

VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

Testimonies of former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

In this issue, the Review has chosen to give a voice to former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Children recruited by armed groups experience separation from their families, physical and psychological violence, sometimes including sexual exploitation, as well as interruption of their education. Whether they joined an armed group forcibly or by choice, as a fighter or carrying out a different function – every story is unique, reflecting numerous challenges faced by children in these circumstances. The testimonies below reflect children’s experiences, the difficulties they have faced and their hopes for a new life. In order to protect them and their relatives, their testimonies have been anonymized.

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮

O. L., 15 years old, male

When I was 11, I was suspended from primary school for lateness. One day, I set off with my three friends to help my mother in the fields. On the way, six members of an armed group captured us. One friend was allowed to go, but my two friends and myself were made to walk for three days to the base of the armed group. When we got to the camp, I was bad-tempered because I was tired from the long walk in the hills through the mud; I felt dirty and was in desperate need of sleep.

We wanted to continue our studies, and the armed group enrolled us at a local school. I attended the school for only four days. Four armed men accompanied me and my friends there and back. At the camp, I learned to handle a gun and was

* Thanks to the ICRC Delegation in Kinshasa and especially its Protection and Communication Departments for their assistance in collecting these testimonies.

tattooed and initiated in taking care of the *gris-gris*.¹ I was annoyed that I wouldn't be able to continue my studies. A month later, I learned that my two friends had managed to escape and had told my parents where the armed group was keeping me. My parents came to negotiate my release with the armed group, offering a goat, but the commander demanded a cow and made fun of them by offering them food. I was furious about the way the commander was humiliating my parents, but there was nothing I could do.

I spent around three years in the forest as the “guardian of the *gris-gris*”, and took part in five military operations against other armed groups and government forces. I was also involved in robbing people travelling on the main roads. I was unhappy about carrying the

“I was also worried about the survival of the others. I couldn't just abandon them; I had to protect them.”

gris-gris, but I was also worried about the survival of the others. I couldn't just abandon them; I had to protect them. I was also troubled by the beatings and pillaging that I witnessed to obtain money and goods, but I couldn't do anything about it. I was often very angry at the commander: he did not seem to realize that he was capturing and beating my friends, my brothers. To vent my anger, I would shoot my gun in the air, which would usually earn me a beating.

In the last military operation in which I participated, I was shot in the mouth and lost four teeth. They took me to a local health facility, and I handed the *gris-gris* over to another fighter. The doctor refused to let the fighters take me back to their camp in the forest. I thought that that was it; I thought that I was going to die when the others left me at that health facility. The ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] evacuated me to Bukavu general hospital, where I was treated for two months. When I came out of hospital, the commander of the armed group came to take me back to the forest. When the armed group was attacked by government forces, I took the opportunity to escape. I returned to my family but had to remain in hiding from the armed group and was facing arrest by the army. My family talked to a Red Cross volunteer, who informed the ICRC of my situation. I was evacuated again and taken to a transit and orientation centre for former child soldiers in Bukavu², where I could be protected and could obtain a demobilization certificate. Three months later, I was reunited with my family, but within weeks the armed group had managed to locate me and send me a letter inviting me to rejoin them, with the promise that I would be treated well. Fearful about what might happen, together with my family we contacted the ICRC, who immediately arranged for me to be evacuated again and taken back to the transit and orientation centre in Bukavu.

1 *Gris-gris* are charms believed to protect the fighters.

2 The transit and orientation centre for former child soldiers is run by the Bureau for Volunteer Services for Children and Health.

The only way I will ever be left in peace is if my former commander dies or surrenders to the government forces. I didn't like living with the armed group. I never laughed. There was nothing I liked about that life except for the food, and even that was tainted as it was obtained by stealing livestock or extorting local people, who were forced to make weekly contributions in exchange for being left alone by the group. I cannot go back home as long as the group remains active in the area. Thanks to the transit and orientation centre and the ICRC, I am doing a hairdressing apprenticeship, which I am about to finish. I want to open my own salon so that I can be independent. Although I don't yet have the equipment I will need and the rent for the salon, that is how I see my future.



© ICRC/Mathias Kempf.

E. R., 17 years old, male

I am the oldest of three children. Our father died, and our mother has been working in the fields to help our family get by. One day, when I was 15, I was coming home from school with my three friends who lived in the same village as me, and as we were crossing a fruit plantation I heard someone calling my name. I stopped to see who it was, and a boy, who was about 10 years old, suddenly appeared, coming out of the plantation. He kept me amused by telling me nonsensical stories and asking strange questions. I told my friends to go home, saying that I would follow them. A few minutes later, four armed men appeared and forced me to go with them, knocking me about and striking me with a whip. That is how I found myself recruited into an armed group.

