



## Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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## **CONGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE (DRC)**

### **Government forces**

The Congolese Armed Forces (FAC) continued to have children in their ranks despite commitments to demobilization. Only 280 FAC child soldiers had been released by August 2003, out of a total of 1,500 children scheduled for demobilization from July 2001.<sup>1</sup> According to Amnesty International, the Congolese Government appeared not to be actively recruiting child soldiers into the regular armed forces, but it provided military support to armed groups such as *Mai-Mai* and the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie-mouvement de libération* (RCD-ML), which continued to recruit child soldiers.<sup>2</sup> From January 2003, the *Mai-Mai*, most of whom are aligned to the government, continued to recruit and use child soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (Coalition) members in DRC detected heavy recruitment of children by the *Mai-Mai* between March and August 2003 in Walungo, Mwenga, Shabunda, Fizi and Buyankiri, in South-Kivu.<sup>4</sup>

### **Non-state armed groups**

All armed opposition groups continued to recruit and use children in violation of international obligations, leading some observers to describe fighting forces as “armies of children”. Following the intensification of conflict in Ituri, the *Union des patriotes congolais* (UPC) increased its recruitment of girls and boys, some as young as seven, to serve as soldiers or domestic servants.<sup>5</sup>

A French-led multinational peacekeeping force was deployed in Bunia, eastern DRC in June 2003. The area and Ituri in particular, arguably had the highest percentage of children serving as soldiers in the various armed groups. The groups included the Hema militias, especially the UPC, as well as Ngiti and Lendu militias, who used children as young as 8 years old.<sup>6</sup> According to UNICEF there were between 8,000 and 10,000 child soldiers in the Congolese Armed Forces and armed groups in Ituri town alone.<sup>7</sup>

On 7 February 2003 UPC leader Thomas Lubanga reportedly decreed that “each family in the area under its control must contribute to the war effort by providing a cow, money, or a child” for the UPC.<sup>8</sup> The UPC also undertook forced round-ups in schools.<sup>9</sup> The *Mouvement pour la libération du Congo* (MLC) also continued to use child soldiers but decreased the visibility of children within its ranks and increasingly referred to them as “volunteers”.<sup>10</sup>

The armed wing of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la Démocratie-Goma* (RCD-Goma), supported by the government of Rwanda, confirmed to a United Nations (UN) officer that it had been recruiting children into its ranks.<sup>11</sup> RCD-Goma also undertook campaigns, including in local schools, to encourage enlistment by children and youth.<sup>12</sup> The RCD-Goma actively recruited demobilized child soldiers formerly with the *Mai-Mai*.<sup>13</sup> Many RCD-Goma commanders and authorities used child soldiers as their personal guards. Child soldiers were also victims of extrajudicial executions in North Kivu. A boy from Masisi, was arrested in Uvira by RCD-Goma soldiers on 25 May 2003 after allegedly killing a soldier the night before. He was tried and was publicly executed the same day.<sup>14</sup>

Reliable reports indicated that the splinter groups *RCD-National* and *RCD-Kisangani/Mouvement de libération* also continued to recruit and use children, with some reports indicating that between 20 and 25 per cent of the troops were children.<sup>15</sup> Up to 40 per cent of the *Mudundu 40*, backed by the Rwandese government were estimated to be child soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

Local Defence Forces (LDF), established to protect communities from militias, continued to recruit children as young as ten in North Kivu. Some underwent training in Mukati camp before being integrated into the RCD-Goma army. Hundreds of children have been enrolled into the LDF during 2003.<sup>17</sup>

Armed opposition groups from other countries, including the *ex-Forces armées rwandaises* (ex-FAR), Rwandese *Interhamwe* and the Burundian *Force pour la défense de la démocratie* (FDD), continued to recruit and use children in the DRC.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the mandate extension of the UN mission in the DRC (MONUC) until the end of July 2004, its increased military strength (from 8,700 to 10,800 soldiers) and the imposition of an arms embargo against all foreign and Congolese armed groups in the east, Coalition members reported an increase in the flow of weapons to eastern DRC and the continuous recruitment of child soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Abductions of children by the RCD-ML were reported in Beni, North Kivu, in August 2003. In July 2003, the *Armée du peuple congolais* (APC) re-recruited dozens of children who had been demobilized by the *Mai-Mai* in June 2003. They were taken to training camps in Eringeti, Watalinga and other places near the Ugandan border.<sup>20</sup>

Coalition member organizations noted continuous recruitment of children by armed groups in South Kivu, notably by *RCD-Goma*. The Coalition in DRC recorded recruitment of children between May and August 2003 on the isle of Idjwi, Kabare, Walungo, Uvira and Bukavu, in South Kivu. Those children were taken to training camps in Nyamunyunye, Mwenga, Shabunda, Fizi and Kihumba.<sup>21</sup>

### **Demobilization and child protection programs**

In April 2003, UNDP and UNICEF organized the first national meeting on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), bringing together all parties to the conflict, as well as key international and local NGOs. This was a positive step towards increased commitment to and coordination of DDR processes for child soldiers. However, re-recruitment of demobilized child soldiers continued to be a widespread problem in the DRC. As all parties to the conflict continued to recruit children, demobilization programs appeared in most cases to be a public relations exercise. Very few girls were

demobilized, highlighting gender inequalities in current processes and the need for specific interventions to identify, demobilize and reintegrate girls involved in fighting forces.

