

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 62/036/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 207

Embargo Date: 9 September 2003 01:00 GMT

Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at war

Published

Although the Transitional Government of National Unity of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has recently been established, thousands of children in the DRC continue to be compelled to sacrifice their childhood for the political and military advancement of the leaders of the country's warring parties. As child soldiers, they face a catalogue of abuses: many are killed, all carry the physical and psychological scars of their experiences.

"The recruitment and use of children under 18 in armed conflict constitute war crimes and, as such, they are crimes against the entire international community, not just against children in DRC," the organization said in *Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at war*, a new report documenting the plight of thousands of child soldiers in the Great Lakes region.

"The ruthless exploitation of Congo's children by leaders of armed forces to further their own material and political ends is one of the most egregious examples of human rights abuses in of the entire conflict in the Congo," Amnesty International said. "The international community should bring pressure on all parties involved in the DRC, including leaders of all armed groups, to hold recruiters accountable for their acts, and to bring them to justice at the international and national levels."

Children interviewed by Amnesty International, after they escaped or have been demobilized, give horrifying accounts of how the armed conflicts in the DRC have affected them both physically and psychologically. As one recounted: *"We had to walk for days. At night, I had to raid villages in order to get some food. In October, I was part of the attack on Uvira. It was horrible. I was afraid and didn't want to kill anybody or be killed. After the attack, I left my gun and ran away."*

Since 1996, thousands of children have been press-ganged into the army and militias in the DRC. Recruitment drives are almost continuous and forcible conscription is prevalent although voluntary enlistment is also widespread.

Children have been abducted in the streets or taken from classrooms, refugee camps or camps for the internally displaced. Many others have also been taken from their homes at gunpoint, as their distraught parents looked on helplessly. Others have reported being picked up while playing in their neighbourhood or walking along the road. Some children are known to have voluntarily joined the army or

militia forces on being separated from their families and in conditions of poverty and the collapse of basic social services such as educational and health centres.

Once recruited, children are usually sent to training camps along with adult conscripts for military training and indoctrination. Here, they are subjected to violent treatment and in some camps, children have died from deplorable conditions. After a few weeks of training, the children are deployed to the frontlines for combat to be used as cannon fodder. Frontline missions include serving as decoys, detectors of enemy positions, bodyguards for commandants, or sex slaves. Most girl soldiers have reported being sexually exploited or raped by their commanders or other soldiers. Boys and girls are also often used as porters for ammunition, water and food, or as cooks.

Once on the frontlines, children are repeatedly forced to commit abuses, including rape and murder, against enemy soldiers and civilians. Some have been made to kill their own family members, while others have been forced to engage in cannibalistic or sexual acts with the corpses of enemies killed in battle. Children are often given drugs and alcohol to steel their emotions as they carry out these crimes.

This was the case with Kalami, aged 15, a six-year veteran of the one of the armed groups in eastern DRC: *"We were told to kill people by forcing them to stay in their homes while we burned them down. We even had to bury some alive. One day, my friends and I were forced by our commanders to kill a family, to cut up their bodies and to eat them ... My life is lost. I have nothing to live for. At night, I can no longer sleep. I keep thinking of those horrible things I have seen and done when I was a soldier."*

The personal price paid by child soldiers is often high: brutalised and deeply traumatised by their experiences, many continue to be haunted by the memories of the abuses they witnessed or were forced to commit. For girl soldiers, beyond the brutality and trauma of rape itself, sexual assault may result in serious physical injury and forced pregnancy, as well as infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Some former child soldiers who have been demobilised told Amnesty International that they are afraid to return to their communities because the local people witnessed them taking part in crimes.

International opinion has strengthened against the illegality and immorality of recruiting and using children in conflicts. International consensus on the prohibition of recruitment and use of children now exists to discourage this practice throughout the DRC. Most of the warring parties in the DRC have committed themselves to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

However, there is a vast discrepancy between public commitments and actual attempts made by various governments and armed groups to protect children from being used as combatants. The demobilization of child soldiers has been too timid and limited in scale to have any real effect on the problem. Demobilization initiatives often ignore the crucial role played by families and local communities in the child's successful reintegration into civilian life. In eastern Congo, the potential re-recruitment of former child soldiers remains one of the biggest challenges to demobilisation efforts.

"Going beyond the legal and political abolition of recruitment and use of child soldiers, economic development and peace building efforts must be addressed, so that demobilization and rehabilitation of former child soldiers are sustainable. If not addressed properly, the legacy of using child soldiers for the DRC, and for its children who witnessed and committed crimes, will be profound and enduring" the organization concluded.

For more information please see: *Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at war*
"<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/eng620342003>

Public Document

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>