

# ABUBACAR SULTAN

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“THE STRUGGLE IS FAR FROM BEING OVER, AND DESPITE THE END OF THE WAR, THERE IS AN ONGOING WAR TO IMPROVE CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND WELFARE.”

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The war in Mozambique (1985–1992) left 250,000 children displaced and 200,000 orphaned, while tens of thousands more were forcibly recruited and put into combat. It was rare that government forces and guerrillas engaged directly—combat was waged almost exclusively against unarmed civilians. In the midst of the brutality, Abubacar Sultan traveled the country across roadless lands and on tiny planes to rescue the children of war—kids, six to thirteen years old, who had been forced to witness and, in some cases, to commit, atrocities against family members and neighbors. Sultan trained over five hundred people in community-based therapies and his project reunited more than 4,000 children with their families. Sultan put his life at grave risk on a daily basis. In 2016, he was appointed the UNICEF representative in Angola. Today he continues his work with children, concentrating on community education and children’s rights through his initiative Wona Sanaka.



Abubacar Sultan, ©2000 Eddie Adams

*INTERVIEW TAKEN FROM KERRY KENNEDY’S BOOK SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER, 2000*

When the war started in Mozambique, I was finishing my teacher training at the university. Neighbors, relatives, friends of those who were kidnapped, and people who fled from war zones brought back news of the war and the suffering.

By the end of 1987, UNICEF estimated that 250,000 children had been orphaned or separated from their families. A high percentage was involved in the war as active combatants, forcibly trained and forcibly engaged in fighting. I was shocked by pictures of child soldiers who had been captured by government forces and others who were shot in combat. Something wrong was going on. I couldn’t keep going to my classes and teaching students while all these things were happening in my country. I decided to do something.

Around that same time, a local orphanage took in thirty-five kids captured in combat. A psychiatrist and a social worker interviewed these children, and what they heard was truly horrifying: entire families kidnapped, taken into the bush, forced to carry heavy loads to military base camps, and subjected to all kinds of abuse. Children were beaten, sexually violated, and compelled to witness killings and beatings, pressed into combat and urged to commit murder. These were common practices. Many of these children had been physically injured, and most of them were traumatized.

One particular seven-year-old boy who had been kidnapped changed my life. When I arrived at this orphanage, he was completely withdrawn from the world. He would be calm one day and cry continuously the next. Finally he started speaking. He said he was living with his family, when a group of rebel soldiers woke him up at night, beat him, and forced him to set fire to the hut where his parents were living. And when his family tried to escape from the hut, they were shot in front of him and then cut into pieces. I will never forget his feelings, because I kind of went inside him and he shared with me the worst moments of his life. The images, the bad images I had from my childhood of small things that hurt me, all came alive. And sometimes I tried to put myself into his position and tried to live his experience. His was just one story among many others.

In conjunction with Save the Children (U.S.), we developed a program to gather information about children who had been separated from their families by the war. While the point of this program was to provide the victims with psychological

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and social help, it soon became obvious that we did not have the necessary resources. We were mostly left with the mission of helping the children leave the war areas and return to their families. We went into the war zones every day, documented as many children as possible, and tried to trace them to communities of displaced people inside the country, and to refugee camps in neighboring countries. Whenever possible we took children to safer environments.

Most of these kids were on the front so that's where we went. In some cases we didn't have permission from the government to go there, and furthermore, we never had permission from the rebels, since we didn't have any contact with them. Among the most basic needs we wanted to provide for the kids was access to water, food, and to simple medicine in order to fight the spread of malnutrition, malaria, cholera, and other diseases. But if a kid was injured with bullets in his body, or had been maimed by land mines, you had to address that before you could start doing your real work. Our lives were thus in permanent danger, too.

There were no safe roads in the country then, and the only way to reach those areas was by plane. On several occasions, we were almost shot down. We landed on airstrips that had been heavily mined. We had several plane accidents. Whenever we got too frightened, we tried to remember how lucky we were even to be alive.

