British Army used under-18-year-old soldiers in Iraq occupation

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8 March 2007

A recent written answer to a parliamentary question from the Liberal Democrats revealed that the British Army sent 15 soldiers under the age of 18 to fight in Iraq, contravening a United Nation's protocol on children's rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 38, (1989) insists: "State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities." The optional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict to the Convention that came into force in 2002 stipulates that its state parties "shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons below the age of 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities and that they are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces."

Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government ratified the optional protocol against the deployment of those aged 18 and under to war on June 24, 2003. At almost the same time it was sending them to participate in the occupation of Iraq.

In response to the Liberal Democrats' questioning, Defence Minister Adam Ingram admitted that Britain had deployed under-18s to Iraq over a two-year period between June 2003 and July 2005. Claiming that it was the result of a mistake, Ingram excused the government of any culpability by saying that most of these had been despatched to the war zone only shortly before their eighteenth birthdays. Those who saw combat, he said, were withdrawn after only weeks of combat action.

Blaming a shortage of available soldiers, Ingram was quoted by the BBC as stating, "Unfortunately, these processes are not fallible and the pressures on units prior to deployment have meant that there have been a small number of instances where soldiers have been inadvertently deployed to Iraq before their eighteenth birthday."

The Ministry of Defence admitted that army commanders were put under pressure by successive deployments to Iraq and other war zones and consequently broke international rules.

Children can join the British army aged 16 if they have their parents' consent and approximately 40 percent of its military forces have signed up when they were just 16 or 17 years old. Seventeen-year-old British army soldiers have also seen conflict in the Malvinas/Falklands War and in the first Gulf War.

The government's admission that not only were under-age soldiers sent to fight an illegal war in Iraq, but at least four of the 15 were females, caused barely a ripple in the British media. Hardly any questioned the policy of the British army in recruiting children young enough to still attend school.

At just 16 years old, the UK armed forces have the lowest recruitment threshold in Europe and the largest number of those recruited aged below 18 years of age. It is the only country in Europe that deploys 17-year-olds into armed conflicts.

But widespread unpopularity over the Iraq war and the Blair government's policy of aggressive military intervention overseas means that the army is struggling to retain its current numbers. The highly suspicious deaths of several young recruits at the army's notorious Deepcut barracks and the fate of veterans from recent conflicts like the first Gulf conflict have also had a negative effect on the appeal of joining the armed services. In addition, recent furores concerning the wretched state of army accommodation, pay and conditions have exacerbated the recruitment crisis.

In 2006, 14,000 left the army and only 12,000 joined up. Teenagers make up the bulk of recent intake. Last year, 2,760 new recruits to the three armed services

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were 16 years old and a further 3,415 were aged 17. In contrast, just 980 recruits were aged 23 and just 160 aged 28.

The maximum recruitment age has been raised from 26 to 33 years old. The army has also undertaken a relatively successful recruitment drive in the former Commonwealth and other countries. This has yielded 6,000 new recruits, with a further 3,000 Gurkhas from Nepal.

As a result one in every ten British soldiers is a foreign national. But this has worried some senior figures, who are concerned it will affect morale and create divided loyalties. Because of this the army has begun focusing its attention on even younger British children, stepping up its recruitment drive in schools.

Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that Scottish school recruitment visits have increased more than tenfold. In 2003/2004 there were 14 visits to Scottish schools, but during 2005/2006 this rose exponentially to 153. Such figures are a damning indictment of Labour controlled councils, who must first give permission to the army to recruit within schools.

Writing in the *New Statesman* recently, Stephen Armstrong revealed how working class school pupils aged between 14 and 16 are being bussed regularly from poor urban areas to what the army calls an "encounter day" with the Duke of Lancaster Regiment. There the children do rifle drill and move model SA80s from shoulder to arms length and back with Officer Nick Froehling.

According to the report, rather than use the instruction "At ease," the Officer uses the informal "Chill," supposedly so as not to alienate those under his charge. The pupils also learn to use a climbing wall, negotiate an obstacle course and complete a one-mile run. Having successfully completed these tasks, the pupils receive a certificate signed by Lieutenant Colnel L.J. Pitt, commander of recruitment in the northwest region.

All three British armed forces aggressively recruit through advertising that portrays a career in the forces as akin to a student gap year. Future career prospects and leisure activities are emphasised, while the possibility of killing and being killed is glossed over. The certificate awarded to the school pupils comes with a glossy teen magazine called *Camouflage*, a DVD and assorted recruiting paraphernalia.

A recruitment process that begins when the child is just 14 is a measure of the pressure weighing upon the British armed forces. Juveniles offer a more vulnerable and uninformed demographic base from which to recruit. Two of the children who attended the event reported by the *New Statesmen* told the reporter they wished to join up.

Warrant Officer Chris Jones told the *New Statesman* that the current casual employment opportunities offered by the construction industry and the increasing numbers of children stopping on at school or college to study A levels is not helping the recruitment shortfall. Armstrong notes that while the army refuses to publish figures it remains clear that much of its intake comes from the most disadvantaged sections of the working class.

Colonel David Allfrey is the officer with responsibility for child recruitment through the Camouflage youth information scheme. He told the *New Statesman* how the armed forces had to work to hold the interest of children interested in joining up, but who were too young to do so. Since the Camouflage strategy was enacted in 2000 the army has processed 271,000 youngsters through their initial involvement with the magazine and associated marketing. Stephen Armstrong reports that no less than 18 percent of this year's recruitment intake were Camouflage members, many of whom signed up when the army visited their schools.

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