

SECOND CHANCE AT CHILDHOOD: A generation brought up in the murderous ways of Sierra Leone's rebels is finding balm for horrors it committed.;

by Don Melvin, Staff ; The Atlanta Journal and Constitution 12-12-1999

Freetown, Sierra Leone-- Abibu Hawad is 10 years old, and in the past year he has cut off the hands of more people than he can remember. But he remembers the first time. It was soon after he was abducted.

Abibu was living with his grandmother in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, in January when rebels in his country's brutal civil war stormed the city. He was in a marketplace, and he and his grandmother became separated in the panic.

He ran, but the rebels caught him as they had so many children before. Now he was theirs; soon he would become one of them.

"I was asked to kill people and perform other atrocities," he said recently. "I refused, but they threatened to kill me, so I did it."

Abibu is no more than 4 feet tall, but the rebels issued him an AK-47 --- a Soviet-made assault rifle that weighs nearly 10 pounds and is capable of firing 400 rounds a minute.

He knew that if he put the gun down, he would be killed. He fired it during attacks on villages as the rebels retreated from Freetown, but he said he does not know if he killed anyone.

The rebels forced Abibu to drink rum and smoke marijuana and then to perform what he called the "other atrocities" --- lopping off the hands of civilians with a machete. The first person whose hand Abibu severed was that of an old woman.

"She begged me," the little boy recalled. "I said I had to do it or I would get in trouble."

Stories like his are bitterly common in Sierra Leone. International aid groups estimate that 5,000 to 10,000 children have fought in the civil war, which began in 1991.

Now, in theory, the war is over. In July, the elected president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, and the chief rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, signed a peace agreement.

But for many of the children, who, like Abibu, were both the victims of vicious crimes and the perpetrators, the war goes on. Going home and becoming a kid again is no easy task, said Roisin de Burca, a child protection officer with UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, in Sierra Leone.

Helping these children is difficult. But UNICEF's effort is being augmented by some of the \$1 billion donated to United Nations-related causes by Ted Turner, the Atlanta billionaire and founder of CNN.

After Turner said in 1997 that he would donate \$100 million a year for 10 years to U.N. projects, he created the U.N. Foundation to disburse the money. In the first round of grants, announced in May 1998, the foundation said it was giving \$1.1 million to UNICEF for "demobilization of child soldiers in Sierra Leone."

But when the rebels swept through Freetown in January, killing, looting and burning, foreigners working for UNICEF and other international organizations were evacuated. UNICEF was unable to begin using the Turner money until March.

Now the grant is being used to provide former child soldiers with interim care, psychological counseling and other support as they try to fit back into their homes and villages.

But can children return to normal and productive lives after they have been abducted and forced to kill and mutilate and after witnessing the deaths of friends and family?

"You always have a better chance with the younger ones," de Burca said. "You can get them back to their families. You can get them back to schools. You can get them back to structures. And you have more time. The older ones I'm really worried for."

Children who started fighting when the war began are now in their late teens or older. They have not attended school, they cannot read and they have no way other than looting to support themselves.

But even the younger children --- those who have escaped or been released and who want to change --- face problems. Their difficulties range from being bullies to harboring fear and rage --- and having families that do not want them back.

Many of the former young soldiers have reason for rage. Ibrahim Massaquoi's eyes blaze when he remembers the day four years ago when rebels burst into his home in eastern Sierra Leone.

The rebels killed Ibrahim's father in front of him, his mother, his three sisters and five brothers.

"They cut his throat with a knife," Ibrahim said. "I was 11 years old."

He thinks the soldier who did it was 9.

Two years later, when Ibrahim was 13 and disgusted that he could not attend school in the rebel-held area where he lived, he decided the time to fight had come.

He joined the Kamajohs, a tribal group with secret initiation rites that members believe render them immune even from bullets. Ibrahim took a bullet in his right foot, but he did not die --- and he still believes.

The Kamajohs and similar groups formed fighting forces that supported the government and fought to protect villages from rebel attacks.

"We killed, but it was in battle," Ibrahim said.

Now 15, Ibrahim is trying to set aside his anger. But the rage still shows.

He attends St. Andrew's Secondary School in the city of Bo with 35 other former child soldiers from both sides of the conflict. The school receives Turner money from UNICEF, through the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, to support its work to help former child combatants.

