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Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Child soldiers abandoned

At least 11,000 children are still with armed groups or unaccounted for -- more than two years after the government launched a country-wide programme to release and reintegrate child soldiers into civilian life. A major new report published by Amnesty International today warns that the country's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration -- or DDR -- programme is failing to meet children's need for protection and support.

The majority of girls taken by armed groups in the country remain unaccounted for - either abandoned or misidentified as "dependants" of adult fighters. To date the government has taken no steps to trace and recover these missing children.

"In some areas girls make up less than two percent of the children released from armed groups and passing through the DDR programme -- despite the fact that they make up approximately forty percent of the children used by armed forces and groups," said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

While in the DRC, Amnesty International was told by a number of sources that commanders and adult fighters often do not feel obliged to release girls, whom they consider as their sexual possessions. This discrimination is perpetuated by some government DDR officials, who uncritically regard such girls as "dependants" of adult fighters, rather than as girls associated with an armed forces or group who are entitled to entry into the child DDR programme.

Some girls feel that they have no option but to stay with the armed group, fearing that they will be tortured or killed if they try to escape.

"When the mayi-mayi attacked my village, we all ran away. In our flight, the soldiers captured all the girls, even the very young. Once with the soldiers, you were forced to "marry" one of the soldiers. Whether he was as old as your father or young, bad or nice, you had to accept. If you refused, they would kill you. This happened to one of my friends. They would slaughter people like chickens. They would not even bury the bodies they slaughtered... I even saw a girl who refused to be "married" being tortured..."

These are the words of Jasmine, a 16 year-old girl who was recruited by the mayi-mayi armed group in South-Kivu when she was 12. She now has a four-month-old baby.

Girls associated with armed forces and groups are often traumatised by years of abuse and sometimes have children of their own. However, little is being done to ensure that they have the necessary support and assistance to which they are entitled.

In fact, the majority of children released and reunited with their families or communities -- whether boys or girls -- have received little or no support to return to civilian life, including adequate educational or vocational opportunities. Some were as young as six when they were first recruited.

Many children interviewed by Amnesty International researchers dejectedly admitted that despite the horrors they endured during their military life, they feared that they would be forced to rejoin armed groups simply to survive.

Some armed groups remain primed to return to conflict in case the current peace process fails. Such groups consider the release of their child soldiers as a threat to their strength if conflict resumes.

"The government has not only failed to release thousands of children who remain with armed forces or groups -- new child soldiers continue to be recruited, including some who were only recently demobilized and reunited with their families," said Tawanda Hondora.

"As long as the government and the international community continue to fail to meet the needs of released children, these children are at risk of being quickly redrawn into armed forces or armed groups -- or of being abandoned to an impoverished and forlorn existence."

"The new government must make it their first priority to ensure that all children associated with armed forces and groups are released, protected and provided with meaningful educational and income-generating opportunities to enable them to stay within their communities. This is the only way to prevent the re-recruitment and further abandonment of these children."

To date, the government has been extremely slow to approve and implement community reintegration projects for children.

Amnesty International also called on the incoming DRC government and international community to prioritize investment in the state education system and to realize as quickly as possible the human right to free elementary education.

Currently, only 29 per cent of children in the DRC complete their primary education and an estimated 4.7 million primary-aged children, including 2.5 million girls, are out-of-school. At least six million adolescents receive no formal education. This lack of educational opportunity contributes greatly to the economic and social insecurity of Congolese children, one of the factors behind the widespread recruitment and use of children in the DRC.

Background

The ongoing conflict in the DRC has left communities across the east in ruins and their civilian populations killed or displaced. By 2006 an estimated 3.9 million Congolese had died as a result of the conflict, with around 1,200 people continuing to die every day from violence, preventable disease or starvation.

As part of a national peace process and a political transition that began in June 2003, the DRC government, backed by \$200 million of international finance, launched a country-wide programme for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) into civilian life of an estimated 150,000 fighters -- including an estimated 30,000 children. The implementation of the programme has been hampered by a lack of political and military will, serious management and technical problems, and ongoing insecurity in eastern DRC. By June 2006, the government commission in charge of DDR claimed that it had demobilized just over 19,000 children.

Under international law, the recruitment and use of children under 18 is prohibited. The recruitment and use of children under 15 is a war crime.

It is estimated that children constitute up to forty percent of some forces engaged in conflict in the DRC -- with girls making up about forty percent of these children.

State spending on education has declined dramatically in recent years -- in real terms, it is now less than four per cent of what it was in 1980. In the absence of adequate government support, state schools rely on direct payments from parents to meet 80 - 90 per cent of their funding needs. Many households cannot afford these fees. Many teachers in the DRC are expected to survive on as little as \$10 per month.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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