The conflict in Mozambique was unique in the sense that it targeted only civilian populations. Direct combat between the government and rebel forces was very, very rare. In most cases, they would just go into the villages and into the huts and loot everything and kill everybody, or kidnap people and steal everything. In this process girls and boys were taken and indoctrinated as soldiers. At the end of the war we had evidence that many girls were used as maids and as sexual partners to the soldiers. After a few years of indoctrination, these kids became perfect killing machines. They would do exactly what their perpetrators had done to them: cold-blooded killing.

Everyone who promoted this war was to blame. There was a real psychology of terror. People risked being killed if they dissented from whatever they were forced to do. Either you killed or you were killed. That's what made people do what they did. Even life in the rebel camps was so bad and so difficult that the only people who had access to food or to the basic necessities were the soldiers. Being a soldier, in that context, meant that you would survive. It was as simple as that.

The camps no longer exist today. They were dismantled as part of the peace agreement. But the problem is that many of the kids were left behind as part of the demobilization process. The United Nations provided resettlement to adult soldiers but since the former fighting armies denied they had children in their forces, resettlement was not available to them. We tried to follow up but we were only able to provide support for something like eight hundred kids. We don't know what happened to the majority of them. They just went to a place where they felt safe, and often the

only place that they considered home was the place where they lived during the war.

Many times I asked myself why I chose this work. I had two kids and until they reached the age of four or five, I didn't spend more than two or three days a month with them. I finally came to realize that I was hurting my own family. They were always worried about my safety. And yet, there was something strong within myself that responded to saying I was a human being and there were other human beings out there in danger.

And if those who are close to you are in a better position than those who suffer, you need to sacrifice some of your own privileges. It's hard to explain. It's perhaps a kind of gift that you have inside yourself. Part of the explanation lies in religion (I am a practicing Muslim) and part in education. Yet, there are many other people like myself who never considered doing what I did. Hence, it must be something deeper, something inside.

And though our program succeeded in reuniting about 20,000 children with their families, when you consider that over a quarter million children were orphaned or lost during the war, our efforts seemed almost insignificant. We had the constant feeling that we were spending too much money to help only a few hundred children, even though I had worked as hard as I could.

Now that the war is over, the country is finally recovering and slowly making its transition into economic development and democracy. It's become clear to me that those who were suffering at the time of the war were the same as those who were most affected when the war was over: the ones who still lack basic resources. They are the ones who continue to be maimed by land mines in the country. The girls in the rural areas are the ones who have limited access to education, and who are still subjected to all kinds of abuse. It also became apparent to me that programs of education and health continue to focus on urban areas, where people are mostly safe, whereas in all those former frontline territories, there is nothing going on. Children continue to die of diseases that in other parts of the country can be easily treated. The struggle is far from over, and despite the end of the war, there is an ongoing war to improve children's rights and welfare.

I hope that some day we will have a world in which children can be treated like children again and in which they can be given all the opportunity they deserve as human beings. I imagine a world in which "humanness" would be the guiding principle behind rules and laws. I hope that someday we will reach this ideal.

You see, once you give people the opportunity to express their potential, many problems can be solved. My country is an example in which people were able to use their own resources in the most extreme and difficult circumstances. People really are resilient, and in countries like mine, that has an important meaning. And in that you must believe.

# DEFENDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS / CHILD SOLDIERS

## ABUBACAR SULTAN

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 4:** Freedom from Slavery
- **Article 24:** Right to Rest and Leisure
- **Article 25:** Right to Adequate Living Standard
- **Article 26:** Right to Education

### GUIDING QUESTION:

- What are the causes and effects of forcing children to take part in combat?

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** 80 minutes

### OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe why children are targeted for combat.
- Assess the effects of child soldiers.
- Identify effective measures for defending the rights of children using the story of Abubacar Sultan.
- Become a defender of children's rights by participating in a social justice advocacy project.

