

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

External Document

AI Index: AFR 62/038/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 210
9 September 2003

DR Congo: Child soldiers tell their stories

Jeanne was forcibly recruited by the AFDL at the age of 11 in 1996: *'I was recruited in Goma on my way home from school. I came across some soldiers who were pretending to mend their broken-down vehicle, but in fact it was a ploy. They called me and some other children over, and when I went up to them, they grabbed me, threw me into their vehicle and took me off to a training centre. I was trained there and then we began the march towards Kinshasa. Because we were taken just like that on our way home from school, our parents had no idea where we were. To this very day I don't know if my parents are alive. And even if they are, they don't know what's become of me.'*

Thomas, who is now 16 years old, was recruited in North-Kivu at the age of 13 by the RCD-Goma as he was on his way to school. His 8-year-old brother and several other children were conscripted at the same time. He was sent to Mushaki training camp in North-Kivu for five months. Because of the severe injuries he sustained there as a result of blows to his backbone, Thomas is unlikely to ever again have the full use of his legs. *'The scars I have all over my back come from my camp commanders beating me 40 times with a rifle butt every time I did not perform the daily exercises successfully like the adults, or if I fell asleep while I was on guard. Being new, I couldn't perform the very difficult exercises properly and so I was beaten every morning. Two of my friends in the camp died because of the beatings. The soldiers buried them in the latrines. I am still thinking of them'*

Benedicte, who was recruited by the AFDL at the age of 11 in Goma, recalled to Amnesty International what she witnessed on the frontlines: *'Several of my friends were killed on the battlefield. And others lost their limbs - their arms, their legs. I remember there was one comrade, a friend of mine, who had his nose blown away. Another had a big hole blown in his face, around his lips and mouth.'*

Gaston was conscripted from his school classroom at the age of 10 by the AFDL: *'We were frightened because we were young children and we didn't know anything about the army. Even on the shooting range, when they tell you to fire, you're always very scared. For me to overcome that fear, I had to kill someone at the training camp. They brought someone to me one night when I was on duty guarding an entrance. It was a child, whose face they'd covered, and they told me he was a rebel, an enemy, and that I had to kill him. That's exactly what I did. On the spot. With my knife. That night, after doing that, I couldn't sleep.'*

Albert was 15 when he was recruited by the RCD-Goma in 1999: *'I can tell you from personal experience that we kadagos [child soldiers Kadogo means small in KiSwahili and is used as a term for child soldier in parts of Central and East Africa.] were pretty numerous. After capturing a village, what happened was that they would give us 'chanvre' [cannabis] and force us to kill people to toughen us up. Sometimes they brought us women and girls to rape. The commanding officers didn't justify why they did that. Every time they captured somewhere, they would get kadagos to do these things in front of the adult soldiers, as if it was a show, in order to humiliate the people of the village. That scene held no interest for us, but they would beat us if we refused. The unlucky ones were shot and would die - they killed kadagos like that when they refused to obey. Before engaging in scenes like that, before killing, you first have to smoke some 'chanvre' - when you do that, it stops the spirit of the person you've killed from entering inside you.'*

Olivier began life as a child soldier at the age of 11 and spent the next seven years of his life serving in various armed groups. After capturing the coltan-rich town of Katoye, his RCD-Goma commander ordered his soldiers to attack the local civilian population: *'He ordered us to loot everything they had, to drive them away and to destroy their homes. The population responded and tried to stop us, and so our commander gave the order to kill anyone who put up any resistance. He ordered me personally to do that and told two other soldiers to watch over me and kill me if I refused to obey. And so I killed, I fired on these people. They brought me a woman and her children and I had to put them in a hole and bury them alive. They were screaming and pleading with me to spare them and release them. I took pity on them, but then I looked over my shoulder at the two soldiers watching me, and I said to myself: 'If I let them go, these soldiers are going to kill me.'* And so I went ahead and buried the woman and children alive, to save my own life.'

