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Northern Mali Militants Recruiting Children

by Anne Look

DAKAR — A recent investigation by the Malian Coalition for Rights of the Child found that militant groups in control of northern Mali are using hundreds of children, aged 9 to 17, not just as combatants but also as scouts, couriers, minesweepers, cooks and servants.

But Amadou Bocar Tekete, the coalition's vice-president, says militants aren't using force to swell their ranks.

"They are seducing youth, giving them money and food," he said, explaining that militants will use any means to exploit children made vulnerable by poverty and hunger.

Residents of the occupied town of Gao told VOA by phone that al-Qaida-linked Islamists have trained and armed scores of teenage boys from the town and surrounding villages. The boys, as young as 14, can be seen guarding roadblocks and administrative buildings.

Although exact figures have been difficult to obtain, the accounts corroborate recent reports by the U.N. Children's Fund that say militant groups have recruited hundreds of children and the numbers are growing.

In July, UNICEF reported that at least 175 boys between the ages of 12 and 18 were directly associated with armed groups in the region.

"Clearly there are massive problems in northern Mali," said Martin Dawes, UNICEF regional spokesman. "A number of groups hold the population. They are responsible for the population. They are also responsible under international law not to recruit children into armed groups. No doubt there are factors such as poverty and a desire to eat. But there is no excuse whatsoever for taking children into a situation where they suffer possible considerable physical harm, and certainly psychological harm."

International law prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of 18 into armed groups and considers the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 to be a war crime and a crime against humanity.

An ongoing crisis

Rebel groups took advantage of the chaos that followed a March 22 military coup in the capital city, Bamako, by seizing control of the northern part of the country.

Al-Qaida-linked militants have since pushed out Tuareg separatist fighters and begun imposing a harsh interpretation of Sharia law that has included execution of an unmarried couple by stoning and amputation of limbs as punishment for various crimes.

The U.N. says the ongoing crisis has displaced approximately 435,000 people, aggravating severe food shortages already gripping Africa's Sahel region. The situation for those who have remained in northern Mali continues to deteriorate as locusts threaten agricultural production and an ongoing cholera epidemic has killed 11 people.

