

Restoring lost childhood in Sierra Leone

UN and NGOs run programmes to reintegrate former child soldiers

By **Masimba Tafirenyika**

Freetown

A 45-minute drive along a muddy road leads to the small town of Lakka, about 20 kilometres south of Freetown, Sierra Leone's war-torn capital. There sits St. Michael's Lodge, as it used to be called, a place once favoured by tourists for its beautiful beaches surrounded by stunning mountains. Today, however, people visit the lodge not to escape from the demands of their daily lives but to trace children long lost or abducted during Sierra Leone's vicious civil war.

Renamed the Family Homes Movement, the centre now houses more than 90 former child soldiers, themselves victims of a war that has torn apart the lives of virtually every Sierra Leonean over the past decade. It is one of the several child protection facilities operating in this West African nation. The children, who range in age from 6 to 17 years, live in run-down bungalows formerly used by the tourists. A two-storey building with peeling green and red paint is being revamped and sub-divided into classrooms to provide basic education.

Barely a year ago, these children were fighting with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels and the Civil Defence Force, a pro-government militia better known as the Kamajors. During the war, thousands of children, some as young as six years old, were press-ganged, drugged and given weapons to commit grisly atrocities, including chopping off the limbs of civilians. With the signing of a peace accord in Lomé, Togo, in 2000 and several subsequent agreements, the RUF has released more than 1,800 former child soldiers, mostly boys. Child protection agencies, however, estimate that the warring factions abducted as many as 6,000 children, out of which about 3,500 actually fought in the war. The rest were used as sex slaves or for carrying weapons.

Many girls still held

Both the RUF and the Kamajors have shown greater willingness to release boys than girls. Of the 92 children staying at the Family Homes Movement centre, only one is a girl. Some of those released so far were either pregnant or brought babies with them. The rebels use the girls for sex or for cooking and other household chores.

Child advocates have been pressing the parties to release more girls. Recently, as a result of pressure from the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), there has been a steady stream of released girls. In order to reinforce UN involvement in reintegrating child soldiers, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has appointed an adviser on child protection, attached to the office of his special representative in Sierra Leone.

Masimba Tafirenyika is an information officer with the UNAMSIL peace-keeping mission in Sierra Leone.

The story of Alusine Sesay, 17, is typical of most of the released children, or "children associated with fighting forces" as the child protection agencies prefer to call them. He was among a group of schoolchildren abducted by the RUF in 1997 while attending classes in the central town of Magburaka. After three months of military training in Makeni, the former RUF headquarters, Alusine started carrying weapons for the rebels through the battle zones. Although he was not involved in fighting, Alusine was shot in his left leg in an ambush by the Kamajors in October 2000. He was later brought to Freetown for treatment, but not early enough to save his infected leg from amputation.

Alusine now attends classes taught by the Family Homes Movement and has high hopes of becoming an accountant. "He is one of the brightest students we have here," says Ms. Adriana Marsili, a Catholic nun who supervises the centre.

"I would like to meet my parents even though I am disabled," Alusine says, speaking softly and deliberately as he narrates his experiences with the RUF.

Training and counseling

Under an arrangement worked out by UNICEF and UNAMSIL, the RUF and the Kamajors release the children to UNAMSIL, which then hands them over to child protection agencies. They are first housed in camps or interim care centres while efforts are made to reunite them with families. In the meantime, they receive training in carpentry, masonry, pottery, fishing, tailoring, and auto mechanics, with funds provided by UNICEF through the Child Protection Network, an umbrella group that includes the International Rescue Committee, Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA), Family Homes Movement and Caritas, a Catholic relief group.

Those released into the care of child protection agencies stay for a maximum of six months, except when a child still requires medical treatment or family members cannot be traced. Upon receiving children who have turned in their weapons, Caritas takes them to interim care centres in the towns of Kabala, Koinadugu, Port Loko and Lungi for registration, family tracing and reunification. Those whose families cannot be traced are placed into foster care or group homes where they are provided with formal education, skills training and psychosocial trauma counseling pending reintegration into society.

Mr. Ibrahim Sesay, director of Caritas, says his organization's main objective is "to restore lost childhood to the children associated with fighters and provide them with attractive opportunities," especially those between 15 and 18 years. "We have to give them hope for the future and raise their self-esteem. We have to show them that there is life beyond carrying a gun," says Sesay.

Caritas also works with the Sierra Leone army and UNAMSIL peacekeepers, with assistance from UNICEF, to raise awareness



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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. ■

The road from soldier back to child

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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.”

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.

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.” ■

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