There have been no problems between former fighters from different factions and no hostility shown by students who were never soldiers, according to the principal, the Rev. S.M. Bayoh.

"We spoke to them, and they are brothers and sisters," Bayoh said, noting that the school may accept 100 more former child soldiers.

The degree to which Turner's money helps this generation of Sierra Leonean youths lead peaceful lives will take years to determine. UNICEF officials are trying to use the money effectively. De Burca is working to have a Sierra Leonean organization involved in each program because international workers evacuate when fighting flares.

"The first shot in the air, you'll be gone," she said. "The program will stop, and we can't have that."

She wants the other groups, sometimes international organizations paired with local groups, to contribute to the programs, increasing resources available to the children.

The agencies that get UNICEF grants work with local organizations such as schools, interim care centers and skills workshops. Whenever possible, de Burca urges the groups receiving the grants to give the local groups materials instead of money, which is harder to monitor. A woodworking training center, for instance, might get lumber and tools rather than cash.

Although inability to pay school fees prevents many children from attending school, UNICEF tries not to give the former soldiers money. That, de Burca said, would reward the former combatants. Instead, the money is given to schools, such as St. Andrew's, which then waive the fees.

To demobilize the child soldiers, UNICEF has established emergency care programs at four sites around the country. Children who escape or have been released are given intensive psychological counseling individually. These are children who have considered possibilities that no child should have to envision. De Burca noticed writing on the shoes of a 12-year-old boy and asked to see it. On the shoes, the boy had written his name, his parents' names and the name of his village.

"In case they killed me," he explained, "I hoped somebody would find me and tell my mother and father."

At the interim care facilities, the youngsters are told their families will be traced. Then they are dispersed to programs in their home areas.

It will be four or five months before officials can tell whether the Turner grant has helped children resume life in their villages, de Burca said. "But for demobilization, the money is making a difference," she said. "At any time of the day or night, soldiers can be cared for."

Reintegration, though, can be difficult for children who have pillaged and maimed.

Aiah Bockarie, 16, feels so bad about what he's done that it makes him sick.

The first time he was ordered to sever someone's hand, he refused; for that he was cut on the wrist with a bayonet. He still bears the scar.

After that, he complied. The first person whose hand he cut off was his uncle. Other rebels forced the man's arm onto a slab of cement.

"My uncle said, 'You are my child! Why are you cutting off my hand?' " Aiah recalled. "And I replied, 'I have an order to cut off your hand.' "

The rebels often forced children to commit crimes in their own villages or against their families, international workers say. That prevented them from returning home and turned the rebels into the only family they had left. It was common, too, to deliberately addict child soldiers to drugs. Aiah said he snorted powdered cocaine and applied crack cocaine to cuts in his skin.

"I was rough. I was insane," he said. "I cannot remember how many hands I cut off, but I cut off many."

He said he is off drugs now. He wants to go to school and become a doctor. He wants to pray. And he begs God's

forgiveness.

"It is not necessary at the age of 16 to continue destruction," he said.

He wants to be a doctor, to heal people, but he still has flashbacks about the things he did in the war.

He is staying in Freetown as part of the program Children Associated With the War, run by the Catholic Mission, which gets Turner funding. He hasn't seen his family since he was kidnapped at age 14. He has no idea how many survived the war, though he learned his uncle was killed in an ambush the day Aiah cut off his hand.

For all his prayers, Aiah radiates rage. That's common, said Peter Francis, acting program manager for Children Associated With the War.

"They are both the victims of atrocities and the perpetrators," Francis said. "They always have flashbacks. They are very violent. The only difference is they do not have a gun."

Yet the center, he said, has had many successes --- children who now are "responsible people."

They get interim care for six months at the most. Counseling, tracing the child's family and returning the child home are critical. "If you allow the child to just be hanging around the neighborhood, you are creating more trouble," Francis said.

But persuading the child's village to take him back requires negotiation.

Rituals must be performed to appease the gods and atone for atrocities. The village chief may be presented with a goat, rice or palm oil. If the chief accepts the child, so does the entire community --- including the family.

As Francis spoke, his boss, the Rev. Theophilus Momoh, returned from a trip to outlying areas of the country.

During that trip, he returned 43 children to their homes.