The UPC abandoned around 40 child soldiers in April 2003. The children were located by MONUC and local NGOs. This figure was just a small fraction of the thousands of children still serving in the UPC.<sup>22</sup>

On 9 July 2003, an RCD-ML leader announced that 45 children, allegedly members of the *Mai-Mai*, had been demobilized in the RCD-ML-held city of Lumumbashi, Katanga province and entrusted to staff from a Coalition member organisation in DRC.<sup>23</sup> RCD-ML, however, continued to recruit children.

RDC-Goma demobilized several dozen children in the first half of 2003. For example, 66 children (among them six girls) were released from a training camp in South-Kivu in August 2003. Most were former members of local defence groups, *Mudundu 40* or the *Mai-Mai*. Children demobilized from RCD-Goma were cared for in demobilization centres in Goma and Bukavu, with the support of UNICEF, Save the Children, Don Bosco and other NGOs. RDC-Goma refused to demobilize children aged 17 or over and some LDF groups refused demobilization orders, denying that they were associated with the RCD-Goma army.<sup>24</sup> RCD-Goma authorities in Uvira, South-Kivu announced in July 2003 that they would refuse any request for additional transfer of former child soldiers into demobilization centres.<sup>25</sup>

As of February 2003, there were two demobilization centres in operation in RCD-ML-held territory, for ex RCD-ML soldiers as well as ex-*Mai-Mai*. Both centres were run by Let's Protect Children, a Coalition member. A third centre, on the outskirts on Beni, was opened in March 2003, sheltering some 80 children, most of who were former RCD-ML soldiers.<sup>26</sup> The RCD-ML refused to contribute to the running of these centres and in March 2003 an RCD-ML commander reportedly re-recruited 19 children from one of the centres.<sup>27</sup>

## Recommendations

- The UN should increase its dialogue with all parties to the conflict in the DRC. It should call on the transitional government of national unity (formed in July 2003), on the armed groups and militias not represented in it to respect international law prohibiting the recruitment and use of children.
- The UN should collaborate with the International Criminal Court to prosecute as a war crime the recruitment and use of children as soldiers on the territory of, and by nationals of, the DRC.
- The UN should take decisive steps to reinforce the arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council on eastern DRC and to minimize the flow of small arms to the country, which is fuelling the conflict and facilitating the use of child soldiers.
- UN agencies working to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers in the DRC should ensure appropriate coordination mechanisms with other multilateral, international and local organizations working on this issue.
- DDR programs should take into account the specific needs of girls, former child soldiers who have attained the age of majority, and other vulnerable youth who may be marginalized from existing processes.

- UN agencies and partners should devote more resources to reintegration and follow-up activities to reduce risks of re-recruitment of child soldiers once they leave transit centres.
- MONUC should be strengthened in human and financial resources to fulfil its mandate to monitor and report on human rights abuses, including child soldiering.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF/BUNADER, *Évaluation de la phase pilote du Program de démobilisation et réinsertion des enfants soldats dans la région de Kinshasa*, November 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Information received from Amnesty International (AI), August 2003

<sup>3</sup> Information received from Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers members in the DRC, June 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, September 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by Human Rights Watch, June 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by Human Rights Watch, June 2003.

<sup>7</sup> AFP, 6 June 2003

<sup>8</sup> IRIN report, 7 February 2003, [www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org)

<sup>9</sup> Information provided by Human Rights Watch, June 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, 1 June 2003; Confidential report from UN official, 29 April 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Confidential report from UN officer, 27 March 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Confidential report from UN officer, 27 March 2003; Reports from Coalition members

<sup>13</sup> Information received from credible Coalition sources, 2 February 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Information received from AI, August 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Information received from Coalition members, June 2003.

<sup>16</sup> GRAM, Press Release, 21 April 2003; Confidential report from UN officer, 29 April 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Information received from AI, August 2003

<sup>18</sup> Information received from Coalition members in Burundi and DRC, March 2003 and June 2003.

<sup>19</sup> The UNSC resolution 1493 of July 2003, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the Kivus provinces and Ituri district of eastern DRC.

<sup>20</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, September 2003

<sup>21</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, September 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Information received from AI, August 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, July 2003

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<sup>26</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, September 2003

<sup>27</sup> Information received from Coalition members in the DRC, September 2003