During my time with the armed group, I was brainwashed with their ideology and received training in military intelligence, armed robbery, weapons, livestock theft and intimidation methods for robbing people on the road or in the fields, or abducting them. I started as a cook, was promoted to bodyguard of the camp commander and was eventually made responsible for leading operations on a national road. Sometimes, I was sent with other children to support joint operations with other armed groups. There were times when I cried, especially when I thought about my mother and my two brothers, but I couldn't leave the bush because all the paths out were watched by members of the armed group. They also kept a watch on me.

“There were times when I cried, especially when I thought about my mother and my two brothers, but I couldn't leave the bush because all the paths out were watched by members of the armed group.”

One day, during an operation to steal livestock, I took an opportunity to lay down my weapon and my military shirt. I left them on the roadside and reported to MONUSCO [the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo], who took me to Uvira, where the ICRC tried to locate my family. I was very happy to be reunited with my mother and decided to stay in the city centre to avoid being forcibly recruited again. One day I received a visit from an NGO which offered me support to continue my studies. I didn't want to go back to school, though, because I was used to having money, so they helped me with equipment and materials to open a hairdressing salon. I now run my own salon which makes enough for me to get by and sometimes to pay labourers to help my mother farm her land. I am starting to think about having a family myself now.

I think the armed groups should lay down their arms and stop recruiting children because it's not right.



M. A., 18 years old, male

I was living with my parents in South Kivu. I was not attending school because we couldn't afford it, but I was surrounded by love and had a peaceful life. I often played football with my friends on a piece of land near our house. At the age of 5, I started taking the village cows into the surrounding hills. I spent my days stuffing myself with milk and potatoes and would return home in the evening as happy as I could be. I stopped herding cows when I was 9 and my parents started teaching me about farming. At 13, I followed the young men from my village to the mines. I wanted to earn some money to buy myself a pair of trousers and change my life, just like all the other young people in the village. When I had been working there for three years, several diggers were crushed in a rock fall. The incident scared me, and I decided to go back home and focus on farming. I was happy.

One Sunday in April 2017, when I was 16, the armed group came to our village because the soldiers stationed there had left to halt the advance of another well-known armed group. When fighters arrived, they forced the villagers to give them food. My friend and I were made to transport the food, but when we got to their camp in the hills, they did not let us go back home. They told us that we were men and that we should stay with them and protect our village. We refused and were beaten. At night, we were forced to guard the camp with just a machete as a weapon. I was horrified to belong to an armed group that didn't even have enough weapons to protect itself. Luckily, a week later, my friend and I managed to escape. We told our family we couldn't stay in the area, and left for another village. On the way, some young people who had seen us with the armed group recognized us and informed the government forces. We were arrested and held in a local lockup for four months, and then in a cell in Bukavu for three weeks. We were brought before a military court and sentenced to one year and five months at the Bukavu prison. My friend fell ill and was transferred to Bukavu general hospital, where he died. I was totally overwhelmed by the situation and lost all hope of ever returning home. However, the ICRC visited us and started monitoring my case. They eventually succeeded in having my case handed over to a juvenile judge. I was released and transferred to the transit and orientation centre, where I waited to be issued with a document certifying that I had left an armed group and for the ICRC to find my family. In March 2019, I was reunited with my family. It was an indescribably joyous moment, and all the villagers came to the house to welcome me back. They all thought I was dead.

I am now in the process of building a house for my mother – the greatest honour any man can have. I have gone back to my life as it was before the armed group and hope to start a family of my own one day. My experience with the armed group and in prison is one I hope never to repeat.

I. N., 17 years old, male

I was born in Kasai-Central Province in 2002, the fifth of seven siblings. My mother is a farmer, and my father a builder. Before I was recruited into the militia, I was a third-year student in building at a vocational training college.

In October 2016, I was at college when our neighbourhood was attacked by the militia. When I got home, there was no one there. I spent the night alone in the house and in the morning, on my way to school, I met six classmates who were going to the commune of Nganza, and I went with them. Along the way, they told me that they were going there to be “initiated”³ for their freedom, and I thought it was a good idea. I therefore decided that I would also get initiated, with the intention of one day becoming a territorial administrator or a mayor.