At first, his mission to bring "rebel boys" back was met with resistance. But some parents were overjoyed. "They said they thought their children were dead," Momoh said. "Some were really happy. They started singing."

Momoh sometimes pays the head of the village a little money as a token of sincerity and as a promise that he will respond if the child creates trouble.

A parent or relative signs an agreement accepting the return of each child and pledges to try to put the child back in school. Staffers of Children Associated With the War make follow-up visits to assess the family's capacity to care for the child.

Not all former combatants are boys. Aminata Turay was 15 when rebels came into Koidu in Sierra Leone's diamond-rich eastern region. Her father ordered the family inside, but the rebels threatened to burn down the house unless he opened the door.

"The rebels entered the house and lined up my father, my mother, myself, my younger brother and my two younger sisters," said Aminata, now 16. "They took me and my brother out of the line and told my father that they were taking us away with them. My parents fell on the floor, weeping and begging them not to take us away. They fired several shots on the ground in front of my parents and threatened to kill them. So they took us away."

She lost track of her brother and was forced to march as the rebels fought their way through village after village on the way to Freetown. She did not kill, she said, but she helped burn houses.

"The rebel soldier who abducted me had made me his wife," she said. "He was forcing me to have sex with him at gunpoint."

She escaped when the rebels were routed from Freetown. She does not know if her family is alive or dead.

Mariama Jalloh's family survived, but getting her relatives to take her back was difficult.

She was kidnapped when she was 17. The first time a rebel tried to rape her, she resisted. "That's exactly why we abducted you," the rebel told her, "so you could provide these services to me."

He threatened to kill her if she resisted. She had seen another girl her age who had fought her rape vigorously.

Rebels beat her and branded "RUF," for Revolutionary United Front, on her chest. Then she was killed by a boy, perhaps 11, himself a kidnap victim.

So Mariama submitted. She was raped "every day," she said softly, shaking her head. "Every day. Every day."

She cried when she found out she was pregnant. She tried traditional remedies, eating herbs and leaves, to terminate the pregnancy, but they didn't work. Ill and depressed, she had to march with the rebels as they burned their way toward Freetown. Those who lagged were shot.

After she escaped, she found that the rebels had burned her father's house. He had lost everything. And here came his daughter, pregnant with a rebel baby. He wanted nothing to do with her.

Mariama worked intensively with a counselor whose fees were paid with Turner money.

"She kept telling me there was life after that," Mariama said. "It's not the end of the world, and the important thing is to have the baby."

The baby is 5 months old now. Mariama named her Olayinka Maude Jalloh, after her therapist. Her father still wants nothing to do with her. But, following family mediation, Mariama is living with an aunt and uncle. Her mother is caring for the baby. Mariama is back in the school she attended before her capture. And she says she's going to be all right.

Abibu Hawad, the 10-year-old who cut off more hands than he can remember, is back living with his grandmother. His first-grade teacher, Zainab Hassan, said the boy has shown no behavioral problems and that she has made him prefect of the class.

Still, neighborhood kids "provoke" him, Abibu said, and call him a rebel child. And he feels guilt. "Any time I see an amputee, inside me I say to myself, 'We are the ones who did that,' " he said. Sometimes in his dreams the bad guys come back, tromp down his stairs and issue him a gun. But the worst fears come when he is awake. Recently, news of skirmishes between rebel factions in the northern part of the country reached Freetown.

"I was worried that they would come and make me fight again," Abibu said. "I thought I was going to be forced into another war."

SIERRA LEONE AT A GLANCE

Population: 5.3 million

Area: 27,699 square miles, slightly smaller than South Carolina.

Civil War: The war, which began in 1991, has been fought not over ideology, but over control of the country's diamonds and other minerals.

Peace: On July 7, the elected president and the chief rebel leader signed an accord agreeing to give the rebels government representation.

Child soldiers in Sierra Leone: Children have fought on both sides - as part of militia groups supporting the government and as members of the rebel groups that opposed and twice ousted it. But international organizations say that abduction and forced conscription of children was overwhelmingly done by rebel groups. An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 children fought in the war.

Child soldiers worldwide: The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that at least 300,000 children younger than 18 are currently taking part in hostilities around the world.

Sources: CIA World Factbook; The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers; staff reports.