

Many DRC Children Volunteer to Fight

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Activists say not enough done to address reasons for children joining armed groups of their own free will.

Extreme poverty, malnutrition and a lack of access to education and skills are driving significant numbers of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, to voluntarily join armed groups.

While some degree of coercion, most notably abduction, is behind the continued recruitment of child soldiers by militia groups and government forces, there's evidence that a substantial proportion choose to take up arms.

Claudia Seymour, a former child protection adviser with the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations in eastern DRC, told IWPR, "[Because] of poverty and lack of viable socio-economic opportunities, including the inability to afford schooling, a significant proportion of Congolese children may choose to enrol in armed groups for lack of a better option."

She added that "notions of 'voluntary' in such a context of limited choices must be delicately addressed – often choices that children may have to make in conflict contexts are only the least worst of a series of harsh possibilities".

No long-term studies have been conducted into the numbers of children who choose to join armed groups, but empirical data from the UN suggests that, out of 1,988 recruitment cases in 2009, a total of 928 (47 per cent) were classified as voluntary. Some 587 cases were considered forced, while the remaining 473 were described as neither voluntary nor forced.

Sarah Mathewson, of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, says for some the choice is an unfortunately obvious one, "With a gun you can eat."

In April 2010, DRC's minister of health, Victor Makwenge, noted that "at least 700 children under five die each day" in five of the DRC's provinces - Equateur, Orientale, Occidental, Katanga and Maniema.

According to nutrition surveys carried out by the Congolese government in conjunction with the UN children's agency, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme, "some 530,000 children under five and more than one million pregnant women need urgent nutrition intervention".

Although child soldiers' experience in armed groups varies enormously, Imogen Prickett, Child Protection Programme Coordinator of War Child UK, says that some units "provide food, as well as stability and a somewhat structured life".

Prickett also points out that a lack of access to education sometimes encourages children to join militias or government forces rather than remain unemployed and unskilled.

"School is extremely important and regarded highly," she said. "[Joining an armed group] wouldn't be an option people would consider if the opportunity to go to school was widely available."

In a recent report, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers cites the testimony of one girl who ran away from home at the age of 12 to join a Mai Mai, or local militia, group in South Kivu "because her parents could no longer afford to send her to school. She was selling doughnuts in the street for a living and considered fighting as simply another form of work".

Shantha Bloeman, of UNICEF, says that the amount that the DRC allocates to education – currently eight per cent of gross domestic product – is woefully insufficient.

"The remaining funding burden falls heavily on parents, who are expected to pay an average of 65 US dollars a year per child to supplement teacher salaries, maintenance expenses and other operating costs," she said.

In a country where 59 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, these fees are clearly excessive.

One former child soldier, Kimpoke, told IWPR that he joined the Congolese Rally for Democracy, RCD, an opposition militia group backed by Rwanda, in 2002, shortly after his father had died.

"My mother could not pay to send me and my brothers and sisters to school," he said. "When I heard people in the neighbourhood talking about receiving 150 dollars for joining an armed group, I thought that this could be a very good idea. Once I had received the money, which helped us a lot, I was taken with the group to a training site called Mushaki, 40 kilometres from Goma."

Kimpoke said that he was also encouraged to join by the fact that many of his friends had done so, and convinced him that this was a good thing to be involved in.

But Kimpoke says that it didn't take long for disillusionment to set in.

"Soldiers from Rwanda began to abuse us by putting us in the front of the patrols, when we did not have as much military experience as them," he said. "This is how many young recruits lost their lives and that is when I became discouraged and decided to quit."

He said that he escaped his unit, and fled back to his mother in Goma.

"I am now back with my family and, although I do not work at the moment, I hope that one day I will find a good job and my family can be well looked after," he said.

Another reason for children to join armed groups is to defend their local village or town .

Seymour points out that the locals are "sometimes left without any credible government defence from attack" and therefore have to take security into their own hands.

Mathewson of the Coalition Against the Use of Child Soldiers says that there have even been reports of local militia going from house to house, asking residents to donate either "cash or a combatant".

"As parents need to work to feed their families, they may have to give away older children," she said.

In some areas, there are strong links established between communities and their local militias. This is particularly the case with the Mai-Mai militias, which, according to Mathewson, "advocate joining as a means of self-defence" for the community, with some children being actively encouraged to join by their families.

In the region of Ituri, just north of the turbulent Kivu province, academic and DRC specialist Roberto Beneduce writes that "the bonds of solidarity within the different communities have induced most families to send at least one of their children to the militias that claim to fight for the interests of their ethnic group".

One former child soldier, John, told IWPR that he joined the anti-government militia group Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo, ADFL, in 1997 out of a strong belief that forces loyal to then president Mobutu Sese Seko had to be defeated.

"I believed that what I was doing was important," he said. "We wanted to expel Mobutu, whose military was sowing terror within the population."

He said that the movement offered a salary of 100 dollars a month and told him that when the country was liberated all would be well again.

"We were told that we would have the chance to travel in aeroplanes and drive in cars - all free of charge - and that we would be free," he said.

But, when such promised benefits were not realised, and when former government soldiers were incorporated into the rebel movement, John lost faith in what he was doing.

"Today I am a mechanic in a garage," he said. "I have paid for my house. I feed and look after my family. I am much more than I was in the [militia group]."

UN agencies have been working since 1998 on schemes to demobilise child soldiers.

At first glance, the numbers look promising. Though 30,000 child soldiers are estimated to remain in armed groups, since the UN launched in 2004 an official Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme, DDR, 36,000 of them have left.

But in reality, many of the demobilised children are again re-recruited.

Victoria Forbes Adam, director of the Coalition Against the Use of Child Soldiers, emphasises that "in a climate of chronic insecurity and poverty, cycles of recruitment and re-recruitment will never end unless the government fully accepts and assumes its responsibilities to protect children's rights and promote their

development”.

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