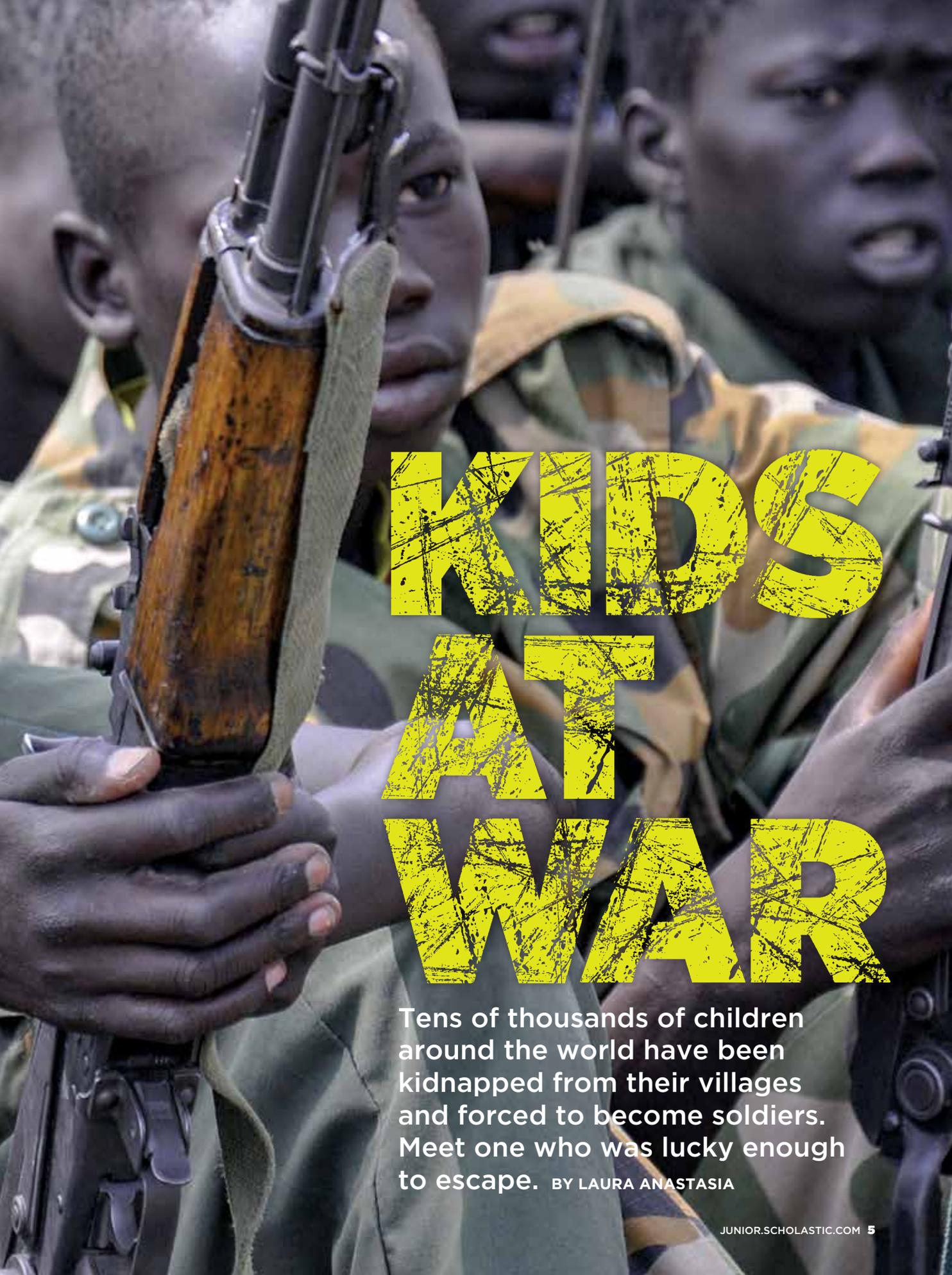




JS 360°



A group of child soldiers in South Sudan in 2015



KIDS AT WAR

Tens of thousands of children around the world have been kidnapped from their villages and forced to become soldiers. Meet one who was lucky enough to escape. BY LAURA ANASTASIA

Grace* heard the warnings. They came in the form of whispers. Alarmed, the villagers whispered the warnings from person to person.

Soldiers are coming.

Grace was just 10 years old. But already her life in South Sudan had been ripped apart by violence. A bloody civil war had been raging in the central African country. It started in 2013, when rebel forces tried to overthrow the president. Two years later, the rebels were still clashing with government troops. Grace's dad had long ago left home to fight.

Chaos was swirling around her. But Grace kept attending school. She helped look after her 4-year-old sister. And on weekends, she joined her mother on the roadside to sell vegetables.

