to observe. But how long can you observe the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people before you realize that it is necessary to change the rules?

So we have entered a new era of imploding nations, where we are no longer facing armies but rather groups of people killing each other, and this change has brought new weapons to the fore. One of these weapons is the deliberate use of rape as a means of destabilizing societies and controlling populations. But the other weapon, which has become increasingly prevalent since the late 1980s and which has continued to adapt to changing conditions, is the use of child soldiers. Whereas children were not recruited in the past because they were considered too young, they are now recruited precisely because they are young. There are seven countries that currently use them, and they have become the principle tools of more than fifty non-state actors. In other words, many of the civil wars that are currently being sustained by adults are being fought by thousands upon thousands of children. During my time in Rwanda, for example, I saw 10,000 children join a happy-go-lucky youth movement, in which they played soccer games, held rallies, sang songs, and so on, and then the political party that funded the movement transformed these children over a period of six months into a militia armed with machetes that slaughtered 800,000 people. The same scenario also occurred in Sierra Leone. The children did the slaughtering, with the adults guiding them. This has fundamentally changed the parameters of contemporary conflicts. Peacekeepers are no longer facing adults in uniforms; instead, they are facing children, who are being used to commit the most brutal atrocities, as we have seen all too often with groups like Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIS.

The nature of war has changed, and we need to change too. We need to stop being taken by surprise and reacting to these catastrophic failures. Instead, we need to get ahead of the game, understand the problem, and develop new solutions. The main problem is how to reduce the scale and capabilities of these forces. One method is to prevent them from using children, so we have developed tactics that can be used to stop the recruitment of children and eliminate the problem of having to use lethal force to destroy

them. This is essentially the mission of the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative: to eradicate the recruitment and use of child soldiers progressively and aggressively using a security sector approach.

What does this mean? Over the last twenty-five years massive amounts of money have been expended on child soldiers, but we have been treating them as an afterthought—as a socio-economic problem—rather than as the primary means by which conflicts are fought. In particular, a tremendous amount of money and effort has been invested in rehabilitating and reintegrating former child soldiers who have escaped or been extracted. We have built schools for these children, and we have put them through three-month or six-month courses. Many of them are also girls with a child or two, so our efforts have been focused on helping them to become healthy again while also helping them to take care of their children. While several non-government organizations have been funded to do this sort of work, they have done absolutely nothing to reduce the number of child soldiers or to find ways of making them less effective. The worst part is that these survivors represent only a small fraction of the overall number of child soldiers, as most of them either die in battle or are simply left to die when they become injured or sick.

How do we stop this? The solution that has proven to be the most effective and that has been embraced by peace organizations and fighting forces around the world is to look at the front end. If children have become instruments of conflict, then it is important to consider why and how they are being used. If they have become a weapons system, then we need to find a way to either counter this system or prevent it from being deployed in battle. In order to prevent its deployment, we have created programs within school systems that particularly target children between the ages of 8 and 12. These groups employ pedagogical tools—from comic books to playing cards—to teach children how to avoid being recruited. They also use former child soldiers, who have been trained to work with teachers and who provide valuable firsthand experience. Our test case was Sierra Leone, a country where child soldiers had been recruited for nearly ten years. After implementing this program, the parents came to us and said, “Now I can finally talk to my children about child soldiers, about what I was.” They were able to talk about it for the first time because they were able to understand what had actually happened to them, which led to an open debate. We thus sought to cut off the flow of new recruits as much as we could by instilling in people an

abhorrence of the idea of using children as soldiers.