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

### VOCABULARY:

- Child
- Empathy
- United Nations
- UNICEF
- War
- Ratify
- Convention
- Defender

### CONCEPTS:

- Change
- Human rights
- Justice
- Empathy
- Childhood rights
- Social activism

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- Projection system for photos and PowerPoint
- DVD player

### TEACHER TIPS:

Suggested placement of this lesson within Social Studies curriculum:

- Global history and geography
- A lesson on social justice advocacy in participation in government
- An elective course involving civic involvement

### MATERIALS:

- Computer with Internet and projection
- Printed interviews with Abubacar Sultan
- Sheet with reflection prompts for video (Questions listed below in Activity 3)
- Biography of Abubacar Sultan, an interview with him and information on child soldiers. [www.RFKHumanRights.org](http://www.RFKHumanRights.org) / click on **Speak Truth to Power** / click on **"Defenders"** tab
- Source for facts on child soldiers <https://www.child-soldiers.org/who-are-child-soldiers>
- This site provides excellent teacher/student resources on child soldiers, including readings, maps, photos and video clips. [http://www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations\\_pdfs/2\\_comp.pdf](http://www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations_pdfs/2_comp.pdf)
- "Life of a Child Soldier" video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPWliZ29KVI>
- Child Soldier photo gallery: <http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/features/somalia-s-child-soldiers/>

**TEACHER TIP:** The movie *Blood Diamond* has scenes of child soldiers. However, these scenes are graphically violent. It is highly recommended that you review the movie prior to showing it in class. Given the violent nature of the child soldiers scenes, it is advisable to have parental permission for students to view the movie.

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

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### ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Instruct students to take 30 seconds to picture their childhoods in their minds. Encourage them to think of as many different activities as they can remember from the ages of 6–13. Ask students to write a list of eight to ten specific activities that they pictured.
- Using images found on YouTube: “Life of a child soldier,” first two minutes. For each photo, ask the class if anyone has something resembling this on their own list and solicit responses.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPWliZ29KVI>
- After showing the YouTube video, show photos of child soldiers from the photo gallery at: <http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/features/somalia-s-child-soldiers/#>
- Discuss: What accounts for the differences in activities between the pictures of your childhood and the photos shown?

### ACTIVITY 1:

Now that students clearly see that not everyone’s childhood looks the same, discuss the following questions. Depending on your class/pacing, you may choose to discuss these using partners or the class as a whole:

- What is a child?
- At what age can a young person no longer be called a child?
- At what age or event were you not a child anymore?
- What are the basic needs of children?
- What happens if these needs are not met?
- What rights do you have as child?
- Should there be a universal childhood? What would it look like?
- Should there be a minimum age before someone is used in armed forces? What should it be?

### ACTIVITY 2:

- Show students the map of where child soldiers exist.  
<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/childrenand-armed-conflict-interactive-world-map/>
- Ask students why children are specifically recruited into combat. Record student comments on the chalkboard or interactive whiteboard.
- Ask students what the consequences are of children taking part in war for the child, for the family, and for society.

### TEACHER TIP:

For background information on child soldiers see

- [http://www.child-soldiers.org/about\\_the\\_issues.php](http://www.child-soldiers.org/about_the_issues.php)
- <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/12/03/facts-about-child-soldiers>
- [http://www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations\\_pdfs/2\\_comp.pdf](http://www.ehl.icrc.org/images/stories/explorations_pdfs/2_comp.pdf)

### ACTIVITY 3:

- Before showing the clip in which the abducted children train to be child soldiers, read some or all of the reflection prompts below. This will allow students to more accurately reflect on what they see.
- Show the clip from YouTube, “Life of a Child Soldier,” remaining minutes 3–7 (caution—the clip shows graphic violence). After watching the clip, have the students reflect, in writing, on one or more of the following:
  - Reflect on senses that the child is experiencing (touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight)
  - What were your feelings as you watched these children?
  - Can you relate to any of his/her experiences/feelings?
  - What do you think happened to this child after the clip you saw?
- Have a guided classroom discussion based on these prompts. Depending on time, this can be done as a class or with partners who then report out.

### ACTIVITY 4:

- Ask students to brainstorm ways to stop recruitment of child soldiers. Record answers on the board or interactive whiteboard.
- Distribute to the students the interview of Abubacar Sultan, a defender of children’s rights, found at [www.RFKHumanRights.org](http://www.RFKHumanRights.org) / click on **Speak Truth to Power** / click on “Defenders” tab
- Instruct students to read the interview individually.
- Distribute copies of these focus points for students’ written responses:
  - Write at least three reactions to the interview.
  - Highlight the steps Abubacar Sultan took to address the problem of children in combat.
  - Select one sentence that struck you as powerful and explain why.
- Facilitate a classroom discussion on students’ findings, questions and reflections.

