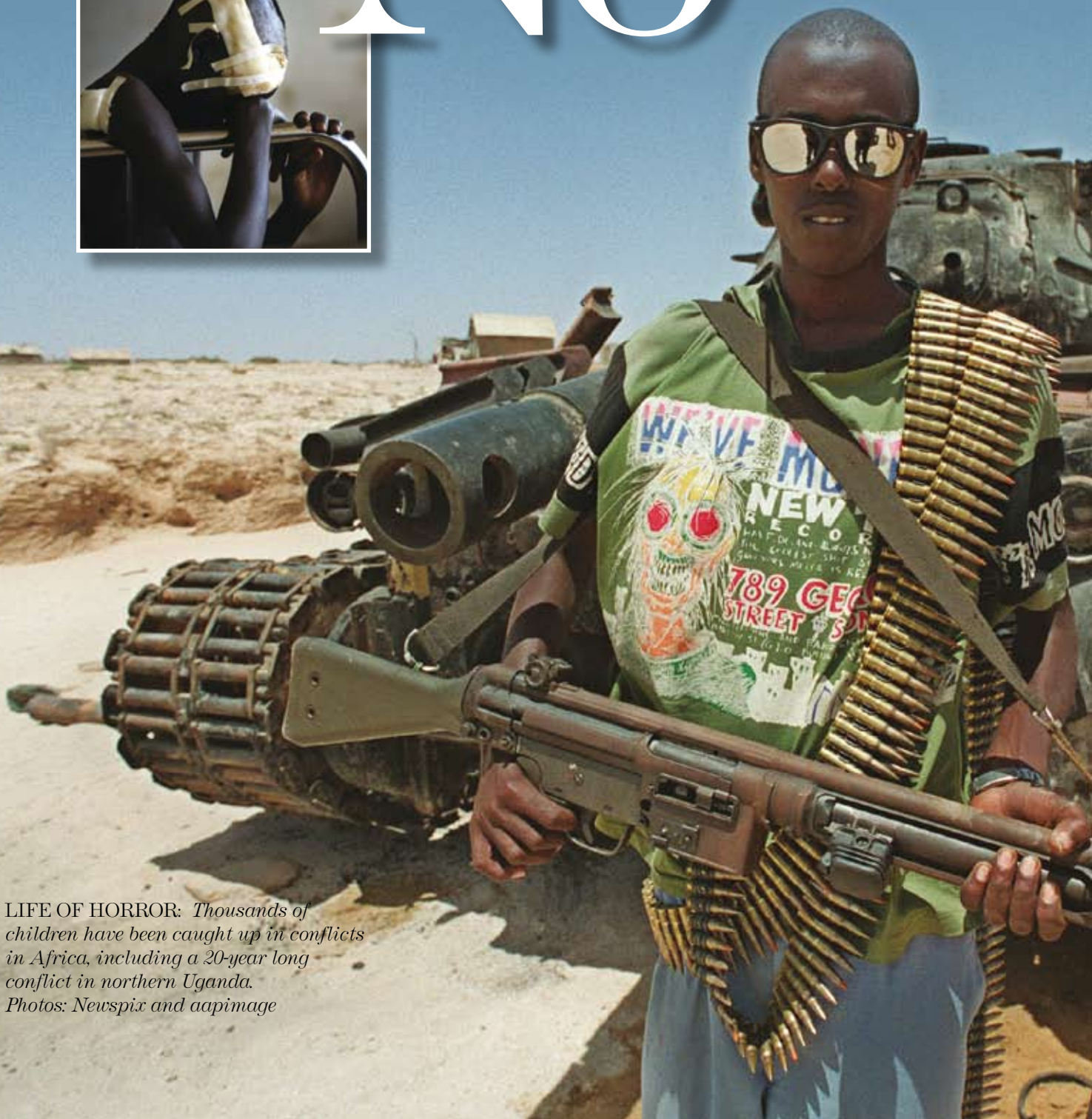


Invisible Mo No



LIFE OF HORROR: *Thousands of children have been caught up in conflicts in Africa, including a 20-year long conflict in northern Uganda.*
Photos: Newspix and aapimage

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One young Australian is standing up for children affected by conflict, and wants us to do more to help win the battle.

STORY: ANDREW DAWSON

Seventeen-year-old Canberra high school student Chris Inglis is on a mission. He wants Australians to learn more about the plight of children forced to become soldiers in war-torn regions of Africa and he wants world governments, including the Australian government, to do more to save such children from their suffering.

Mr Inglis was prompted into action when he and his year 10 classmates watched a documentary produced by three American college students who travelled to Uganda.

Titled *Invisible children*, it is a chilling account of how a 20-year conflict is devastating the lives of children in northern Uganda.

According to Mr Inglis, more than 30,000 children have been abducted and forced to live a personal horror full of bloodshed, drugs, alcohol and under-age, unprotected sex. Many have been forced to take up arms as child soldiers.

Infuriated by these statistics, Mr Inglis decided to bring his campaign against such atrocities direct to the federal parliament, through a petition to the House of Representatives.

“Children as young as seven were being abducted and recruited as new special troops.”

