

Forgotten generation puts uneasy peace at risk

Discontent and anger grow in Burundi among the 3,000 child soldiers demobilised from rebel armies

Sandra Laville in Bujumbura
Monday January 16, 2006

Desire Sabiyumva has been given a new identity. It is written on a laminated card that he shows proudly to anyone who cares to ask. After six years as an anonymous child soldier in one of the harshest conflicts in Africa, Desire officially became a demobilised "enfant soldat" four months ago - one of 3,000 children and young men whose future is no longer tied to the rebel armies of Burundi.

With an uneasy peace settling on the tiny central African country after 12 years of ethnically motivated civil war, the wrenching of Desire from the ranks of an armed group is regarded as a success story by the new Burundian government and the United Nations children's fund Unicef.

In 18 months Unicef and the government, supported by the World Bank, have overseen the demobilisation of 3,000 enfants soldats - many of whom were engaged in war from the age of seven.

But Desire and his friends do not feel successful. Each day they gather to hustle for a little food and money a few miles outside the capital, Bujumbura, at a ramshackle shed that is pockmarked with bullet holes. They were all members of CNDD-FDD, the rebel group led by Pierre Nkurunziza, the man who three months ago became the first democratically elected president of Burundi in 10 years.

His election brought to an end a conflict that began in 1994 when Tutsi soldiers assassinated the Hutu prime minister, sparking a decade of bloodshed that left 300,000 dead. But while President Nkurunziza now lives in an official residence and is driven around the capital in a limousine, the young men who were taken from their families and schools as children to fight for him feel overlooked and abandoned.

"I was 14 when I was forced into the army," said Desire. "I had no family, I had no choice. I was taken into the bush and told to fight and kill. I saw many of my friends die, I had to kill many people. They wanted us to disband and we did. Now what I want is to go back to school, I want an education and I want to get a job. But I have nothing, I have no money, no school place, and I am treated by society as if I am some kind of thief. My life is very hard and I just feel forgotten."

Under a deal worked out by the international community and the Burundian government, enfants soldats were to receive a \$1 (56p) a day for 18 months following disbandment. But former child soldiers have recently staged demonstrations in the capital protesting at the failure of the authorities to pay the allowances.

The discontentment is raising fears that Burundi's hard-fought peace could be threatened as evidence grows that rebel groups are targeting the young malcontents.

Herman Ndayisaba, a clinical psychologist at the Transcultural Psycho-Social Organisation (TPO), which works with disbanded child combatants, said there was evidence that the Front for National Liberation (FNL), the main rebel group that remains outside the new government, is recruiting child soldiers again in a campaign of increasing violence in the countryside around Bujumbura

The FNL targets civilians in the hills above the capital on a daily basis. There are nightly shootings, kidnappings, robberies and summary executions that have increased in recent months, prompting the new president to issue an ultimatum - either join the peace process or face a military solution within weeks.

Recently 12 young boys from Cibitoke, 30 miles north of Bujumbura, arrived at a police station in the capital, saying that they had run away from their homes because the FNL was trying to force them back into their army, according to Mr Ndayisaba. This is one of several reports that is now under investigation by Unicef.

Adolfphe Ntantangwa, a field worker for TPO, said that the threat of FNL preying on vulnerable and discontented former combatants was dangerous for the country's peace.

"Having 3,000 young men and women who feel they are owed something, doing nothing, growing more angry and discontented is dangerous for a country trying to establish a lasting peace after so long," he said.

"These are children and young people who are very vulnerable. The government and the UN should be doing more to create activities for them, to make sure they can all get to schools, to help them find jobs and to support them financially. They were rebel soldiers in an army; they have not yet become anything else."

A spokeswoman for Unicef in Bujumbura admitted that disbanding traumatised, hardened soldiers after years of conflict was "not an easy business" but much had been achieved in the last 18 months.

"Eighteen months is a very short time and it is a slow process to detoxify their minds after the traumatic experiences they have been through," she said. "As far

as we know at the moment, there is nothing like a large-scale slipping back into combat. But in areas where the FNL is still fighting it maybe that they are putting people under pressure to join."

She said that direct financial support was not being given to the enfants soldats but that projects were in place to reintegrate children, help them into school or employment and to support their families.

Delays

However, a recent report by the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, acknowledged that children had recently claimed that they were being recruited by the FNL. He also admitted that projects to reintegrate children had been delayed.

In Bujumbura, Desire has yet to feel the benefits of any of the promised projects to help disbanded child soldiers. Now 20 the option of rejoining a rebel army is not one he wants to consider, no matter how tough his situation becomes.

"I know it is going on but I can't imagine joining up again," he said. "Life was too hard and I don't want to do that again if I can help it. But it is not easy, I have done what they asked and left the army. Now all I want is a chance."

Backstory

Burundi's civil war bears similarities to the 1994 genocide in neighbouring **Rwanda**, and grew from the same tensions between a majority population of ethnic **Hutus** and minority **Tutsis** who dominated the government.

Burundi's Hutus had run the country since independence from **Belgium** in 1962, but military dictatorships kept Tutsis in power until 1993. Within four months of the election of Hutu president **Melchior Ndadaye**, he was assassinated by Tutsis who carried out a military coup sparking 12 years of civil war.

The conflict was brought to a formal end last August, but some Hutus have refused to lay down arms.