After the initiation, we went to the front to fight the governmental forces. In the militia, I served as platoon leader in many operations. I fought in Kasai Province, where we slaughtered over fifty soldiers. Then there was the hunt for the FARDC [Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo] in the Kasais, the bloodiest clash yet, where the governmental forces were supported by another militia. Facing this resistance, we realized that the *gris-gris* in our possession were no longer working. I was racked with disappointment, my hopes of becoming a territorial administrator now dashed. The governmental forces, supported by the militia, were becoming stronger and stronger, and we suffered huge losses. My six friends were killed.

“I just want to go back to a normal life, resume my training and become a builder one day, like my father.”

I have to admit that life in the militia was good until the *gris-gris* stopped working. We had gone from victory to victory and were free to do what we wanted. It really was a good life for me. The reason why I left the militia was the round-up carried out by the governmental forces after our attempted hunt for the FARDC, when they arrested all the boys they could find, and would kill everybody on whose body they found a tattoo.⁴ We fled to Angola, but the Congolese were expelled and I found myself back in my country. That was when the ICRC found me, contacted my family and took me back to them. Now, I just want to go back to a normal life, resume my training and become a builder one day, like my father.

L. O., 16 years old, female

Five years ago, I joined an armed group in the eastern part of the DRC. I was no longer studying because I wasn't clever enough at schoolwork. One day, armed men came into my aunt's shop where I worked. They drank all we had and then asked me to go with them to their base so that they could pay me. I asked two of my friends to accompany me. When we got there, they locked us up for two days. The armed group was preparing to fight, and they let us out and told us

3 At a *Tshiota*, a ceremonial fire at which fetishes and potions are distributed.

that we could choose between becoming soldiers and dying. We had no choice but to become soldiers. That same day, we were initiated by fetishes. When night came, fighting broke out, and we fought all night. One of my friends who had come with me was killed. I was very angry and decided to stay with the group to avenge my friend.

One day, we were engaged in a clash with another armed group in the bush; the fighting was intense, and we had run out of ammunition. Some members of our group had just been captured. Twelve children, including me, decided to try to escape to the nearest village. We hoped to get to the MONUSCO forces, who would be able to help us demobilize. However, we were intercepted by another group before we could find them. We were beaten and locked up at this armed group's camp and then quickly incorporated into its ranks. I continued to take part in fighting with this new armed group. It was difficult to find enough to eat, and we were forced to steal goats in the villages, which we often had to eat raw.

I sometimes cry when I recall what I went through. I think a lot about a great friend of mine who was killed in the fighting; he was only 9. After he was recruited into our group, his mother came and begged for him to be released. She took three goats to the commander so that he would let her son leave the group. Eventually, he took pity on her and promised to hand him over to her the next day. That night, however, we were sent to fetch cassava flour from the villages. There were ten of us, but I was the only one with a gun; the others only had spears and knives. On the way, we met some armed men who shot at us and killed my friend. He was the humblest of the group, and we all really liked him; he made us laugh. We all wept bitterly when we saw that he had been killed. We no longer thought about dying – we were filled with rage. We went down into the villages and killed many people, both civilians and combatants. Every time I think about that boy, I am overtaken by a desire to kill.

It wasn't easy being a girl in an armed group. Sometimes the boys protected us from the violence meted out by the adults, but the commanders took advantage of night patrols to sleep with the girls. They intimidated us, and if you refused to sleep with them, they would kill you and then go back to the camp and say you had been killed in the fighting.

There were clashes all the time. I was tired of the war and had become so thin that I was just a sack of bones. One day, when my commander sent me into the town to find food, I took the opportunity and escaped again. I went to the government forces with three of my friends. I was ready to leave the armed group and join the regular army, but they said that I was not old enough. I was transferred to a transit and orientation centre to be demobilized in August 2018. I was going to be reunited with my grandfather in North Kivu, but all

“It wasn't easy being a girl in an armed group. Sometimes the boys protected us from the violence meted out by the adults, but the commanders took advantage of night patrols to sleep with the girls.”

reunifications in the area were stopped because of the Ebola virus. I appealed to those in charge of the centre, and they decided to take me back to my village. I was reunited with my family in September 2018.



© ICRC/Phil Moore.

