

Child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The impact of war on children

Elisabeth Munsch, Chargée des Projets, Delegation for Africa, BICE

Ranking 144th in the 2004 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme, the Democratic Republic of Congo is among the countries with the lowest human development index. Years of civil war and regional armed conflict have destroyed the country's economy and torn its social fabric to shreds.

The people of the Congo live under extremely difficult conditions: without work, coping with thousands of displaced individuals and families, with few or no resources, little access to health care, and sharply reduced standards of schooling for children. The predicament of the country's children is of particular concern, especially for the following groups:

- **Street children, known as "shegues".** This term stigmatises these children in the eyes of the community, who consider them to be sub-human "vermin". These children may come from displaced families, may have been orphaned by the war, may have only a single parent, may be in new family arrangements in which they feel unwelcome, or may have been cast out as "possessed by a devil".
- **Imprisoned children.** Often street children who survive by doing odd jobs such as carrying things, selling water, cleaning shoes or guarding cars are driven to commit petty theft or are arrested for vagrancy. Without legal assistance or families to reclaim them, they are sent to prison and forgotten.
- **Girls who are sexually exploited.** Girls on the streets, especially those labeled as possessed, are often first raped and then must sell their bodies just in order to eat. Families also prostitute their daughters to provide for their needs.

The war has exacerbated these violations of children's basic rights. Terror and extortion by different military factions have combined with deepening poverty to accelerate the disintegration of society. These problems are compounded by the phenomenon of "children associated with armed forces and groups", a collective term for all under 18 years of age who are or have been used by a regular or irregular armed force or faction, regardless of their functions. Typical functions are those of cook, porter, messenger and those who accompany military personnel, especially girls who are sexually exploited and forced into marriage.

Children have been recruited to serve in armed combat throughout the Congo. The laws that apply to armed conflict do not adequately protect the rights of children and are often disregarded in any case. Compelled to obey violent orders and themselves the victims of violence, often combined with alcohol and drug abuse, these children develop a strong and lasting propensity towards very serious violence.

Child soldiers first appeared in the Congo in 1996, when they were recruited by the Alliance des Forces de Libération du Congo. Thousands of children aged 7 to 16, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, enlisted, particularly in the east of the country, where they saw active combat during the so-called "war of liberation", which led to the fall of President Mobutu. Whether they volunteer or are forced to join up, these children are often under 15 when they enter service. They have not completed their schooling, let alone received any professional training. Cut off from their families since recruitment, these children have been involved in activities that are highly unsuitable for their age-group and have been subjected systematically to

the most degrading living conditions imaginable. Suffering from malnutrition, disease and constant exploitation by adults, they have been deprived of their basic human rights for years.

Faced with this tragedy and under pressure from the international community as well as various local NGOs (among them BICE), the Government of the Congo has made various commitments and taken several practical steps to demobilise child soldiers and reintegrate them in civil society. The government has signed a number of international decrees and protocols related to children's rights and announced bans on recruiting children into the armed forces.

However, the recruitment of child soldiers persists. Some commanders persist in spreading terror and are trying to hold on to the children. Because the disarmament and rehabilitation process is very slow, very young children who enlisted early in the war have now come of age and are no longer covered by the demobilisation initiative.

More numerous still are children who are victims of armed conflict. While they are not associated with armed forces or factions, they have been adversely affected by war, with physical, psychological and social consequences that are still evident. They include:

- **Children who have been displaced by war and are not accompanied by adults, or, while accompanied, still highly vulnerable.** In the Kasai provinces, displaced children, both separated and unaccompanied, are numerous. If they are alone, they are rapidly assimilated into life on the streets, joining the ranks of the "shegues". These children at the bottom of the social hierarchy suffer extreme poverty and are deprived of most, if not all, of their basic human rights. Children in families are little better off if the adults lack employment: their housing conditions are very poor, they rarely attend school, and many of them suffer from malnutrition.
- **Children orphaned because of the war.** In African tradition, orphans are usually taken care of by the extended family. At present, the socio-economic problems associated with the war mean that these children are considered an added

and highly unwelcome burden. Often, when the family is overtaken by some disaster, they are accused of exercising malign powers. From then on their fate is cruel indeed: traumatic exorcism, followed by expulsion from the family. These children soon swell the numbers of the "shegues".