Albert, some of whose experiences are recounted above, is now 19 and demobilised: *'I was looked upon badly by the population. When I killed people in K, I was nicknamed 'the Assassin' and the name became known. People started to say that the Assassin has left the army and so now we are going to make him pay. It would be suicide for me to dare to go back there. They would kill me.'*

Natalia is 16 years old. She is from South-Kivu and was recruited when she was 12 by the RCD-Goma: *'I was living in my village with my mother and my brothers and sisters. One day, our village was attacked by the mayi-mayi. The mayi-mayi soldiers stole everything we had. A few days later, our village was attacked again by the RCD-Goma, who accused us of collaboration with the mayi-mayi and of giving them food. I watched as soldiers killed many of my relatives in the village and raped my two sisters and my mother. I was hiding but I saw how many soldiers raped my sisters and my mother. I was scared, and I thought that if I joined the army, I would be protected. I wanted to defend my-self. Once in the army I was trained to carry and use a fire arm and I performed guard duty night and days. It was horrible because I was only 12 years old, but I was frequently beaten and raped during the night by the other soldiers. One day, a commander wanted me to become his wife, so I tried to escape. They caught me, whipped me and raped me every night for many days. When I was just 14, I had a baby. I don't even know who his father is. I ran away again and this time I managed to escape. But today I have nowhere to go and no food to give to the baby, and I am afraid to go home, because I was a soldier.'*

Emilie, who was forcibly recruited at the age of 11 by the AFDL, described what happened when she said no to a commander: *'Some commanders had a certain morality, but there were others who just*

wanted to sleep with everybody. Either you accepted or you refused - with all the consequences which that could entail. The commanders often already had a concubine there with them, and so it also caused you problems with the other woman. If you say no, you're flouting his authority, you're defying him, and he'll create problems for you. I remember I got whipped plenty of times on the back because I said no to a commander. He had me whipped.'

Jeanne, whose forcible recruitment into the AFDL is described above, soon became aware of the need to obey orders without question: *'In the army it's all about obeying orders. The principle is that you carry out the order first, and then the justifications and explanations come afterwards. And you soon understand that if you don't carry out a commander's order, you'll be disciplined and punished. Many times we ended up getting whipped and ill-treated because we didn't carry out an order.'*

Kalami was recruited when he was nine. When Amnesty International delegates met him in Goma, he was 15 years old and had spent six years of his life fighting in the different armed forces. In late 2000, fighting for the RCD-ML, he was involved in a particularly intense confrontation and afterwards he took the decision to escape. Unfortunately, he was recaptured: *'The battle lasted forever. 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 people 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. After this battle, I decided I had to flee and I ran away into the forest. But in Lubero some soldiers found me and brought me back to a military camp. They imprisoned me and beat me every day. Seeing that I was close to death, a soldier decided to send me to the hospital in Lubero, where UN staff found me and demobilized me. Today, I am afraid. I don't know how to read, I don't know where my family is, I have no future. The worst is during the day when I think about my future. 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.'*

Jean, from Walikale in North-Kivu, is 15 years old and, as of March 2003, had been detained in Bukavu prison for nearly a year. He was forcibly recruited at the age of 12 by the RCD-Goma. During his training he was severely beaten and was then forced to fight on the frontlines in Walikale. *'On 22 July 2002, my commander asked me and two other soldiers to go and arrest a man. When we arrived the man attacked one of the other soldiers with a hammer and hit my gun with the hammer. I was scared and tried to get the gun back off him. While I was struggling with him for the gun, the gun went off and wounded the man, who later died. I was arrested. I have no parents, which means nobody comes to bring me food. I never wanted to be a soldier. It was so hard to fight on the front line, I was afraid to die. I had to kill and I saw so many of my friends die.'*

Jeanne of the AFDL explains: *'Some of the prisoners of war we executed, although we also kept a good number alive to prove to the international community that we really were being attacked. But we didn't keep all the prisoners - it's true that we eliminated some. You can't have judicial procedures on the frontlines, because you're fighting for your survival. You're from Camp A and you call the people in Camp B rebels, and they in turn call you rebels. So when you're face to face with the enemy, all you can do is eliminate him, before he gets you.'*

Nicolas, who is 16 years old and from Fizi in South-Kivu, was recruited in August 1998 by the RCD: *'After training, we fought against the Burundian rebels. During the first battle, I was wounded in the stomach*

and taken to Uvira hospital for one-and-a-half months. When I recovered, I was sent back to fight. We fought the mayi-mayi in Makobola in September 1999. After three weeks of fighting there, we were ambushed and I was captured by the mayi-mayi and taken into the hills. I was tortured, tied up and beaten by them. The mayi-mayi killed seven of us. We were asked to join them and to fight against the RCD. Those who refused were killed'.