### TEACHER TIP:

The example of Abubacar Sultan’s actions is the essence of this lesson. Teachers should stress the significance of the actions of one person in the face of injustice as a motivation for becoming a defender.

## BECOME A DEFENDER

Now that students see how the actions of one man helped ease the suffering of so many children, ask what *they* as individuals can do, using one of the following or an idea of their own.

- Write a letter to your local, state and national representatives and/or to the editor of your local newspaper regarding the failure of the U.S. to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In your letter, request specific action on the issue of the universal rights of children. Share any response you may receive.  
<http://www.childrightscampaign.org/> This can also be done online at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/get-involved/take-action-now>
- Organize a 'Change for Change' fundraiser to support a rehabilitation center for child soldiers.  
<http://www.changeforchange.org/what-we-do/>  
Collect change during lunch and after school. Be sure to promote the event with informational posters, display cases, video clips and/or school-wide announcements. Also be sure to thank the school population and publicize any feedback you get from the organization.
- Participate in Human Rights Watch's Red Hand Campaign.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/01/29/red-hand-day-campaign>  
Organize the school to take part in the Red Hand Campaign to promote awareness on child soldiers.
- Create a Facebook group advocating efforts to end children being used in combat. Invite several people into the group and encourage them to get informed on the issue. Encourage them to invite others.
- Create a multimedia presentation about child soldiers to show to your class and/or a community group (such as Rotary International). Be sure to include facts on the problem and highlight defenders such as Abubacar Sultan.
- Hold a teach-in about child soldiers during lunch. Encourage participants to dress alike and have pamphlets with information about child soldiers. This may be combined with HRW's Red Hand Campaign and watching the multimedia presentation created.

### EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Find a photo of a child soldier and write a letter/journal/song/rap/poem from the perspective of that child.
- Write a paper about today's child soldiers. Pick a country/conflict and research: facts/statistics on the issue and ongoing efforts by individuals and/or groups defending the protection of children. Be sure to include your personal reflection on how investigating this issue has affected your thinking and action.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation/poster on the theme/word childhood.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### **Child Soldiers International:**

<http://child-soldiers.org>

CSI is a non-profit organization that functions as a center for information, legislation and research to help end the use of child soldiers worldwide.

### **Exploring Humanitarian Law Virtual Campus:**

[http://www.ehl.icrc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=613&Itemid=1](http://www.ehl.icrc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=613&Itemid=1)

This site provides a reading on a reunited child soldier in Rwanda.

### **The Convention of the Rights of the Child:**

<http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

This convention is a universally agreed-upon set of non-negotiable standards for the basic human rights of all children.

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights:**

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

This is one of the most important modern documents to create an international standard of human rights.

### **Crimes of War 2.0:**

edited by Roy Gutman, David Rieff and Anthony Dworkin, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2007.

This book serves as a guide to all wartime atrocities, presented in a straightforward, manner by more than 140 expert contributors. Key terms and legal issues are explained and augmented by 150 photographs.

### **Children at War:**

by P.W. Singer. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006.

This book discusses the recruitment process of the modern child soldier and examines how and why wars fought with child soldiers are considered beneficial to their political patrons. Based on interviews with child soldiers, international groups including the UN and others involved in the conflicts.

### **Girl Soldier:**

By Faith J.H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo. Chosen, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007.

### **War Child: A Child Soldier's Story:**

by Emmanuel Jal, Megan Lloyd Davies. St. Martin's Press, 2009.

*War Child* is Emmanuel Jal's personal story as one of the former "Lost Boys of Sudan," and his eventual escape with the help of foreign aid workers.

## ADDITIONAL VIDEO RESOURCES MENU

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### **Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights**

[www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org)

This site has remarkable video clips on human rights issues.

### **Youth for Human Rights:**

<http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/>

This site provides excellent 30-second videos and additional information on many human rights issues

### **What's Going On? Videos:Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone:**

Available at [www.socialstudies.com/wgo](http://www.socialstudies.com/wgo)

### **A Child's Century of War:**

Available at: <http://www.icarusfilms.com/new2002/cent.html>