

The road from soldier back to child

Demobilization and rehabilitation are only the first steps

About a third of the world's child soldiers are in Africa. According to a report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, a non-governmental alliance that includes Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, an estimated 300,000 child soldiers, some as young as seven, are actively fighting in 41 countries, with about 120,000 of them in Africa. Another 500,000 children worldwide may be in paramilitary organizations. For those who recruit them, "children are cheap, expendable and easier to condition into fearless killing and unthinking obedience," the report comments.

Military recruitment is harmful not only for the children themselves, but also for society as a whole, notes Mr. Olara Otunnu, the UN secretary-general's special representative for children and armed conflict. Years of schooling are lost and the children grow up to become alienated adults, prone to violence, he told *Africa Recovery*. "Today's warfare in Africa, especially the exploitation, abuse and use of children, is nothing short of a process of self-destruction.... Look at Angola, look at Sudan, look at Somalia, look at Sierra Leone. This isn't a small matter. This goes to the very heart of whether or not in large portions of Africa there is promise of a future for those societies."

Some children are forcibly abducted into government or rebel armies, observes Mr. Otunnu, but others join for ideological reasons or because viable alternatives do not exist, given widespread socio-economic collapse, schools that do not function and the break-up of families. "The fighting groups look attractive relative to what there is," he says.

Mr. Jean-Claude Legrand, a senior adviser to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the protection of children in armed conflict, agrees that most children who join armies are not really "volunteers." They usually join under various economic, social and political pressures. "You find that some of them just volunteer to get a meal a day. It's a survival strategy," he told *Africa Recovery*. "And many of the children are being promised access to education."

For Djibril Karim, who was recruited into the Sierra Leone army at the age of 13, the goal was sheer survival. With his parents and brothers killed by rebel forces, Djibril explained in an interview with *Africa Recovery*, he wandered the countryside for months trying to find a safe place, eventually ending up at a small town protected by an army camp. To stay there, he and other refugee children had to work in the camps for the soldiers. "You had to collaborate with the military in order to breathe in that town," he recalls. Then as rebels killed more and more adult soldiers, the army turned increasingly to younger recruits. The children were confronted with a stark choice: "you can either join us or you leave." And leaving meant almost certain death at rebel hands.

After less than a week of rudimentary training, Djibril and his mates were sent out into active combat, where they again were

faced with a choice: either die or kill rebels — some of whom were themselves children. In his first ambush against the rebels, Djibril initially was too frightened to shoot. Then those next to him were hit, "and their blood was all over my face and my uniform. There was no other way out. You had to pull the trigger." Of the hundred or so soldiers in his unit, more than half were children. "Some of the kids were so young they couldn't even hold the gun. They had to drag it on the ground."

The experience was dehumanizing. Many, like Djibril, have lost their entire families and were encouraged by their commanders to simply take revenge. Often the children fought under the influence of drugs supplied by the adults. Some were required to take part in the torture killing of captured rebels. "You didn't really care what you were doing," recalls Djibril. "I didn't think there was any point in being alive anyway."

Young girls also were in the army camp, he says, as "basically captives." They cooked and did other tasks, and frequently were raped and beaten. Some eventually were also conscripted into military service.