Julie, 14 years old, was sent to Mushaki for training in 2002: 'I was with five other girls, who are still there. They haven't been demobilised because they have to serve as the soldiers' 'wives'. At night the soldiers used to sexually abuse us. Sometimes it was several soldiers the same night.'

Guy, from the Masisi territory of North-Kivu, is just one of many hundreds of children to have been enrolled into the LDF since January 2003: Initially recruited at 14, Guy was trained for three months before being sent into combat: 'They, the enemies, were much better armed than us. Every day I thought I would die. I finally escaped from the army, but as soon as I returned home, I was recruited again into the LDF. I was sent again with many others from my village to the Mushaki training camp. Most of us were between 12 and 17 years old. "

16-year-old **Paul** from Walungu in South-Kivu was enlisted into the RCD-Goma in 2002: 'I joined because there were many children already there. I didn't do any training, I was sent to the front to fight in Uvira, Fizi, Baraka and Minembwe. We attacked Masunzu at Minembwe. I left in January 2003 after the Minembwe battle. We were defeated by Masunzu. Since then I have been arrested three times and accused of deserting but my family has intervened and the soldiers have let me go free. I now need to get a demobilisation order from the RCD-Goma'

Some children have been recruited in the DRC, trained in Rwanda, and then deployed back to the DRC, such as 15-year-old **Jacques**: 'I was playing at home with my sister when an RCD-Goma commander arrived in our village and recruited me to fight on the Kasika front in Mwenga. I was trained for six months in Kigali and learnt how to use weapons. During the training, many children died. It was awful.' The RDF has also reportedly recruited street-children in Rwanda, trained them, and then sent them to fight in the DRC.

Paul is 16 years old and is from the Kasai region. He was detained for five months from May to October 2002 in Rwanda: 'I was recruited by the RCD-Goma in 1999. They used to come to our village and beat people up. One day they came to our house and took everything we had. So I decided to join them so that nobody come and beat us up any more. In Kasai we fought the Zimbabwean soldiers. In 2001 I was moved to Minembwe near Fizi to fight against Masunzu. Later, we arrived in Fizi, where the Rwandans decided to take all of us off to Rwanda so that we wouldn't join Masunzu's forces. They told us we were going to be trained in Rwanda, but when we arrived we were put in prison for five months. There were about 500 of us, including many children. We were kept in chains even when we went to the toilet. We were sometimes beaten for no reason. Afterwards we were brought back to Bukavu - an RCD-Goma official negotiated our return. Three months later we were demobilised by the RCD-Goma, though I don't have a demobilisation certificate. Rwanda was the worst experience for me. I am still not in contact with my family.'

Having seen civilians rounded up and killed in Mambasa, and fearing that he would suffer the same fate, **Christian**, 12, fled his *mayi-mayi* unit on their return to Beni. Unfortunately, soon afterwards, he ran into Colonel Kakolele and was re-recruited: *'I was taken to the Nyaleke training camp. On my arrival, they shaved my head with a piece of broken glass. On the training ground they used to shoot live rounds in our presence to teach us not to be afraid. I was sometimes whipped. I fought on the frontlines in Bunia, Mambasa, Beni and Butembo, and I killed people with my rifle. One time the gun I had, which had a big chain of ammunition attached to it, was so heavy that I had to kneel down to fire it. When I was fighting in Bunia, Lendu fighters cut off my commander's head right in front of me. I was shot in the arm fighting against the 'effaceurs' [MLC troops], but I shot back at the soldier, hit him in the neck and killed him. I have not been given proper treatment for my injury and still suffer from it. The army doesn't have any time for the wounded. I'm not paid and there's no food or soap. When I get better, I want to go to school.'*

Jérôme is 13 years old and had been at Mangangu for six months. He enlisted voluntarily into the *mayi-mayi* when he heard that the RCD-Goma were advancing on his home town of Kasaphu. He enlisted along with some 25 other children. During training they were taught how to strip down and re-assemble a rifle. Jérôme was then sent to fight on the frontlines at Kanyabayonga: *'During the battle I killed the Tutsis with my Kalashnikov. I'd taken products to make me strong and invincible. I saw adults killed, but not any kadogos. I didn't like the army because you have to sleep in the bush and there's never enough food. But I have no interest in civilian life. If the enemy attacked, you'd have to flee with all the other civilians. I'd rather be a soldier so that I can defend myself. My parents are somewhere in Beni, but I have no recollection of them.'*

