

Saving the Smallest Soldiers

Bank Supports Special Projects for Child Soldiers in African “Great Lakes” Nations

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May 17, 2006—Children as young as 6 or 7 years old have wielded weapons in the volatile central African region known as the “Great Lakes,” World Bank Senior Social Development Specialist Roisin De Burca says.

Over the past decades, regular and irregular armed groups in Rwanda, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Burundi, and Uganda, have abducted children from their families, villages, schools or refugee camps in raids that often left the children orphans.

Street kids, already unprotected and vulnerable, were easily taken.

The children were taught how to become soldiers—to hold guns and to kill.

Some children were trained to be spies, or used as porters, cooks, or sex slaves.

The troops saw the children as easy to control and manipulate—and expendable, says De Burca, a Bank team member supporting the [Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program \(MDRP\)](#) special projects for child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Global Problem

Over 3 million children are currently involved in armed conflicts around the world.
-MDRP

The World Bank is a key partner in the MDRP plan to reintroduce an estimated 400,000 former combatants, including child soldiers, to civilian life in the African Great Lakes countries—an area that has endured decades of conflicts but has recently become more stable. (See related story, [Bank Is Partner in Plan to Resettle Africa Great Lakes Soldiers](#).)

Even so, armed groups still forcefully recruit children in countries like Uganda and the DRC.

In northern Uganda, children seek the safety of towns at night for fear of being snatched from their beds by the rebel group Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

There, an MDRP-supported special project has allowed the Amnesty Commission to collaborate with non-governmental organizations and other partners to provide resettlement assistance to thousands of children, according to Kees Kingma, MDRP Senior Demobilization and Reintegration Specialist.

In DRC, child protection groups estimate the number of child soldiers could reach around 30,000, De Burca says.

About 18,000 of these children are receiving assistance from special projects and from a national program to reintroduce former soldiers to civilian life.

But several thousand more boys and girls have not been “demobilized” and many are still involved in active conflict in the eastern part of the country, even as the DRC prepares for its first free elections in 40 years in

July.

“Children continue to be targeted for recruitment among militia in the DRC. Child protection agencies and human rights groups continue to report the ongoing sexual abuse of girls by armed groups,” states De Burca, a former UNICEF child protection officer with years of experience in the region.

“It’s not over yet. This is a process which continues to need the efforts of all, both at the national political level and the international level.”

Crossing Borders

Child protection organizations have been working to free child soldiers in the DRC since 1996, when rebels overthrew the Mobutu government of what was then Zaire and is now the DRC.

The rebel movement, initially supported by Rwanda, strongly recruited children as soldiers, says De Burca. Other rebel groups in the country and in surrounding countries did the same.

“They all used children, very young children, 6, 7 years old. The children have been actively involved in this conflict, both in the DRC and across the borders.

“We’ve had Congolese children fighting in the Central African Republic. We’ve had children cross over the border between Rwanda and the DRC, and Burundi and the DRC. We’ve had children from Congo trained in Uganda. It’s been quite a complex war over the last 10 years,” De Burca says.

‘Deprived of Normal Childhood’

Groups Helping Child Soldiers in DRC through the MDRP

UNICEF
Save the Children UK
International Rescue Committee
Care International
International Foundation for Education and Self Help
Belgium Red Cross

From the beginning of the most recent conflict, international agencies such as Save the Children Fund (UK) and UNICEF negotiated with commanders in eastern DRC for the release of children and non-recruitment of children, says De Burca.

They offered the children a safe haven, sheltering them while searching for relatives sometimes thousands of miles away in areas where there were no roads, no communications, and limited transport options, says Bruno Donat, MDRP Communications Officer.

The groups defended the rights of girls who were victims of war, and developed strategies for working with children both during conflict and after the conflict, adds Donat.

They also worked with the new government to discharge children from military service and advocate legislation to prohibit the use of children under 18 in armed forces.

In 2002, the Bank helped the groups further develop their assistance for child soldiers and, along with international donors, provided funding for special child soldier projects.

The projects provide shelter, either in centers or with foster families, psycho-social assistance, family tracing, reunification, education, and special vocational training.

The goal is to prepare the children to return to their families and civilian life. But that can pose a challenge,

says Lead Social Protection Specialist John Elder.

“The idea is that they reintegrate these kids back into civilian life, but many have spent the last three or four years killing people and are desocialized in many ways,” he says.

Child soldiers often suffer from malnutrition, hard physical labor, and exposure to the elements and are in poor physical condition.

They also tend to suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, nightmares, paranoia, aggressive and violent behavior and depression, say members of the World Bank team supporting the projects.

“These children have been deprived of a normal childhood – the love and care of their families, the chance to go to school and to play with other children,” says Elisabeth Maier, a Bank Operations Analyst.

De Burca adds, “They need psycho-social support by these agencies to prepare them for the return home, and also to start giving them some basic skills to help them integrate back into the communities and maybe go back to school, or go to school if they’ve never been, or learn a skill.”

Follow-up Visits

She says it’s a lot of work to reunite the children with families and communities that may be reluctant to welcome them back.

Length of separation between family and child will also determine how long it takes to be successful, she says.

“If the child was abducted when they were 6 and they’re coming back at 16, that’s a different person—it’s a completely different person that the family has to adapt to and that child has to get to know his family again.”

Bruno Donat adds that the Bank just completed an independent review of the projects last month that found the children’s groups had done a good job of tracing families, but could ensure only about 60 percent of children were involved in an activity, such as school, once back in their communities.

The program will continue to work to raise the number to 85 percent, De Burca says.

“There needs to be a little bit more of a push to ensure the majority—and I say majority, I don’t say all—of the children can have some sort of activity,” she says.

In some cases, it’s difficult and very costly to do more than return a child to his or her family in a remote and hard to reach area. “We do not expect every child to have something beyond the reunification with his or her family but we must try to do our best,” De Burca says.

MDRP encourages child protection agencies to make follow-up visits, but understands that doing so can be difficult in areas where there are no roads and there is a security risk, she says. A social worker could spend four or five days trying to find a way to visit one child in a hard-to-reach area.

For that reason, agencies are encouraging communities to form local child protection committees and take responsibility for the children that have re-entered society, De Burca says.

MDRP is working on a day-to-day basis with child protection agencies to prepare them to work with the new DRC government after elections in July.

Donat adds that currently the child soldier special projects collaborate with the DRC’s national program for adult ex-combatants, who, like the children, are being reintegrated into civilian life. Soon, further assistance for child soldiers will be funded directly by the national program.

Cape Town Principles

The Bank is also involved in policies and discussions about child programs in general, and has agreed to abide by the Cape Town Principles, which defines what a child soldier is, says De Burca.

The document was the result of a 1997 symposium in Cape Town, South Africa, held by the NGO working group on the Convention of the Rights of the Child and UNICEF to develop strategies for preventing recruitment of children.

The Cape Town Principles describe a child soldier as any child under 18 associated with a fighting force in any capacity, including girls used as sex slaves or children used as spies or in other roles.

Under the principles, a child does not have to actually use a gun to be classified as a child soldier, De Burca says.

She says the Cape Town Principles are currently being revised to have a more global view. A new policy document will strive for a common understanding of what a child soldier is that can be used to shape programs, financing and approaches to the problem.

The final review of the document is scheduled for October.

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