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Syrian rebels using children in war - Human Rights Watch

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Syrian rebels fighting to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad have sent children into combat and used boys as young as 14 to transport weapons and supplies, Human Rights Watch said on Thursday.

The New York-based group said it had interviewed five boys aged between 14 and 16 who said they worked with rebels in the southern province of Deraa, the central Homs region and on the northern border with Turkey.

Three of them, all aged 16, said they carried weapons and one said he participated in attack missions. Two others, aged 14 and 15, said they supported fighter brigades by conducting reconnaissance or transporting weapons and supplies.

The International Criminal Court says that conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 or using them to participate in hostilities is a war crime. The United Nations convention on child rights urges states to ensure that people under 18 are not recruited or used in hostilities.

"All eyes are on the Syrian opposition to prove they're trying to protect children from bullets and bombs, rather than placing them in danger," said Priyanka Motaparthy, children's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch.

She urged rebel commanders "to make a strong, public commitment against use of children in their forces, and to verify boys' ages before allowing them to enlist."

A 16-year-old boy from the Khalidiyeh district of Homs city told HRW he participated in combat missions.

"I used to carry a Kalashnikov... I used to shoot checkpoints ... to capture (them) and take the weapons," he said, adding that his 2,000-strong battalion gave him combat training.

"They taught us how to shoot, how to dismantle and put together a weapon," he told Human Rights Watch. He volunteered along with his older brother and other relatives.

Another boy, from Homs, said children took on various roles. "The job you have depends on you," he said. "If you have a brave heart, they'll send you to (attack) checkpoints."

He said that after several months in a combat post, his commanders told him to leave the unit because of his age.

"They said we need older guys - you're too young," he said.

The youngest boy quoted by the rights group was a 14-year-old who said he transported weapons, food and other supplies for fighters near the Turkish border.

"We would bring bullets and Russiyets (Kalashnikovs). All of the kids were helping like this. We were 10 boys between 14 and 18 years old," he said.

The Centre for Documentation of Violations in Syria, an opposition monitoring group, has documented the deaths of at least 17 children who fought with the FSA. Many others have been severely wounded, and some permanently disabled, HRW said.

Rights groups say both government forces and rebels may have committed war crimes during the 20-month-old uprising against Assad, including torture and summary executions. Most of the accusations have been levelled against pro-Assad forces