

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 25, 2009 at 11:12am

Pope supports UN campaign to end use of child soldiers

by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY

Pope Benedict XVI offered his public support to the United Nations' efforts to prevent the recruitment and deployment of child soldiers and said he prays each day for suffering children around the world.

At the end of his weekly general audience June 24, the pope greeted Radhika Coomaraswamy, the U.N. secretary-general's representative for children and armed conflict, who was accompanied by Grace Akallo, a former child soldier, and Sacred Heart Sister Rosemary Nyerumbe, who runs a center for former child soldiers in northern Uganda.

The pope told the group he had deep "appreciation for the commitment to defend child victims of violence and weapons."

"I remember all the children of the world, especially those who are exposed to fear, abandonment, hunger, abuse, sickness and death. The pope is close to all of these little victims and remembers them always in his prayers," he said.

For Akallo, now a 29-year-old graduate student in the United States, the voice of the pope is very important.

When she was kidnapped in Uganda by rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army in 1996, she said, Pope John Paul II appealed publicly for her release and that of the other girls taken with her from a Catholic school.

"His voice alone is enough," she said. "When Pope John Paul spoke out about our abduction, the whole world heard about it. Even the rebels heard about it. They were so angry at us and they said, 'Who are you

that even the pope is talking about you?"

Late in the afternoon after meeting Pope Benedict, Akallo and the others spoke at a conference on the need to increase protection for children in times of war and to provide comprehensive rehabilitation programs to children who have been forced to take up arms.

At the conference sponsored by the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio, Coormaraswamy said her office estimates there are about 250,000 children currently used as soldiers in wars and guerrilla conflicts around the world.

The estimate has dropped by 50,000 over the past 10 years because of the end of fighting in Sierra Leone and Liberia, she said.

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The U.N. representative said faith communities are essential in the struggle to prevent the use of children in war and in the long process of helping child victims recover from the traumatic experiences of having participated in killing and looting and having been abused sexually by older soldiers.

"Communities of faith are communications networks," she said.

They are a key part of an "early warning system" sharing and giving information about kidnappings or murders of children, educating parents and children about the dangers of recruitment ploys and in making sure that church-run schools are "safe zones."

Sister Nyerumbe said that in Uganda's 21-year conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army "very little has been said about girl child soldiers," who are kept as concubines as well as soldiers.

Helping those who have escaped return to some kind of normal life "is a big challenge. They are stigmatized and often rejected by their own families," said Sister Nyerumbe. She runs St. Monica's Center in Gulu, Uganda, which shelters potential victims and assists girls who have escaped.

"We all have an obligation to restore the lost dignity of these children," she said.

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