- **Children living with handicaps or chronic illnesses caused by the war.** Many children have died after being wounded during fighting close to their homes, victims of the many atrocities perpetrated by the various armed factions. Others may survive but remain handicapped or ill, either because of lack of access to health care, which is non-existent or too costly, or because the treatment they receive cannot restore them to full health. To this category should be added the girls raped and infected with sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS.
- **Children who witnessed traumatic events.** Armed factions have spread terror in the villages by committing particularly barbaric acts. Some children have witnessed the murder of their parents, together with other acts of pillage and rape. All these events remain imprinted on their memories and cause behavioural problems such as aggressiveness, depression and insomnia. The plight of raped girls is pitiful in the extreme: in addition to undergoing this traumatic experience they are considered outcasts by the rest of society. If their condition is known about, they have no chance of finding a husband.
- **Children who are not attending school or whose schooling is inadequate because of the war.** On the front line, civil servants have not been paid for months, even years. Teachers who could, fled. The schools that are still functioning work on double occupancy (one group in the morning, another in the afternoon) because of the shortage of class-rooms and teachers. Because even primary education is not free, the poorest children have no access to school, since their parents are unable to contribute to the teacher's salary and cannot afford even the most minimal package of books and other supplies.
- **Malnourished children requiring rapid intervention by the state.** Non-existent country roads, fighting that takes people away from the fields, livestock stolen by the military – all make life particularly difficult for rural people. Pregnant women, nursing mothers and

newly weaned infants are highly vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. These groups have been severely affected. Survivors slowly regain their strength, but the consequences of these disorders can last a lifetime.

- **children abandoned by their parents, both military and civilian.** When military factions entered a town, they often took young girls to serve as their concubines. When the troops withdrew, they left many of these girls pregnant and on their own, sometimes far from home. If it is known that they have lived with a soldier, they are shunned by the rest of society. Some of these girls abandon their babies and flee to a different town in the hope of finding a better life there.

These children at the bottom of the social hierarchy suffer extreme poverty and are deprived of most, if not all, of their basic human rights

These child victims are particularly numerous in towns and villages near the front lines, where they remain beyond help owing to the breakdown of normal transport and communications. Cut off from the rest of the world during the long months of war, they suffer greatly. The depth of their poverty renders the situation of these marginalised groups particularly worrying.

BICE's project

The project implemented by the BICE has focussed on protecting and promoting children's rights in the Congo, since 1996 in Kinshasa and since 2002 in the western and eastern Kasai provinces. The BICE project is innovative in two respects. First, it covers not only children "associated with armed forces and groups" but also children who are victims of armed conflict, who are not the target of any government interventions and are usually ignored by the international community. Second, BICE social workers do not only attend the obligatory meetings of the National Committee of Demobilization and Reintegration, but they also send demobilised children to two transition centres

(Structures d'Encadrement Transitoires - SET). They have developed a partnership with the general who commands the military in the region, under which they are able, in the company of an officer, to visit units stationed in remote bush areas, where they then identify minors who are still on active service. In this way they have been able to rescue and/or demobilise some 420 children over the past year and a half.

The SET project run by BICE is now well under way, helping to ease the transition for young people adjusting from a military to a civilian life. Participants undergo physical and mental rehabilitation, acquire life skills that will optimise their chances of successful reintegration in society, are directed into professions that will be useful in the area where they will be placed, are reunited with their families or relatives and are reabsorbed into society. The transition process lasts three months and is designed to enable these youths to re-enter civil society not empty handed but with skills, ambitions and ideas that they can offer to their new communities.

The project involves local inhabitants in the villages near the SET centres. Villagers were brought in right at the start, to help build the new centres. This enabled them to earn money, which they used either to improve their houses or to start a new income-earning activity such as a small business or craft enterprise. The project thus offers an opportunity to create a sense of community. Villagers and youths cultivate a field together and undertake community work together every Saturday morning. Girls and women who have not had any education can attend literacy classes. There are sports fixtures for SET participants, villagers and those from further afield. These activities have been developed to enable participants to experience peaceable and respectful relationships with their fellow citizens as they re-enter civilian life. The villagers greet each newly arrived group of demobilised children with songs and dances. When the first group arrived, the villagers and youths planted a tree together, to symbolise the return of peace and their hopes for a better future. Of course, nothing is perfect, and there are lapses from time to time that have to be managed by the supervisors.



The BICE SET project enables young people to re-enter civil society with skills and ideas that they can offer to their new communities

To ensure that the process of reintegration is sustained, BICE has also put in place an institutional innovation, Local Protection Committees, which are responsible for promoting children's rights in each town or village. A Committee consists of volunteers who are deeply rooted in village life, such as teachers, nurses, civil servants and parents of young children. Trained in children's rights and social work, committee members are responsible not only for sustaining reintegration, but also for identifying youths who have been traumatised by the armed conflict so that, with the aid of BICE, measures can be put in place to support them both socially and psychologically.

Parents displaced by the war are provided with agricultural tools and seeds to enable them to grow crops and thus to improve their children's diets. In some areas, support for school attendance has also been provided. For other children, access to care has been facilitated. Counseling rooms are available to provide victims with opportunities to talk about their problems and consider possible solutions. BICE

also stresses awareness raising among the broader population through weekly radio programmes. Each child is encouraged to continually reappraise his or her situation from a psychological and social perspective in order to encourage changes in behaviour. Such changes are indispensable if the Congo is to win its fragile peace.