



DISARMING LIBERIAN CHILD SOLDIERS

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Millions of young people around the world will head back to school after the summer break but not the thousands of child soldiers in the West African nation of Liberia who refuse to lay down their guns.

Fighting around the Liberian capital of Monrovia has decreased since ousted President Charles Taylor stepped down from office on Aug. 11 and went into exile in Nigeria. However, fighting continues in some parts of the countryside with soldiers under the age of 18 making up almost half of all combatants.

Child combatants are used as conflicts become longer and more manpower is needed. Many start out as porters, carrying guns and munitions, before moving to more violent tasks, such as fighting. Most of the time, the children are abducted from their families, or compelled into join the fighting with promises of the glories of war.

These child combatants present one of the biggest challenges to international peacekeepers and aid agencies working to implement a cease-fire and disarm all warring sides.

Disarming child soldiers

Currently the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has set up a program focusing on child soldiers. According to Manuel Fontaine, senior adviser on children and conflict, the program is modeled after a successful long-term program in neighboring Sierra Leone. In that country's conflict, which ended in 2002, UNICEF is successfully reintegrating child combatants into society.

"It is more than taking away guns. We need to bring them back into their communities, bring them back into their families. There are special needs for children. Their logic is different. As soon as they are identified we provide them with opportunities to learn a job or to go to some form of school," Fontaine said.

Fontaine says it is hard to convince child combatants to disarm if they feel unsafe or don't have families to support them.

The history of child soldiers

Although ousted President Charles Taylor, once a warlord himself, introduced the concept of child soldiers to Liberia, they exist in every region of the world. Child soldiers

have fought in recent wars in Asia, Latin America and the Balkans. Some estimates put the number of child soldiers between 300,000 and 400,00 worldwide.

The groups of Liberian child soldiers, known as Small Boy Units, fight for all major factions in the 14-year-long civil war. They fight for the rebel groups Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) as well as for the government forces.

Once a part of the units, the boys are often given cocaine and other drugs for courage. They believe that if they wear bullets in their hair and special clothing, including wigs and women's clothing, they will not be harmed during battle. They are given new names -- battle names -- and told that if they resist, they will be killed.

Fourteen-year-old Dukuly fought for the government during the most recent bout of fighting in Liberia.

"The first time I saw fighting I was 10 years old," Dukuly said in a New York Times report. "[Rebels and the government fighters] shot up my home and we all run in the bush. My parents, everybody run away, me too. I started running and they opened up firing. They captured me."

The former child soldier, now living in a shelter on the outskirts of Monrovia, recalled being forced to fight by government soldier and rebel forces in previous battles.

"I feeling bad," Dukuly said. "I killing people's forces fighting my brothers, killing my brothers. But I had no choice. Many, many days I did not want to go fight, but if I did not, they would kill me."

UNICEF plans to begin the demobilization process immediately.

"We are starting to deploy our colleagues now, putting our services into place, establishing contacts with the leaders of all military groups to get them to commit to the protection of children," Fontaine said.

The war in Liberia began 14 years ago and has left more than 100,000 people dead. Currently, the United Nations estimates that some 500,000 Liberians, including thousands of children, are without food, shelter or access to clean water.

By Annie Schleicher, Online NewsHour

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