

Youth stolen for child rebels Sierra Leone's youngest fighters emerge as tragic legacy of 8-year war

by Douglas Farah Washington Post; 04-13-2000

KENEMA, Sierra Leone -- When Revolutionary United Front rebels abducted 10-year-old Ernest Vanboi from his home three years ago and burned his house to the ground, they used razors to carve the initials RUF into his thin chest.

Then they gave him an AK-47 rifle and forced him to join them on raids, first against his own village and family. He was given cocaine, amphetamines and other drugs to prepare him for combat. The carving ensured he could not run away without the likelihood of being killed by government troops.

Since demobilizing in December as part of a tenuous peace accord that ended Sierra Leone's eight-year civil war, Vanboi and thousands of other children who were forced to become killers are emerging as one of the nation's most tragic and potentially dangerous legacies.

The civil war, begun in 1991, was one of modern Africa's most brutal. While the use of child combatants was well known, only now is the scope of the phenomenon and the range of the brutality inflicted on children as young as 7 beginning to emerge. A peace agreement was signed July 7, granting the RUF a share of power in the government and amnesty for all atrocities it committed in exchange for disarming.

Although the UN Children's Fund estimates that some 250,000 children under 18 are engaged in combat in 16 conflicts around the world, in few places have children faced the level of abuse or committed such a large number of atrocities as here, according to humanitarian aid workers. Human rights groups estimate that the rebels abducted 4,500 to 10,000 children under 16 during the war.

Human Rights Watch found in a 1999 report that "child combatants armed with pistols, rifles and machetes actively participated in killings and massacres, (and) severed the arms of other children. ... Often under the influence of drugs, they were known and feared for their impetuosity, lack of control and brutality."

The International Rescue Committee and a handful of other organizations are working with the demobilized children. Because of money limits, most children receive only 30 to 90 days of rehabilitation before they are forced to find jobs and fend for themselves.

So far 1,504 children have turned in their weapons at UN-supervised demobilization camps, and most of the children who have come out of the camps say the RUF is preventing many more from demobilizing.

The immediate demobilization of children was part of the peace agreement. But so far the RUF and other armed groups have missed numerous disarmament deadlines.

"It (the killing) is not the fault of the children. A child is a child," said Musu Burah, who runs a community-based child-care center here that has taken in child combatants. "But whoever led the children astray is responsible and is a monster."

RUF leader Foday Sankoh has publicly apologized for some of the abuses committed by his troops. But diplomats and UN officials who deal with him say that he denies the RUF abducted minors.

That contradicts the testimony of more than a dozen child combatants.

The children's accounts paint a chilling picture of how the RUF and its AFRC allies systematically abducted children, became the children's surrogate family and forced them, under threat of death, to wreak havoc.

The children also talked of being given small blue pills and drug injections. The effect, they said, was that they could go on murderous binges for days. "That is what they would do when they wanted us to have mayhem days, so when we got up we could go for up to three days without stopping, just to kill," said Siamba, 16.

"The commander told me when I was captured, 'Your father is gone. Now I am your father.' In the bush we committed a lot of atrocities. We did many evil things."