The second problem is how to stop the child soldiers who are currently being used. How can we counter their use and make them less effective? One of the reasons why they are so effective is that until now there's been no doctrine from which to deduce the tactics we should use, the training we should provide, or even the kind of equipment we should deploy. Professional soldiers have thus been required to use lethal force against children, which has had severe psychological consequences. I remember meeting a sergeant at a shopping centre in Quebec City, and he told me that he had done five missions in twelve years. When I asked him what his job was, he immediately lost it. There was water in his eyes, his knees were buckling, and he couldn't talk. I tried to calm him down, and he explained that he had been back for four years but that he had not yet been able to hug his children because of what he had experienced. In order to protect convoys as well as his own troops he had been forced to kill ten-year-old suicide bombers as well as children who were planting improvised explosive devices. We are creating casualties of enormous significance because our only solution is to use lethal force. However, it is possible to eliminate this tactical and strategic advantage by preparing our troops and police forces with a whole new set of tactics and tools, which we have been working on for the past seven years and which have now been published by the Canadian Army. We have been using these tactics in the education and training of soldiers in many different countries in order to show them how to react without using lethal force. If soldiers are trained to face children beforehand—if they know how to react, how to defuse the situation, and how to deescalate the tension—then we can reduce the number of casualties on both sides. And if we make children less effective, then the people who recruit them will be less interested in using them.

We are also working to make the legal consequences of recruiting and mobilizing child soldiers more severe. Shelly Whitman and her team were invited to draft a policy to assist the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague in preparing lawyers and investigators to prosecute people who recruit children, and it was implemented last November with the approval of about 130 countries. One of the reasons why these measures have been adopted is because research indicates that if an organization is willing to recruit children to fight, kill, rape, maim, and destroy their own people, then that organization is most likely prepared to com-

mit worse atrocities—even genocide. In other words, the mass recruitment of child soldiers should signal the need for immediate intervention, as it is very likely that the conflict will escalate. We have thus been able to provide the international community with a kind of early warning system that will hopefully help to prevent these kinds of atrocities in the future. That is the grander strategic objective that we have adopted, and it has been widely accepted around the world.

We are focused on children because they have become the primary tools in these conflicts and their fundamental rights are being massively abused. They are currently being used in a variety of ways by different factions. Some are treated as sex slaves, some carry water, some are forced to walk through minefields in order to blow up mines while the older ones follow behind, and some serve as spies, shining the boots of peacekeepers inside the camps in order to hear what we are saying. As child soldiers, they have been deprived of their basic human rights, so we have a strong moral justification for intervention—namely, the fact that all humans are human. And placing the rights of the children in the forefront is the key to resolving many of these conflicts and bringing about a lasting peace.

Throughout my career as a U.N. peacekeeper and senior commander, I have personally witnessed the effects of these conflicts on our veterans as well as our communities, as children are being moved to extreme violence and our police forces are struggling to figure out how to intervene and stop these youth gangs from creating such scenarios. We need to find a better way to assist the police by getting ahead of the game and preventing these children from being recruited in the first place. There is no higher objective in my life than eliminating the use of children as weapons of war. When I was in Rwanda, I was abandoned by the U.N. They pulled out most of my troops, there were no reinforcements coming, and in fact there was almost no ammunition left. We ran out of food and water. We were essentially left there to rot. And a journalist who was doing a story about Rwanda came up to me and said, “General, why are you still here? There is no way you can change the course of this genocide and this civil war.” My answer to him was spontaneous and instinctive; it came straight from my gut, and it was a reflection of our values—the values that come from our communities, our schools, our churches, and our way of life. I said to him, “If I save one Rwandan child and that child becomes the witness of that genocide to the world, then I will have achieved the minimum of my aim, for no one should

forget how 800,000 innocent people were slaughtered in their homes, in their communities, and on their streets over a period of 100 days. And using children to create such scenarios is not just a crime against humanity—it is a sin.”

That is why I founded the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative—an action-focused research organization that is changing the face of conflict in far-off lands and even influencing it here at home. It is the only body in the world that has been able to build a bridge between the military, the police and security forces, and the humanitarian non-government organizations, and it is developing innovative solutions that will ultimately reduce the effectiveness of child soldiers as well as the number of casualties—particularly the number of child casualties.