Grace's family had no electricity in



WAR'S AFTERMATH
A village in South Sudan after a 2016 attack by armed forces



their small mud-and-grass hut. They did not have a TV, radio, or phone. So they depended on

word of mouth for news of the war. That is how they

knew that soldiers on both sides were forcing **civilians**, even kids, to fight. Grace had heard stories of sons and daughters being dragged away from their parents by armed troops.

Soldiers are coming.

Whenever the whispers came, Grace and her family would pack

up and flee. They would hide in the wilderness or a different village. They had taken shelter at a farm nearby on the day the war finally caught up with them.

Kidnapped!

At the farm, Grace's mother helped with gardening to earn money. One afternoon, as her mom dug in the dusty soil and Grace watched her sister nearby, a man approached. He asked for water and work. Neither request was unusual. Millions of South Sudanese had

UNDERSTANDING...

The Child Soldier Crisis

Tens of thousands of kids and teens have been forced to become soldiers in 18 nations around the world since 2016. Seven countries—Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—directly recruited and used children in their government militaries last year.

Child soldiers are often forced to shoot assault rifles and rocket launchers. Many are punished with beatings if they disobey. Most witness terrible violence.

International human-rights law bans the use of children under age 18 in war.



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And enlisting kids younger than 15 to fight is a war crime. War crimes are extreme actions, such as torture and mass murder, that violate accepted international standards for conflicts.

Aid groups are pressuring world leaders to punish those who break those laws.

Those same aid groups also help rehabilitate former child soldiers. Child Soldiers International (CSI) works with kids in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. Says Lianne Minasian of CSI: "Many told us their greatest wish was to go back to school."

been left poor, hungry, and homeless because of the conflict.

Grace's mom handed the man water to drink. She gave him a shovel to dig. Then she turned back to her work. But just as she looked away, the man signaled to people hiding nearby. Five uniformed men appeared. They were waving guns and yelling wildly. They surrounded Grace, her mom, and her sister. They ordered them to sit on the ground.

The family sat trembling. Then one of the men spoke. "We are going to train you," he said, "to become soldiers."

Forced to Fight

It may be hard to imagine kids your age or even younger fighting in wars. After all, in the United States, we have a volunteer military. You must be at least 17 years old to **enlist**. You must also meet certain health and educational requirements.

But in other parts of the world, boys and girls as young as 8 are routinely **recruited** by armed groups (see map). Many military groups find children easier to control than adults. That includes children orphaned by war. Child soldiers are forced to do everything. They carry equipment and cook. They spy on opponents and take part in **combat**.

Like Grace, many of these kids are kidnapped by groups of soldiers. But some kids volunteer to fight because they have no other way to get food. Sometimes entire communities join local armed groups in exchange for protection. But the situation they end up in is often even deadlier.

The Life of a Child Soldier

The men who kidnapped Grace and her family were part of a →

MEET A CHANGEMAKER



"I Try to Keep Them at the Front of My Mind"

After hearing a former child soldier speak, Anjali Mishra, 17, of Portland, Oregon, was determined to help.

In my freshman year of high school, I decided to get involved with Unicef USA, which supports the United Nations Children's Fund through fund-raising and education. I started a Unicef club at my school. That's how I heard about the issue of child soldiers. It upset me because children deserve to live like children. When kids are forced to become soldiers, they lose that right.

I hosted guest speakers to educate my community about the issue. One of them—a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo—talked about his experiences. His heartbreaking tale about witnessing his siblings also become child soldiers inspired me to work even harder.

After that, my club held a fund-raiser. We braided blue-and-white friendship bracelets and gave them out in exchange for donations. The bracelets also served as a visual reminder. We collected a few hundred dollars for Unicef to help child soldiers.

Child soldiers live far away, in situations very different from our own. But I try to make connections between our lives to keep them at the front of my mind. Simple things, like reading the news every day, help make sure I don't get caught up in my own bubble.