When I arrived, the commander of the armed group that controlled the region recruited me again and wanted me to be his woman. I rejoined the armed group and one day, during a clash, I was shot in the leg twice. I was taken to a local health facility, where I was treated for several weeks. When I recovered, one of my friends gave me a little money, and I decided to come to North Kivu. I don't have a job at the moment and spend my days wandering around. I don't like hanging out with the girls in my neighbourhood because there is always tension owing to the things they say about me. Everyone knows that I was in an armed group.

K. E., 17 years old, male

In August 2017, I was with my brother in my village in the east of the DRC. The members of an armed group were making all the inhabitants of the village pay a tax. My brother and I had no money to pay it, so we were captured and taken into the bush, where we were thrown into a cell. It was awful. We slept on small mattresses onto which water was dripping each evening. We had nothing to eat. My older brother managed to escape when we went to fetch water from the river. They accused me of being his accomplice, threatened to kill me and forced me to become a fighter.

The life of a fighter in the bush is very hard. We would spend the night outdoors, even when it rained. Sometimes we found food in the villagers' fields, but we didn't have time to cook it or eat it. I was responsible for escorting the commander and wasn't allowed to eat without his permission. It was difficult to find soap to get washed. We had to extort the local people to get what we needed.

I spent a year and a half in the armed group but didn't do much fighting. I remember one day, though, when I was nearly killed. It was during a clash with another armed group when four of our fighters were wounded.

In September 2018, I realized that I couldn't carry on like that any more and resolved to leave the group. One morning, with three other children, I decided to give myself up to the government forces and went to an army base where they promised to train us so that we could join the regular army, but a child protection association came and took all the children away. That is how I ended up at a transit and orientation centre. I didn't want to stay in the army. Those in charge of the centre spoke to the ICRC to have me reunited with my family, but my family said that I risked being recruited into the army again if I returned there. The ICRC therefore reunited me with my uncle in North Kivu in January 2019.

I would like to be a driver. I spend my days with other young people in the neighbourhood, but no one knows that I was a fighter. I wouldn't like them to know, because when you have been a fighter, you risk being treated as an outcast and slandered in the community. Some people even accuse you of things you haven't done.

“I spend my days with other young people in the neighbourhood, but no one knows that I was a fighter. I wouldn't like them to know, because when you have been a fighter, you risk being treated as an outcast and slandered in the community.”

W. Y., 16 years old, male

I was living in a village in North Kivu, where I had a plot of land. I wasn't studying any more, and when I wasn't farming I sold flour in my uncle's shop. One day, an armed group attacked the village and killed my uncle. A few days later, they returned and killed my grandfather. I was filled with rage and wanted to protect my family, so I decided to join a different armed group.

Three of my friends had lost their parents in the attacks on our village. One day at noon, we decided to go into the bush. When we got to the group's base, they taught us to handle a gun and we began to take part in night patrols. You had to be tough to live in the bush; we had no pay and couldn't buy ourselves any clothes. If we wanted money, we had to detain a member of the community and accuse them of something, such as failure to participate in the compulsory community work that the group imposes on the villages. For food, we made the local people bring us produce from their land.

I spent two and a half years in these conditions. I still think about my friends who were killed in the fighting. I remember one day when the army attacked us. We had been drinking and were drunk when the fighting started. Some of our fighters were killed. I was captured, along with twelve other fighters. The government forces took us to their base. I hoped that I would be able to join the regular forces, but people from a child protection organization came. They said that I was a child and that only adults could be trained to become members of the government armed forces. I was disappointed because I wanted to avenge my friends and relatives who had been killed. That was how I came to be reunited with my family here in North Kivu.

Now I sell kerosene in the evenings. During the day, I stay at home with my maternal aunt. I cannot go back to my village now. I did terrible things there; I killed a lot of people and would risk being killed myself if I went back. I am not sure what I will do with my future. I would like to learn to be a mechanic so that I could work and be independent.



© ICRC/Wojtek Lembryk.

J. B., 18 years old, male

I joined the armed group in July 2017. There were frequent clashes in my village between the armed group and government forces. Sometimes, when members of the regular army came back from the fighting, they would take their anger out on the young people in the village. One day, an armed group came into our village, and the government forces fled. The armed group urged the village's young people to join them, telling them that if they helped to free the country, they would be rewarded.

I had a small plot of land, where I grew sorghum and potatoes. I told my aunt that I would leave my plot in her care because I couldn't stay in the village any longer. One evening, I put some clothes in a bag and set off for the armed group's base in the hills near our village. On the way, I met a member of the armed group who encouraged me to join, and I went with him to their camp. He promised me that I would soon have my own gun.