André is 12 and enlisted voluntary into Chief Muduoho's *mayi-mayi* unit at the beginning of 2003: *'I was never involved in active combat. I came to Mangangu soon after I was recruited. I've been trained here. I'd like to leave the camp to study and then become a soldier again. I can't remember my parents and I have no desire to see them again.'*

12-year-old **Matthieu** from Ituri had been at Mangangu since the beginning of the year. He enlisted into Vital Kitambala's *mayi-mayi* unit in 2002 after his parents were killed by the MLC forces of Jean-Pierre Bemba: *'I was at school in Mongbwalu when the town was attacked by Bemba's troops. My mother and father were killed in the fighting. I joined the other civilians fleeing to Erengeti. The 'effaceurs' [MLC forces] caused us a lot of suffering. In Erengeti I joined the mayi-mayi and we hunted the enemy down as far as Mambasa. I had an AK-47 and I killed the 'effaceurs'. I'd like to leave Mangangu to study and then become a soldier.'*

Arsène, 12 ans, originaire de la région de Masisi. Il a été recruté par les *mai mai* quand il avait 10 ans et a participé à l'attaque d'Uvira d'octobre 2002 qu'il a décrite en détails à la page 19: *'J'ai été formé par les mai mai à Kamituga et ils m'ont tatoué le bras pour me protéger. Nous avons marché pendant des jours. La nuit on pillait les villages pour prendre de la nourriture. En octobre 2002, j'ai participé à l'attaque d'Uvira. C'était horrible. J'avais peur et je ne voulais ni tuer quelqu'un, ni être tué. Après l'attaque, j'ai jeté mon fusil et j'ai décidé de m'enfuir.'*

Arsène, who is 12 years old and from the Masisi region. He was recruited by the *mayi-mayi* when he was 10 years old and was involved in the attack on Uvira in October 2002, which is described in more detail on page 19: *'The mayi-mayi trained me at Kamituga and gave me a tattoo on my arm to protect me. We had to walk for days on end, and at night we would pillage villages for food. In October 2002, I was part*

of the attack on Uvira. It was horrible; I was afraid and did not want to kill anybody or to be killed. After the attack on Uvira, I threw my gun away and decided to run away.'

16-year-old **Bonou** is a former child soldier from Kalundu. He also took part in the attack on Uvira, but in 2003 he heard about a rare demobilisation initiative: *'I was recruited to liberate Uvira. I was not trained - I was just given a gun. I was in Uvira before the attack as an infiltrator. The mayi-mayi came down early in the morning. The RCD-Goma were taken by surprise and fled the town. We stayed with the people in Uvira without any problems for a week and then we left. There were many children like me. Most of them of them have gone back up into the hills with the mayi-mayi, but I decided to return to Uvira in January 2003. I'd heard about an NGO involved in demobilisation and I came here so that they could take me to Bukavu. It was an opportunity for me because I don't like fighting.'*

Former AFDL child soldier **Gaston**, speaking in February 2003: *They gathered all us liberators together and President [Laurent-Désiré] Kabila himself said to us: 'You are my children and I have a duty to do everything that's necessary for you.' We were kadogos, we were too small, and we knew nothing. Even if they were lying to us, we didn't know it. He did nothing. At least for me, personally, he did nothing.'*

Jeanne, whose experiences as an AFDL child soldier are recounted chapter II, responded: *'A year ago my answer to that question would have been no. But now I'm sorry to say, having been demobilised, that yes, I do miss the army. When I was still in the army I had a roof over my head and nobody could come and throw me out. And I was paid too. But now, a year on from being demobilised, I've got nothing. They haven't found a way of reintegrating me into the community or enabling me to resume my studies, although we specifically told them that we wanted to study. There's nothing. Today there's no difference between us and the street-children. We don't exist. And so that's why I'm telling you that now I miss the army.'*

Jamani is now 13 years old but looks much younger and has great difficulty in expressing himself: *"Until I was nine years old, I was at home in the Masisi region of North-Kivu with my mother. Then the interahamwe came to my home and forced me to go to the bush with them. After a year in the forest, I escaped, and as I could not find my family, I had to join the mayi-mayi militia. In April 2002 I was demobilised and brought back to my family. One day the interahamwe came to my village again and killed my mother. Now I have no place to go."*

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