In doing so, he helped to make parliamentary history by becoming the first petitioner to be invited to speak with the new House of Representatives Petitions Committee.

Prior to the establishment of the committee earlier this year, petitions to the House of Representatives were read out in parliament and forwarded to the relevant minister. But often that’s where petitions ended, as there was no requirement for ministers to respond to petitions.

Now all that has changed, with the bipartisan Petitions Committee taking on the job of receiving petitions, conducting public hearings about those petitions, and getting responses from ministers.

By the end of October, some 45 responses to petitions had been received, including a response from Foreign Minister Stephen Smith to the child soldiers petition.

The petition calls for the *Invisible children* documentary to be shown on commercial television in Australia, and for newspapers and radio stations to report on the issue of child soldiers as a way of raising community awareness of the issue.



“Twenty years ago the countries of Uganda and Sudan were plunged into a political and physical war that was led by rebel leader Joseph Kony,” Chris Inglis told the Petitions Committee at a Canberra public hearing.

“This war was aimed at achieving new governmental laws based around Kony’s twisted versions of the biblical Ten Commandments. As the years progressed Kony’s supplies grew thinner and thinner, and his men were being slaughtered daily.

“It was at this point that Kony introduced a new type of soldier, the type of soldier that we now only know as child soldiers.

“Children as young as seven were being abducted and recruited as new special troops for Kony’s army. Taught to kill mercilessly, unquestioningly and brutally, Kony decided to use this new, youthful addition to his army to infiltrate schools and kidnap more children.

Australian aid can play a role in countering the use of child soldiers in Africa.

“When a child is abducted, they are taken to a place known as ‘the bush’. When a child is taken to this bush, they are instantly taught to kill using everything and anything, and typically the first murders they are forced to commit are family members. This is so the child feels they have nowhere to go and would be forced to stay wherever Kony orders them to stay.”

Mr Inglis galvanised opinion at his school: every student in year 9 and year 10 signed his petition, as did teachers and business owners at the local shopping centre.

He said the 127 people who signed the petition want the federal government to do all it can to help remove the children from the conflict.

In a prompt response to the Petitions Committee, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said the Australian government shared the concerns of Chris Inglis and his fellow petitioners.

Mr Smith said the government was committed to promoting and protecting children’s rights through international forums such as the United Nations.

“Australia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols, as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour,” he said. “These treaties have benefited children by establishing standards against which international behaviour can be measured and scrutinised.

“Most recently, Australia co-sponsored resolutions on the rights of the child at the seventh session of the Human Rights Council, in March 2008, and at the United Nations General Assembly, in December 2007.”

Mr Smith also highlighted a speech earlier this year by Australia’s Ambassador to the United Nations Robert Hill indicating broad support for a UN report on children and armed conflict. Ambassador Hill encouraged member states to ratify without delay both the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and the International Criminal Court’s Rome Statute.

According to Mr Smith, Australian aid can also play a role in countering the use of child soldiers in Africa.

“Australia’s international development program supports a number of programs to mitigate the impact of conflict on



ON A MISSION: Canberra student Chris Inglis (inset) wants world governments to do more to help children caught up in conflicts in Africa. Photos: Newspix, aapimage and Andrew Dawson

children, and these practical efforts complement our advocacy work in the United Nations,” he said.

“For example, Australia provides aid to Uganda—one of nine African countries targeted for Australian assistance—to help ease the burden of conflict and to mitigate its appalling effects on civilians.”

Over \$6 million of Australian aid was provided to Uganda in 2006-07, including \$1.5 million funding for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), for the protection of women and children displaced by conflict and to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in northern Uganda.

“In addition to the work being undertaken in Uganda, Australia also actively funds programs to counter the problem of child soldiers in the Asia-Pacific region. Current programs



are active in the Philippines (through UNICEF), East Timor, and Nepal,” Mr Smith said.

At the Canberra hearing, representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who were called to provide extra information on how Australia can help prevent the use of child soldiers, reiterated the Foreign Minister’s message that “working through the United Nations and associated international bodies is probably the most effective way of addressing this issue at this stage”.

Chris Inglis told the Petitions Committee one of the problems is that the public is often unaware of the United Nations conventions. They are also unaware of the extent of the problem of child soldiers. He said it needs young people to stand up and give a voice to such issues.

As for the petition’s specific request to have the documentary *Invisible children* played on commercial television networks, the Foreign Minister said there was no scope for the government to insist on commercial broadcasters running programs or advertisements on specific matters. The broadcasting of specific programs or advertisements remained a commercial matter for those networks. In recognition of this, members of the Petitions Committee urged Mr Inglis to contact media outlets directly, noting that he was giving attention to a compelling and newsworthy theme.

“We should use the media to inspire and motivate the people of Australia to want to stop this infuriating act against children.”

“We should use the media to inspire and motivate the people of Australia to want to stop this infuriating act against children,” Mr Inglis said. •

For more information about petitions, including the transcript of the public hearing on child soldiers, visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/petitions or email petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2152. To view a video news item on the child soldiers petition visit www.aph.gov.au/ath and for more information on the *Invisible children* documentary visit: www.invisiblechildren.com