

Life as a Child Soldier

Author: [IWPR ICC](#)

Young man forced to fight in Congo's brutal conflict speaks of his traumatic ordeal. By Erick Kenzo in Goma

The traumatic events of our lives always remain in our memories, however hard we try to forget them.

These memories shape how we think and take decisions. They can encourage us to reclaim our rights or retaliate for the wrongs that have been done to us. But, often, we have difficulties relating our story, because of the fear that we will scare people away.

I have tried to find the courage to tell my story so that other young people can learn from what I went through.

I was forcibly conscripted into the Rwandan armed forces when I was just 15, at an age when I was not equipped for the harsh realities of life as a soldier.

This was at the end of 1996, when forces under the control of Laurent-Désiré Kabila – backed by Rwanda and other neighbouring countries – began a march on Kinshasa, which ultimately resulted in the overthrow of then president Mobutu Sésé Seko.

I was kidnapped during the Christmas holidays, after I had left my house in Goma to go and play football with my friends.

Our team was incomplete that day, since some of our football companions had disappeared. Rumours were circulating that they had been locked in a room at the local police station for almost a week, so we decided to see if we could find them.

We discovered them exactly where we thought they would be. We broke into their cell to rescue them, but when we tried to leave, we found our way blocked by a Rwandan soldier.

At the time, there was a large Rwandan presence in the east of the country, since many thousands of Rwandan refugees had fled over the border to escape the 1994 genocide.

We spent a month in detention at the police station, before being sent to a Rwandan military training centre in Matebe, eight kilometres from the Ugandan border.

Conditions were harsh there. Many of my comrades died and I almost lost my life because of dysentery. Escape was never an option – any soldier who tried to do so would be publicly executed or locked up in a hole until the end of the training.

The training was aimed at making us brave and teaching us skills for battle. We were taught that a soldier was worth more than 1,000 civilians and that, if a soldier died, 1,000 civilians had to be slaughtered in retaliation.

After two months in the training camp, we left to face the stark reality of war – not only in terms of our comrades who were killed, but also the horrors of what we did ourselves.

We took several towns around Goma before arriving in Tingi Tingi, 300 km to the north-west, where we lost many child soldiers from the armed group that I belonged to. The younger fighters were always placed on the front line because they were considered to be the most ruthless.

Despite the teaching of our Rwandan commanders, who told us to be disciplined and to have a strong heart, we were not indifferent to the depravity that we saw.

When I left home, I had experienced little of the world. I had never been with a woman. I had never taken drugs. I had never been involved in violence.

Serving in an armed militia group changed all that.

I started to smoke cigarettes and marijuana to rid myself of all thoughts of my family back home and the bloody acts of war. I smoked so as not to be ashamed of what I was doing, so as not to be afraid and to not feel sorry for the people who were hurt.

In reality, I had become an evil man, who did not want anyone making fun of him. Anyone who laughed at me, I considered an enemy. Remnants of this aggression and brutality remain with me even today.

I managed to escape life as a soldier in 1998.

By this time, the Second Congo War had broken out and I had joined the Rally for Congolese Democracy, RCD.

It was when I was asked to guard Wamba Dya Wamba, the RCD president at the time, that I had the opportunity to return to Goma and see my family again.

They were overjoyed to see me, as they had thought I was dead. They told me to leave the armed group, since they were afraid for me, and I listened to their advice.

I was hunted as a deserter, but, through some connections I had, I managed to make it to Uganda and then on to Nairobi in Kenya, where my father had been living for the past five years.

The time that I spent there made me realise how dramatically I had been changed by my experiences as a soldier.

In 2000, I became angry with my father when he refused to allow me to leave Kenya with some Dutch people who wanted to take me with them to the Netherlands.

My father stopped this from happening, and I felt resentful. The years of war that I had experienced, as well as prolonged drug use, had left me with an anger and aggression that I had not known before.

It has taken me a long time to come to terms with the aftermath of life as a child soldier, and I hope that my experiences can help persuade people of the need to end the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts for good.

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