



A Second Chance for Child Soldiers in a War Zone:

DRC struggles to restore lives of young fighters

By Eunice Chin

Rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and its neighbouring regions are still causing disruption, despite the signing of a United Nations-backed Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework by 11 African countries last February. The deal aimed to bring stability to the highly volatile nation, after the successive wars and recurrent violence of insurgent and government militias.

There was hope the deal would be a potential solution to the conflict between the M23 rebels and the national army that culminated in the fall of Goma in November last year. The agreement led to the formation of a 3,000-strong UN intervention brigade under the command of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) with a mandate to attack insurgent forces.

Although still engaged in peace talks with delegates from the DRC government, M23 rebels have threatened to recapture the city of Goma. The rebel movement's previous victory over the city was short-lived, with the group withdrawing under a ceasefire accord

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and subsequently entering into the peace talks.

Sixty-eight percent of the UN intervention brigade has been deployed in North Kivu and are involved in daily patrol operations, Felix Prosper Basse, military spokesman for MONUSCO, told Xinhua, a Chinese news agency.

The ongoing violence in the east and north-east of DRC has resulted in the displacement of more than 2.2 million people since 2012. But many thousands of people living in the conflict areas have no choice but to stay. Among them are peace builders and ex-child soldiers who are in the process of being reintegrated into the community.

Last August, MONUSCO expressed “deep concern” over 150 documented incidents of child recruitment since the beginning of 2012, by M23 rebels, the Mai Mai groups, the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

UNICEF estimates that 4,500 children serve in militias across the DRC, while at least 1,700 child soldiers are active in North Kivu alone. Children are for-

cibly conscripted into insurgent forces and government militias, abducted at gunpoint from villages, markets, schools and foster homes. Poverty and hunger drive some parents to willingly surrender their children to armed groups, or force them to volunteer as a way to guarantee regular meals and medical attention. Some of these children become soldiers to protect their families from rogue forces or to avenge the deaths of loved ones, while others are lured in by the promise of wealth, power and an end to hunger.

Henri Bura Ladyi, dubbed “Africa’s Schindler” by *The Independent* has worked on rehabilitating child soldiers for 10 years as the director of the Congolese church-based organisation Centre Résolution Conflits (CRC). “The fighting between militia groups and the national army is like a cycle,” Ladyi said. “And every time, children are victims of this.”

The demobilisation process is complex. Floribert Kazingufu, the founder of the Chirezi Foundation, uses a process known as “DDR” (Demobilization Disarmament and Reintegration), contacting the child’s family, local authorities and army officials in the child’s com-

munity to gain their support in negotiating the liberation of children from the rebel groups.

“Sometimes we are taken between two fires: the government army, and armed groups,” Kazingufu said. “This is why it is important to have friendship with both groups. Without building trust, this process is very dangerous and risky.”

Because of the importance of children to the militia, negotiating for their release is no easy task. Ladyi once persuaded a rebel army leader to free 100 children in exchange for 25 goats.

But other peace builders refrain from supplying means to rebel groups altogether. “What they do is illegal, so we don’t give them anything,” said Mumbere Kiserivwa Kizito, who is the coordinator of Passion for Souls Mission in DRC (PSM/DRC).

When the rebel army leaders agree to discharge the children, groups such as the Mai Mai perform rituals to permanently sever the children’s ties to the group and cleanse them of the acts they committed under the rebels’ control. The end of this ceremony marks the beginning of the children’s new lives.

Former child soldiers are found in such destitute states that it can be disheartening for peace builders. Ashamed of having been used as pawns to harm others, the children often “hide within themselves,” Kizito said. But according to Ladyi, “We don’t pay attention to their condition.

We just know that they are children under 18 years-old... we need to take care of them. We need to bring them to the good condition of life. We need to make them really become children.”

Ladyi related that there are three phases of action for the children’s societal reintegration. The first is to try to reconcile children with their families. This can be a gruelling task for peace building organisations—there is no guarantee that a child’s family can be located. Sometimes, children return to their villages only to find that the place they once called home had been completely deserted, or to hear of their parents’ death at the hands of rebel forces.

On the rare occasions that they are reunited with their parents, a number of difficulties may arise. Peace builders often have to resolve conflicts which are, in most cases, rooted in the parents’ mistrust of their children.

“Some parents can say, ‘No, no, we cannot accept the child because he took our bikes, he sold this. We are...

obliged to pay these back—it can be a bike, a goat, a cow. Anything belonging to family, belonging to the parents,’” Ladyi explained.

The second stage of the activity is to work towards a child’s psychological and social wellbeing. “This is to help him to be able to think about new things, and not think about what happened when he was active in the bush,” Ladyi said. The third and final step is the development of a means by which children can financially sustain themselves in the future so they can fully steer clear of violent livelihoods.

In general, villages welcome former child soldiers and support them throughout the phases of their rehabilitation. But, Kazingufu explained, “When the child soldier is blamed for committing acts of violence or robbery, the attitudes of the village change.”

Some members of the community can hold ex-combatants accountable for the crimes they committed under the manipulation of their superiors. “People want revenge. They need to try to destroy or to make children understand that what they did before was very bad. Not only the neighbours, I can also say, for example, the police, the national army, and the government. They are not comfortable with those children,” Ladyi said. This abuse can cause children to choose to abandon the community and return to the life they know in the armed forces.

All three parties agreed that there is a gender divide in the acceptance of children into the community. Girls are often victims of discrimination due to their past as objects of sexual abuse; they can easily be called prostitutes and be dismissed as pariahs.