I was given a warm welcome when I arrived, and was introduced to the leader. He asked me why I wanted to join the group, and I told him that I wanted to free my country. That was the only answer that could be given; otherwise they might suspect you of spying on them. Two days later, I was taught to use different types of weapons.

Four of us in the group were children. There were also some girls, but I don't know how many. Each time my friends from the village passed near the base and saw me, I felt that I was highly respected. My parents phoned me to tell me to leave the group, but I didn't want to. It got to the point where I stopped answering the phone.

I remember how one day I left on a night patrol with five other fighters. The others had guns, but I was the youngest of the group and only had a spear. That night I learned how to extort the local people. I managed to get 10,000 Congolese francs.⁵ On our way back to the base, we encountered ten or so police officers who opened fire on us. One of my comrades killed a police officer. We captured the others and took them to a place near our base and killed them too. It was after this attack that I was given my own gun and military uniform.

Another day, one of the members of our group decided to leave and join the government forces. We went out to look for him and brought him back. The commander gathered all the local people in the middle of the village. He wanted to make an example of him, so that everyone would know that there would be no mercy for traitors. The commander ordered me to kill him in full view because I was from that village and was the only one in the group who had never killed anybody. I was very scared, but I killed him with a spear while the inhabitants of my village watched on. I knew then that I would never be able to return to my village; I had just dug my own grave.

The government army retaliated that night. It was the first time that I had seen a real battle. Several dozen people were killed, including both combatants and civilians. We got our hands on some of the army's weapons and uniforms. Some children who had lost members of their family came to join the group of their own volition.

A few days later, I was transferred to the group's hierarchy. I took part in a number of other clashes in which the fighting was much more intense. I was then promoted to unit commander, and I took advantage of this position to commit abuses against civilians. I am sure that even today, many people in these villages remember me. I killed a lot of civilians and combatants. I had become heartless.

5 Equivalent to 6 US dollars.

One day, while I was sleeping, there was an attack and I was hit by a bomb blast. Six of my comrades were killed. When I came round, I was tied to a tree and had been whipped by members of the group that had attacked us. I was bleeding all over and thought I would die, but the next day, members of our group carried out a counter-attack and freed me. I was taken to a health facility, where I received medical attention. That was when I resolved to leave the armed group. I was tired of it all and had a feeling that I might die in the next battle. I talked to some of the children in our group, telling them I was planning to escape and that they could come with me if they wanted.

Around noon on the day I decided to leave, I gathered my belongings together, and my friends followed me. We pretended that we were going to the river to wash our clothes. After we had set off, somebody tipped the commander off, and he sent other fighters to follow us. We fled, each taking a different path, and I ended up alone in the bush. I didn't want to go back; I was sure that if I was caught, I would be executed. I walked all day and all night. The next day, as I was approaching the city of Beni, I asked someone who was working in the fields to help me. He accompanied me to see a local chief, who took me to the city's authorities. Unfortunately, they handed me over to the army, and I was put in prison for a month. A child protection organization came and took me to a transit and orientation centre in June 2018, and in November of that year, the ICRC reunited me with my family in North Kivu.

I don't want to go back to the army now. I need to prepare for the future. I don't want my family to see me as a fighter, and I know that I cannot go back to my village. My plan now is to go back to school.

ICRC support to former child soldiers in the DRC

The ICRC supports children who have come out of armed groups through small income-generating projects entailing training, material support and follow-up assessments. These projects aim to provide the children with a skill they can use in their home environment, so they can financially support themselves. Limited socio-economic prospects can be a push factor for children to join armed groups, and the income-generating projects aim to prevent the children's re-recruitment into armed groups.

To partake in the income-generating projects, the children are first encouraged to analyze what already exists in their home environment and the local markets. They then undergo several days of training on how to budget, save money, and plan and manage an activity. At the end of the training, the children can choose between a range of activities, including hairdressing, tailoring, mechanics, agriculture and phone repairs. Most of the children choose to become street or market vendors, which is also a socially acceptable role for women and girls in the DRC. Thereafter, the children are encouraged to think about what they would like to make (doughnuts, sandwiches, etc.) or sell (soap, peanuts, basic household items, etc.).

Once the training is over, each child receives a kit from the ICRC with the necessary items to kick-start their chosen income-generating activity once they return home. After a short period, the ICRC carries out a multi-purpose visit to see how the child is reintegrating into their family and the community, and to monitor the income-generating project and provide further advice to support the child and the family if required.