

Nearly two years ago, I visited Liberia with the House Democracy Assistance Commission. That country, which has recently undergone some positive political transformations, had suffered through a horrific civil war.

I went to a school located in an area once held in conflict between various rebel forces. The school was run by a Dominican priest, who led me to a mass grave of 300 children who died of starvation after he was abducted by rebel troops. Then he pulled me into a classroom, saying, "I want to show you something, Congressman."

He discreetly brought three boys from the classroom, not wanting their classmates to think differently of them.

They had been child soldiers.

One of the boys had been playing on the soccer field with his friend when a rebel truck pulled them both inside. One was torn from the arms of his mother. One saw his father shot and killed right next to him. Two of these boys had been shot themselves, marking them with an enduring handicap in the prime of their youth. The boys would not look at me, perhaps because of their trauma, or perhaps because I was a stranger in their midst.

Upon my return, I authored the Child Soldier Prevention Act, which condemns the abduction, conscription, and forced recruitment of children and encourages an expansion of efforts to recover and reintegrate child soldiers into their communities. Children belong on playgrounds, not battlefields, and I sought to solidify the United States' role at the forefront of international efforts to prevent such insidious abuses and exploitation. Child soldiering is a modern form of slavery, compelling us to take a firm stance to promote the basic human rights, safety, and dignity of children worldwide.

My bill was later incorporated into the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 that was signed into law at the end of last year by former President Bush. This landmark legislation contains a number of measures to combat human trafficking, slave labor, and the use of child soldiers, among others.

The issue is currently referenced in the plot lines of a popular television series, but I want to convey to you that these circumstances are real and the children and other victims affected need great care and compassion. The magnitude of the instability across the globe shows the need for our nation to lead in all aspects of building a more just and peaceful international community. This bill is only a small subset of the work to be done, but it discourages nations from setting up infrastructure that empowers these human rights abuses, while helping reintegrate children back into normalcy in their own communities.

The United States is under many pressures at home, but it is a compliment to who we are as a people that the world still turns to us to lead on these critical human rights issues. For more information on child soldiers and human trafficking issues, please visit

<http://www.un.org/rights/concerns.htm>

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<http://fortenberry.house.gov>

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