“They face more challenges during reintegration. Many of them are not married because the community doesn’t trust them,” Kazingufu added. The tenuous position young girls are in is aggravated when they’ve borne children in the rebellion.

Young boys are given an ultimatum—they must first repay the things they have stolen during their time in the rebel groups or they will be rejected as members of the family or community.

Due to the difficulty of tracing children’s families at the height of a conflict, children who have no family or relatives to return to, are taken in by transit families, who are selected during the DDR process.

Peace-building organisations supply these families

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with food and finances to cover the children's medical costs. The role of transit families is to help organisations to find the children's biological families and provide children with support throughout their reintegration.

When it is certain that a child's parents or relatives are either dead or unwilling to accept their child, the child will be put up for adoption. During the six months of the adoption process, they remain with the transit family.

"Children who have no family left in their village are subjected to lives of mendacity, drug abuse and banditry. Many of these children join armed groups later on just to have a job or feed themselves," said Kazingufu.

The struggles children face in the process of their reintegration are pervasive—at home, in their community, and in school. There are no special education centres for former child soldiers. Constant threats are posed by rebel groups to peace builders—they set schools on fire, destroy peace-building organisations' campsites, terrorize communities and massacre children. "Their actions are fuelled by resentment of former child soldiers' progress," Ladyi explained.

This makes it a necessity for peace builders to operate at a low key. In schools, former child soldiers are intermingled with children who have grown up in the village, unfamiliar with the violence and bloodshed of warfare.

"The first months are difficult because of the differences between the two groups, but later on the situation comes to normal," Kazingufu said.

Some children who have lived in the village their whole lives are comfortable with ex-child soldiers in the community. But Ladyi says the problem is when discrimination starts.

"This is what is creating a vicious cycle. You can see those children return to the bush because they were stigmatised. They are victims of being treated badly by other children," he said.

Instilled with the notion that violence is acceptable at an early age, some children in rehabilitation find it hard to overcome the aggression that comes naturally. This makes it difficult for organisations to manage these children because they are capable of hurting teachers and schoolmates.

A Congolese commission once advised Ladyi that it would be best to remove former combatants from the school system altogether because of their misbehaviour. But Ladyi did not let this serve as a detriment to his continuing efforts of helping the children towards a better future.

"This is normal here. Many children come from the bush. Their behaviour is not changing in one

day—it takes a long time for them to change their behaviour and become normal children."

"The key is time and love," Kazingufu said. "When you preach to them, taking into account those two words, they become normal and violence doesn't continue to manipulate them."

Given the abrupt change of environment, children often turn to varying mediums to make their transition easier. The ways by which girls and boys cope to the change of lifestyle are vastly different.

Girls engage in small business activities which include selling crops or bread in the local market. They are able to sustain themselves by the time they turn 15.

But most boys want to go back to school, according to Ladyi. For boys who don't, Ladyi shares his own testimony of how an education helped him attain his position as the director of CRC. This, he said, is "to help them understand that life is not in the bush, but it is in the community."

Many children are speechless when Ladyi asks them, "How will you let this program change you?" "They can just start crying and say, 'It's difficult for us, because we cannot forget what we did. We cannot forget the time when we were killing people, when we were abusing women, when we raped the women. We cannot forget this'," Ladyi said.

This necessitates the incorporation of spiritual cleansing into the children's rehabilitation. Pastors are asked to pray for them, and at times, peace builders enlist the assistance of witch doctors to treat children's psychological problems and break the rebel mentality impressed upon them.

The Theory of Change that peace-building organisations have established states that the reintegration program for former child soldiers is typically three months long, but can take up to six months for children who are not deemed to be ready to return to the community without the organisation's full guidance.

"We are just opening the process. The follow-up process is continued by the community," Ladyi explained. After the program, counsellors and other specialists in the organisation are regularly sent to the children's homes to assess their progress with an evaluation form. This document ultimately aims to assess the children's condition of life, with questions for the parent or guardian and for the children themselves, such as "What makes you happy?" or "Who do you talk to when you have a problem?"

Former child soldiers who have successfully been reintegrated into the community also offer their support to younger boys and girls who are in the



CAPTION

process of rehabilitation.

The reason why only three months is allotted for the reintegration program is the lack of time and the enormous amount of children still serving in the rebel forces.

"Every two-to-three weeks," Ladyi explained, "we can find another 20-30 children again. We need time to deal with the new children."

The complete process of societal reintegration can take up to five years.

Amidst these obstacles, one that proves to be the most challenging is the organisations' lack of funds and adequate resources. They are short of finances for recreational materials (consisting of toys, sports equipment, and educational DVDs), clinics, the salaries of teachers and specialised counsellors, transit centres and reintegration centres.

"Without that, sometimes we do the work but at the end of the day, when the children don't have

something to do to enable them to live, they finish the program just to go back to the armed groups again," said Kazingufu.

While much remains to be done, there are several successes that motivate peace builders to go on. Former child soldiers have walked into Ladyi's office asking for job references; he has also been invited to their weddings. Ladyi once visited a village where many reintegrated children lived and saw that 30 per cent of the houses had been built by ex-combatants.

"This is an indicator that my reintegration is positive," he said.

The work done by peace builders in areas of conflict and the stories of former child soldiers' successes prove that hope and redemption can be found in the rubble of war. The children's journey to reintegration is a long and tumultuous one, but one that will help them regain their lost childhood, dignity and humanity. R