

Helping child soldiers

Emily Hough speaks to Henri Ladyi in the DR Congo, where he carries out groundbreaking work demobilising rebel militias, especially child soldiers, with the aim of bringing peace to this conflict-afflicted region



Congo has suffered a brutal war – over five million people have been killed and still the fighting continues. An estimated 7,000 children are being used in active warfare, prized by the rebel militias because of their ‘purity’ – a status said to give them special powers to prepare black magic potions and amulets to protect the rebels against bullets. Children as young as nine are kidnapped or lured from their homes to a life of fear, brutality and violence.

Yet many of these children sign up voluntarily. After a lifetime of war, they have limited opportunities, living in debilitating poverty with little access to education. They need a genuine alternative to joining armed groups, which means training to earn a living.

Peace Direct funds local peace-building organisation, the Centre Resolution Conflicts, initiated by Ben Mussanzi wa Mussongu and directed by Henri Bura Ladyi, who tells me: “We are working for peace-building by educating people, resolving and preventing conflicts. We promote human dignity and protect children.” He explains that he and his colleagues aim to reduce violence in the community by providing socio and economic reintegration to both ex-combatants and vulnerable young people affected by the conflicts.

“The main areas of activity are in the provinces of eastern DRC – North Kivu, and Oriental Province,” he explains, saying that the volunteers work near the tension zones.

In the past year, Ladyi has rescued 650 children, persuaded 1,020 combatants to lay down their arms – helping them to find ways to live without violence – and has assisted 14,00 people to return to their homes.

Ladyi (centre) and his team have a budget of £21 (\$31; €29.91) to train each child. Some choose engineering, others haircutting or animal husbandry. Ideally, they should return to school, but the urgent need is for them to be able to feed themselves before and during their education, so they don’t return to the militia on the promise of a meal

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So what brought him to this role? Ladyi says: “Since 1995, the situation and conditions in my zones – Goma, Beni and Ituri – have been fragile because of the violent conflicts that are destroying community relations and infrastructure. Human security is a massive issue and this disaster prompted us to begin work in these tough conditions, where people are still killing each other.” He was motivated to rebuild his community, and is doing so with the help of outside humanitarian support.

“We are passionate for peace, which is why we have come up with a number of strategies to prevent and denounce the recruitment of children and youth into the militia,” he says, adding that he and other volunteers do this by focusing on all sides caught up in the conflict, both militia and civilians. The aim is to break the cycle of violence that is fuelled by poverty and hunger, by establishing radio clubs to spread the message, resolving thousands of local conflicts, training teachers in peace education and teaching thousands of church goers about how to bring about peace.

Political manipulation

A typical day involves rescuing child soldiers, taking them out from the bush after negotiating with militia leaders. “This is difficult, because the militia often hide children because they prize their ‘purity’ and because they play important roles such as cooking, carrying equipment and in preparing black magic potions,” he says.

But the mission is complicated by political manipulation, he says, along with the fact that the resources available for reinsertion and reintegration of child fighters back into the community are so tiny when compared to the immense need.

And one of the biggest hindrances to this aim of building peace and sustainability is, according to Ladyi: “The invisible actors, those who support conflict.

“They are the enemies of peace, they are terrorists,” he says, explaining that growing insecurity in the zones in which he works is increasing the number of armed militia within communities.

Looking to the future, Ladyi says that greater commitment is needed from the government in improving community-based reintegration plans and strategy. Technical and financial support for his programmes is also essential. His ambition is to formulate better socio and economic reintegration plans to help victims who are currently receiving no assistance, and to work more closely with the government to deliver new stabilisation programmes in different communities. Essential to this will be involving all the stakeholders in these plans and getting buy-in from the communities themselves.

Ladyi emphasises that he is motivated by the firm conviction that: “One day we will succeed in bringing sustainable peace to our communities.”

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