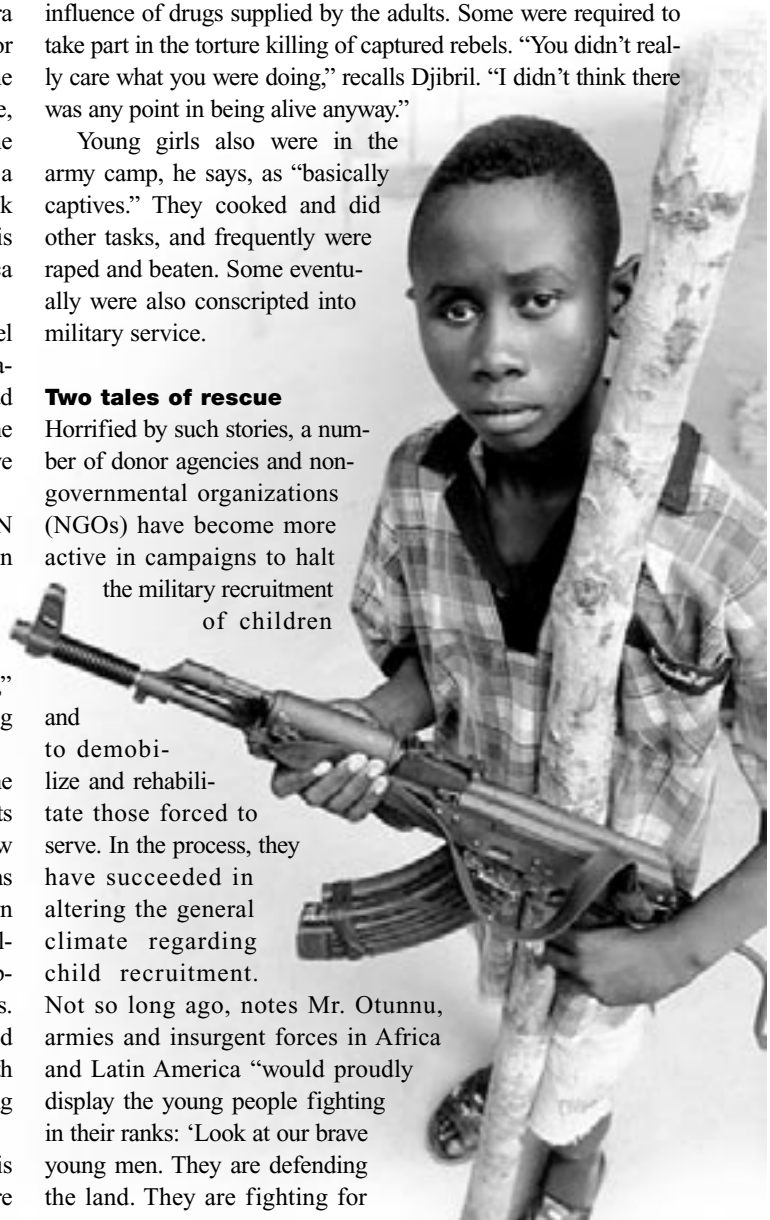
Two tales of rescue

Horrified by such stories, a number of donor agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become more active in campaigns to halt the military recruitment of children

and to demobilize and rehabilitate those forced to serve. In the process, they have succeeded in altering the general climate regarding child recruitment. Not so long ago, notes Mr. Otunnu, armies and insurgent forces in Africa and Latin America "would proudly display the young people fighting in their ranks: 'Look at our brave young men. They are defending the land. They are fighting for



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UNICEF / Giacomo Prozzi



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self-determination.' Not anymore. They've gone on the defensive."

Beyond convincing governments and rebel movements to adhere to international conventions prohibiting child conscription, the first step often involves rescuing children already in uniform. Mr. Legrand of UNICEF has supervised child demobilization programmes in Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other countries. Initially, these were mainly "traditional demobilization programmes," in which combatants were disarmed and demobilized following cease-fires and peace agreements. But now, says Mr. Legrand, "we are more and more developing programmes to demobilize and reintegrate children when war is still going on."

In Uganda, Mr. Legrand led a successful effort to obtain the release of 165 child soldiers from a military camp. The government, which was working closely with UNICEF on other child-related issues, arranged the cooperation of a local commander. At first, he agreed to release 40 children from the ranks, but with UNICEF prodding, eventually approved the agency's direct access to the camp. One consideration was UNICEF's offer to provide a truck of water each day. "That's the advantage of UNICEF being an organization dealing with health, water and education," notes Mr. Legrand. "You can mobilize these resources for programmes on demobilization of child soldiers."

While reviewing the soldiers in formation, Mr. Legrand asked them to remove their caps. He and his colleagues identified 225 who looked rather

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young, and after individual interviews, determined that 165 were in fact under-age, far more than the original number cited by the local commander. The following day Mr. Legrand obtained the government's formal agreement for the children's release.

"Unfortunately," comments Mr. Legrand, "you don't have so many governments in that region that would agree to go through the process with UNICEF." Other countries involved in the war in the DRC "would never allow us to do that." Nevertheless, release of the children still required some pressure on the Ugandan authorities, underlying the need for UNICEF to be bold enough to "challenge our best partners."

In Sierra Leone, there were no such "best partners." UN and other personnel worked together with local civil society networks to put pressure on both government and rebel forces to abide by the terms of the peace agreement. They sought to convince the commanders that it was in their own interests to release the children in their ranks. This has had some success, even with particularly brutal forces such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). While

children remain useful to rebel forces, Mr. Legrand notes, groups sometimes also desire a measure of international credibility and agree to release child combatants.

However, in the first group released by the RUF, there were no girls. This was unacceptable, recalls Mr. Legrand. "We don't want to be an organization demobilizing only boys. For UNICEF, there is a very strong sense of priority for the most vulnerable, and in this case the most vulnerable are the girls." Under stepped-up pressure, the RUF eventually began to free some girls. In the most recent release, there were 66 girls, about half of whom had babies.

Rupture with the past

Once freed, the children often are taken to transit centres. "The very first thing you have to do is create a rupture with the military life," says Mr. Legrand. "We try to ensure that the camps have no military staff." Churches, NGOs and local civil associations run many such centres. In Sierra Leone, he notes, churches play a major role, while in the DRC civil society is generally weak, making it harder to set up and operate such camps.

Before returning the children to their families or communities, the centres provide them with essential health and psychological care, and frequently with basic education and skills training. Counseling is especially vital, says Mr. Legrand.