by Anjali Mishra, as told to Laura Anastasia

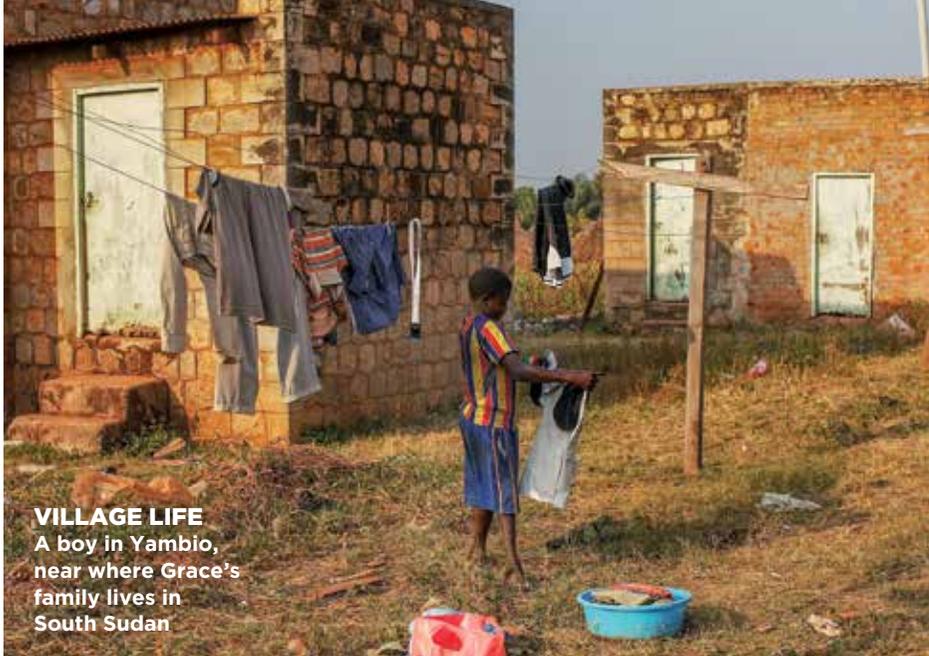
*Grace's name has been changed for her protection.

rebel group fighting against the government. At the rebels' camp, Grace was separated from her mom. The troops grouped her with other girls her age. Grace recognized many of them from her village. That was a small comfort.

From then on, Grace spent her days stealing supplies from villages. She fetched water. She gathered firewood. She struggled to carry the heavy loads back to camp. If she did not move quickly, she was beaten. At night, she took shelter with the other girls in a round hut that they had built themselves.

Grace's mother spent mornings cooking for the rebel soldiers. In the afternoons, she was trained for war. New recruits had to march in step. They had to swing their arms in perfect time. Some were taught to shoot guns.

People who refused the training faced brutal punishment. They were tied to trees and beaten with sticks by kids, including Grace. She was terrified, especially when she had to hit grown-ups. Still, she carried out



VILLAGE LIFE
A boy in Yambio,
near where Grace's
family lives in
South Sudan

the beatings. She knew that if she did not, she might be killed.

A Risky Escape

Over the next few months, Grace had no choice but to adapt to her new life. Yet she dreamed of escaping. One day, she and her family got their chance. It was about six months into their imprisonment. It happened while they were fetching water one morning. They dumped their jugs by the side of the river and ran. They eventually

made it back to their village.

But memories proved harder to outrun. Grace could not forget all the violent things she had seen and done. Her mind replayed the beatings she had received and the ones she had given out.

She also faced **discrimination**. Many former child soldiers are bullied for having been associated with armed groups, even if it was against their will. Many are cast out of their villages. And children who were forced to help rebels often fear that government officials will find out and arrest them.

A Fresh Start

One day, Grace's family heard that government and aid groups had opened a center nearby for former child soldiers. The center offered counseling and medical care.

Grace spent six months at the center. She learned how to deal with the trauma, guilt, and anxiety that haunted her. While there, she shared her story with Child Soldiers International. That is a human-rights organization based in the United Kingdom. It helps improve how child soldiers are reintroduced into communities. Grace returned

How YOU Can Help



Go Viral Spread awareness on social media about child soldiers. Post about the need for change using the hashtag #ChildrenNotSoldiers.



