



COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): Coalition calls for end to Mai Mai child soldier recruitment and use

(Kinshasa, 26 February 2010) Mai Mai militias have been among the most prolific recruiters of children in eastern Congo in recent years, yet virtually nothing has been done to lessen the vulnerability of boys and girls from exploitation by these groups, stated the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers today. At the Kinshasa launch of a new briefing paper on the Mai Mai's recruitment and use of child soldiers (children below the age of 18), the Coalition's Director, Dr Victoria Forbes Adam, called on the DRC government to prioritize the protection of children in conflict-affected areas.

"For too long, the politics of conflict have taken precedence over the welfare of children in the eastern provinces, with the result that the future of the next generation of Congolese children is being jeopardized" said Dr Forbes Adam.

The Coalition's new briefing details surges in recruitment of under-18s by Mai Mai that coincide with escalations in hostilities, failed peace deals, flawed army integration processes and renewed outbreaks of violence. Chronic insecurity means that armed violence, or the threat of it, is ever present in the lives of children in eastern Congo. In the words of one former child soldier interviewed by the Coalition: "If the attacks start again, we'd have to join to defend ourselves. Otherwise we'll die or be exterminated."

Insecurity is seen to justify the existence of local militias but the vulnerability of children is also entrenched in socio-economic conditions. The lives of many children in the conflict-affected areas are additionally blighted by poverty, lack of access to education and few economic opportunities. While forced recruitment by Mai Mai is not uncommon, for some children, joining with a Mai Mai group is seen as a way out of poverty or just another job.

"Programs that focus only on releasing and returning these children to their communities miss the point" said Dr Forbes Adam. "Reducing vulnerability of boys and girls to Mai Mai exploitation means fundamentally changing children's life chances and providing them with a genuine alternative to joining militias."

The imperative of protecting children from involvement with Mai Mai is underscored by the range of abuses that they experience when in the ranks. Children have been sent into frontline combat, subjected to whipping or other violent punishments and, in the case of girls, raped and used for sexual slavery. Young children are also actively recruited by Mai Mai to perform rituals believed to protect their members in battle.

The Coalition welcomes the fact that several thousand child soldiers were released during the integration of Mai Mai and other armed groups into the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) last year. However, the opportunity to release the children was not fully exploited and some children associated with the groups remain in the FARDC. The Coalition is calling on the Congolese

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers unites national, regional and international organizations and Coalitions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Its Steering Committee member organizations are Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva.



government to finalize the action plan called for by Security Council Resolution 1906 and to work with MONUC to ensure that all under-18s are identified and released from the army.

The primary responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights of children in eastern Congo rests with the government. However, Mai Mai have often had the tacit support of the authorities, which have sought their support in past military operations in the full knowledge that they have violated national and international law by having child soldiers in their ranks.

“The Congolese government could make a significant difference simply by implementing its own policy and laws. This means systematically investigating and prosecuting those who recruit and use children and ensuring that any former Mai Mai integrated into the FARDC suspected of committing abuses against children are removed.”

Dr Forbes Adam noted that the Coalition had met with several government representatives during the week. She said they had all recognized the gravity of the problem and expressed their intention to treat it as a priority in their programs.

In the longer-term, the government must work with the international community to provide educational and vocational training and employment opportunities to youth in conflict-affected areas. Putting a brake on Mai Mai recruitment and re-recruitment of children is a long-term project in which efforts to release and reintegrate children need to be underpinned by measures to change the environment which makes children’s association with Mai Mai likely, if not inevitable.

Background

The term Mai Mai describes a range of militia groups drawn from communities broadly described as “indigenous” to the DRC. The groups vary in size and level of organization, from community-based militias with about 50-60 members, to larger more structured groups with a wider geographical spread and up to 1,000 troops. Mai Mai have an ambiguous relationship with the DRC authorities having fought both alongside the armed forces and, on occasions, in opposition to them. Successive attempts to disarm and demobilize Mai Mai groups, including most recently through an accelerated integration process into the armed forces in 2009, have not succeeded. A number of Mai Mai groups either refused to join or have withdrawn from the process and are once again reported to be militarily active and recruiting children.

Several Mai Mai commanders have been among a handful of people prosecuted for the crime of child soldier recruitment in Congolese courts. However, other suspected child recruiters remain at large or have been integrated into the FARDC. One former Mai Mai commander Jean-Pierre Biyoyo, who was found guilty by a military court in 2006 on charges related to child recruitment, subsequently escaped and is now reported to be serving as deputy commander in the Congolese armed forces.

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