However, for many such children, the transition is not easy. Djibril, who was sent to Benin Home, a transit centre outside Sierra Leone's capital, remembers that the children often fought

with each other, tending to choose sides according to whether they had been with the rebels or with the army. Over time, tensions cooled among the youths. But they continued to vent their anger against the centre itself, frequently breaking windows and causing other damage. Because the original promises to them were "exaggerated," Djibril maintains, the youths felt frustrated by the centre's limited facilities and resources. "Some of us were still very angry." At first, they also refused to go to

the remedial classes that were offered and sold the school supplies they were given. Although some eventually began attending the classes, those only took place in the mornings. "After lunch time we basically just hung about. There wasn't really much to do."

Other problems result from stigmatization. People outside the transit centres, including other children, often fear the former child soldiers or resent the special support they are given. Mr. Legrand argues that it is important to have programmes that involve not only those who have carried arms, but all children affected by conflict. "The best way we can help these children is for them to not be considered any more as soldiers. We need to help them to not be stigmatized forever by this image."

After some months, depending on their circumstances, the children are reunited with their families. If no surviving relatives can be traced, they are placed in foster homes. For Djibril, an uncle was found in Freetown and he went to stay with him for a time.

The ultimate goal is to help the children become full members

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of child rights among soldiers.

These centres are not without problems. There have been reports of fighting among the traumatized children. Many resent being called child soldiers, thus the term “children associated with fighting forces” coined by the agencies. Special arrangements have been made to protect girls from sexual abuse or related offences by the boys.



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Makeshift tents

Unlike established centres like the Family Homes Movement, which has been operating as a children's home since 1990, most centres do not have permanent structures but operate from makeshift tents. The ADRA-run centre in Waterloo, about 35 kilometres east of Freetown, is one. It operates from what used to be an airfield, with tent shelters housing the children built on

either side of the runway. But in all these centres, children receive formal education and training in various skills. Child mothers, as they are often called, also learn how to take care of their babies.

A UNICEF official in Freetown maintained that the problem of helping former child soldiers has some unique features in Sierra Leone: not only were the children press-ganged into joining the rebels, but they also were forced to commit atrocities, often while under the influence of palm wine, crack cocaine or amphetamines.

Giving these children some hope for the future — by sending them back to school or arming them with skills — requires greater resources than currently available, note local child protection workers. Without alternatives, the children will remain a ready pool of potential recruits for various armed factions, in Sierra Leone or elsewhere in the region. And Alusine's hopes of becoming an accountant will remain just that — a hope. ■

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of society again. “The best thing we can do for the children,” says Mr. Legrand, “is to help them reintegrate into their communities and be reunified with their families. What their family can do and what their community can do is much bigger than anything we can do ourselves.”



UNICEF / Giacomo Pirozzi

Yet reintegration is not a simple process, given the widespread loss of life and lingering hatreds. “Just rehabilitating the kids and then sending them back to the village is not enough,” says Djibril. Many African societies, including Djibril's own Mende people, have traditional ways of accepting wayward members back into the fold. He advises people helping former child soldiers to better utilize such customary rituals of “cleansing” and reconciliation. Mr.

A former child soldier attending classes in Bo, Sierra Leone.

Legrand says this is beginning to happen, as reintegration efforts seek to “build on the local culture.”

Education is key

Even community reintegration will not be sufficient if the children are unable to go to school or have other ways to acquire

skills, jobs or financial opportunities, leaving them vulnerable to re-recruitment by armed factions. “The best way to support a child is to provide him with education and an opportunity for an income,” insists Mr. Legrand. But in severely war-torn countries such as Sierra Leone, “we are most of the time dealing with communities where all basic services have been disrupted.”

For that reason, he says, donors must look beyond the immediate problems and focus more on how to overcome the long-term impact of war. Unfortunately, “it's so difficult to mobilize donors around these issues. They want to provide emergency assistance in terms of food and basic health. [But] still they don't recognize the importance of providing children and their communities with an alternative to the economy of war.”

Ms. Graça Machel, an expert on children in armed conflicts and a former first lady of Mozambique and South Africa, has argued that programmes to assist former child soldiers should last at least three years. In a September 2000 report, “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” she says this is necessary to address children's “longer-term needs for education, vocational training and psychosocial support. Unless children demobilized from armies are given alternatives to soldiering, they are likely to be recruited again into armed groups.”

Even with the limited resources now available, a greater focus on education can bring modest benefits, observes Mr. Legrand. In southern Sudan, for example, some former child soldiers have received enough training to become teachers, helping provide education to an even younger generation and thus making them less susceptible to military recruitment.

In Sierra Leone as well, many of those who have been through the transit centres are leery of again taking up arms. In 2000, when the RUF briefly restarted the war, “they tried to recruit the children again,” Mr. Legrand recalls. “They were very surprised by the resistance they met.” ■