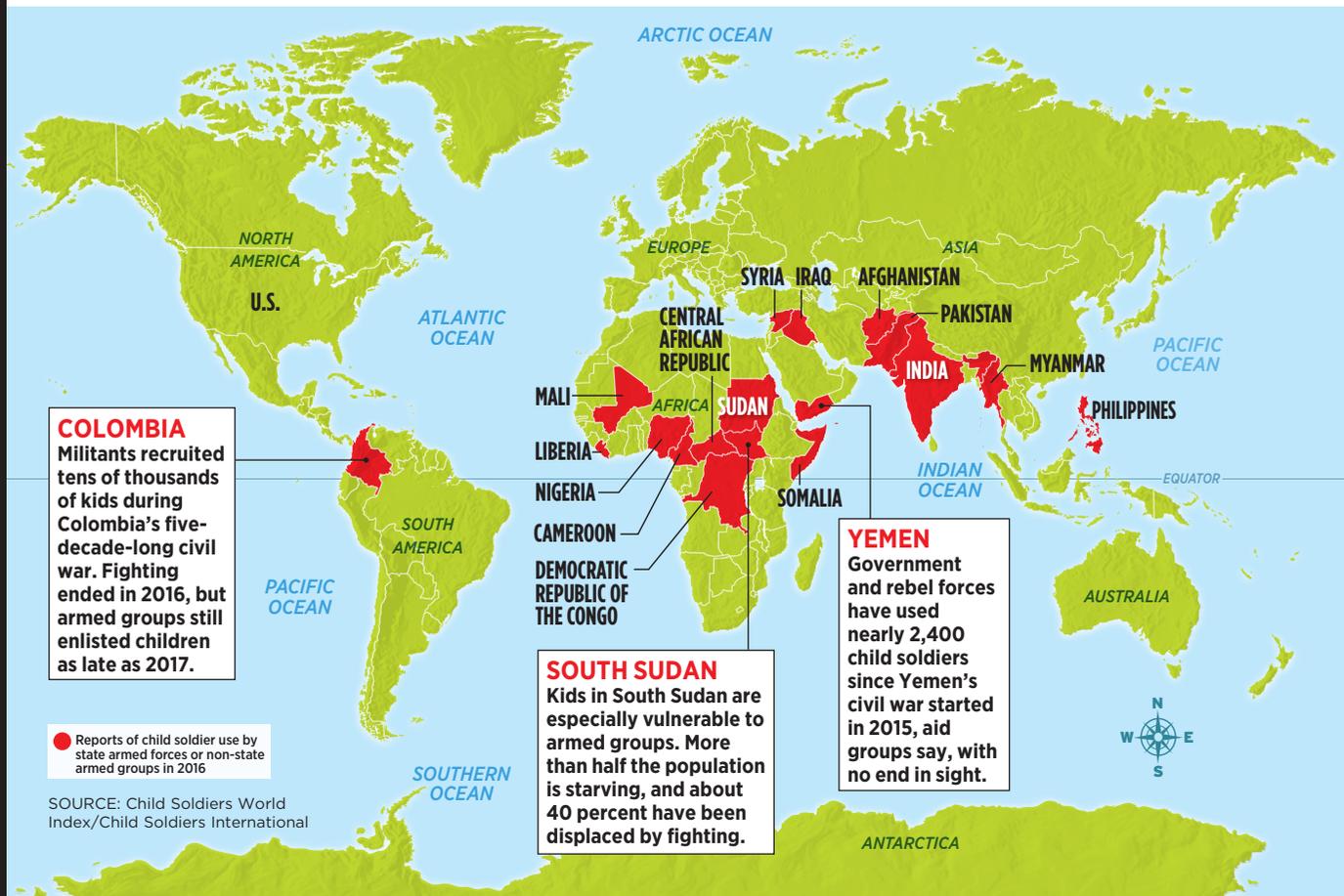
Lend a Hand Every February 12—known as Red Hand Day—aid groups present red handprints to world leaders to remind them to help child soldiers. Make and sign your own—or do it as a class. For details on how to submit them, visit child-soldiers.org/red-hand-day-campaign.



Drum Up Support Organize a movie night or a penny drive at your school or in your town to raise funds for Child Soldiers International, Unicef, or another aid group that helps former child soldiers.

Where Child Soldiers Are Forced to Fight

As of 2016, child soldiers were still actively being recruited and used in combat in 18 countries.



COLOMBIA
 Militants recruited tens of thousands of kids during Colombia's five-decade-long civil war. Fighting ended in 2016, but armed groups still enlisted children as late as 2017.

● Reports of child soldier use by state armed forces or non-state armed groups in 2016

SOURCE: Child Soldiers World Index/Child Soldiers International

SOUTH SUDAN
 Kids in South Sudan are especially vulnerable to armed groups. More than half the population is starving, and about 40 percent have been displaced by fighting.

YEMEN
 Government and rebel forces have used nearly 2,400 child soldiers since Yemen's civil war started in 2015, aid groups say, with no end in sight.

Map Skills

1. Which continents had reports of child soldiers?
2. How many countries in Asia had child soldiers?
3. Which nation with child soldiers is farthest east?
4. Which nation with child soldiers is farthest west?
5. Which countries that border South Sudan had reports of child soldier use?
6. Which labeled nation's civil war started in 2015?
7. What percentage of South Sudan's population have been displaced?
8. Which labeled countries lie along the equator?
9. Which country east of India and west of the Philippines had reports of child soldier use?
10. Which five labeled Asian countries have coastline along the Indian Ocean?

home in June 2018. She was ready to move forward.

Now 13, Grace is back in school. She studies and plays with other kids. It is almost like her time as a child soldier never happened.

But the violence is far from over. Neighboring countries have been trying to create a **cease-fire** in South Sudan. But fighting

continues. Thanks to aid groups, nearly 1,000 child soldiers have been freed over the past two years. But kids are still being forced into the conflict. And many parts of the country are too dangerous for aid workers to reach. That means they cannot help child soldiers in those areas.

As for Grace, she tries to stay

focused on the future. She dreams of becoming a doctor someday. That would be her way of helping her family, and the many other people just like them, finally recover. ♦



WRITE ABOUT IT!

How might Grace have felt during her escape? Describe the experience from her viewpoint in a journal entry.