

# Liberia's Child Soldiers

Liberia in West Africa has a population of 2 666 000 living in area covering 111 369km<sup>2</sup>. Half the population are under 18 years of age.

A devastating civil war began in 1990 that claimed the lives of more than 200 000 people, destroyed public and private property and disrupted the social welfare system including schools and health centres. At its height around 778 000 people had fled into other countries to escape the violence. It was estimated that 1.4 million people, half the pre-war population were internally displaced. The conflict officially came to an end in 1997 with internationally supervised elections, although some human rights issues remain unresolved and the country continues to experience some fighting in the north.

## **Child soldiers**

The United Nations (UN) estimate that 15 000 to 20 000 children, some as young as six, participated in the civil war, at least 6 000 to 10 000 children, boys and girls, became soldiers. Precise figures are very difficult to ascertain because the groups which used child soldiers did not generally keep accurate records of the ages of their personnel.

Children were recruited either by force under threat of violence either to themselves or to their families or by persuasion. Sometimes it was simply case of survival - the soldiers had food or could provide the guns to get food. In Liberia's conflict, children who were most likely to become child soldiers usually come from the following groups:

- children either separated or without families or with disrupted family backgrounds;
- children with little or no education or with no access to education;
- children from the most marginalised sectors of society or lowest socio-economic groups;
- children from war zones.

Once recruited, the children were given combat training, the same usually as that given to adults. Brutalisation through making the children kill and commit other atrocities was often a deliberate policy, making it very hard for the children to return to their communities. There are many reports of child soldiers being drugged to make them less afraid of being on the battle frontlines.

## **After the civil war**

In Liberia, around 4 300 child soldiers have now been demobilized and disarmed but this figure probably severely underestimates the real number of children needing urgent assistance. Even after the end of the conflict, many child soldiers remain filled with rage and are traumatised. Ex-child soldiers, once identified, are usually removed from refugee or internal displacement camps because of their fear that they will be recognised by their victims.

Without the effective rehabilitation of these ex child-soldiers and other war-affected children, it is believed that these children could be used by anyone in the future to destabilize Liberia and the surrounding region again.

The civil war also meant that many young people had their education interrupted and did not finish their schooling. Illiteracy in Liberia is a huge issue. The country will continue to suffer major development and restructuring problems whilst so many children are unable to attend school due to lack of funds.

## **Reintegration**

Some general issues have to be overcome to bring war-affected children to the point of successful resettlement, reintegration and development.

### *a) Financial*

The overall financial situation in Liberia is very difficult. Liberia used to be the largest producer of iron ore in Africa until the civil war destroyed the industry. The conflict has left behind the need for major redevelopment and repair. Children without parents find it almost impossible to return to school. Even those with parents, have not been able to return due to limited finances.

### *b) Illiteracy*

Liberia's illiteracy rate is about 55%. This is mainly due to the education system being starved of funding over many years with education not being viewed as priority by former Liberian authorities. Education is seen as key to changing the country's future prospects.

### *c) Displacement*

Thousands of families and individuals were displaced during the civil war. Some of the war-affected children have not been able to resettle with their previous communities as their parents/guardians remain displaced in either internal displacement or refugee camps or now live outside Liberia. Children without parents or guardians will always be most vulnerable to exploitation.

## **Jubilee Action response**

Jubilee Action is supporting the Back to School project in western Liberia. The programme aims to reintegrate and rehabilitate 100 war affected children, mainly ex-child soldiers, aged 10 to 18 years, every year for five years. The initiative offers counselling, payment of school fees and continually monitors the child's recovery and development. The project will help reduce illiteracy by supporting young Liberians in school who will then be able to help other Liberians, enhancing the country's development.

Jubilee Action is a registered charity no 1013587