

WAR IS NO CHILD'S PLAY

China Keitetsi

There are more than 250,000 children worldwide in 30 countries still involved in war as members of tribal or rebel groups. These children live at the border of the society without any rights and without any social manners. They lose their childhood and their families, and their dignity as children is taken away. They see brutal realities that a child should never see.

Child soldiers are forced to do things that a child should never do. Things are done to them which destroy their soul and their body. Girl child soldiers are raped when they are still very young. They may carry a baby in their stomach and there is no mother to tell them how all will be. They go on giving birth and nobody is there to tell them how to love a baby which comes out from an abuse. She has lost the touch of being that little girl in pink. She does not know who she is, and her confidence is gone. Now she is confused – am I a child or am I a mother? Am I a soldier or am I a civilian? Looking back I feel ashamed.

As the army cannot use a young mother they throw her out. The only thing a child soldier girl knows is “Yes, Sir.” She does not know

the life of being a civilian. When child soldiers lose their arms or legs, they are no more “wanted by the gun” and the commander has no use for them any more.

These child soldiers don't know where to go. They cannot go back to their homes because they feel guilty because of the crimes they were forced to commit in their own villages. They are also lost because they do not have any education. None of these child soldiers ever went to school. Why not? They have to fight in war or they are used as spies. They have to carry, for instance, the small machine gun AK-47, small enough for children. That shows that small weapons are a related problem. Sometimes they have to work as cooks. And very often they are abused girl and boy child soldiers. More than 80% of the girl child soldiers and 70% of the boy child soldiers are abused. And at the end of the day, for a long time, once you became a child soldier it became your home and your grave. There was no way out.

Since 1998 the world has realized the use of child soldiers, but the problems started way back in 1980 or even before. More than 2 million

child soldiers died in all these years. Now within a few years the number of child soldiers has dropped from more than 350,000 to 250,000. In May 1998, organisations such as UNICEF, Mission, Amnesty International, Kindernothilfe, Oxfam, Terre des Hommes and others formed a group called Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSC): Since these pressure groups started, they have been successful in reducing the number of child soldiers world-wide. In 2001, UNICEF took many child soldiers out of war zones in Africa and started looking for their relatives. It has been a very difficult task. When they tried to identify a place to go for these former soldiers, they started to build the centers of reintegration and rehabilitation to ease this process. These centers have helped many child soldiers to find their families. They have also helped to negotiate with rebel groups to hand in child soldiers. Nowadays a lot of child soldiers know where to go after the army. Deserters are aware of the existence of the centers and the protection they can find there against their former groups. As mentioned above before the beginning of the centers there was no place to go to for a child soldier. They were all on their own. Nobody did even take notice of their existence, of their lives. There was no pressure on the rebel commanders or on governments and that is why the number was so high. They could do what they wished to do. Because of the centers, the organisations can monitor better existing child soldiers and are informed about the groups who are using child soldiers.

In the centers the former child soldiers are taught in different ways how to get along with a normal civilian life. Their way back into the society is very difficult. The problems are extremely complex, the wounds are too deep, and there are limited resources. The centers

need much more money to help girl child soldiers who carry 2 or 3 children with them with no fathers. The centers need much more money to care not only for traumatized child soldiers but also their parents who are traumatized by war and by the loss of their children and many other relatives. Both child soldiers and their relatives need help to accept and forgive each other. Because of all the crimes the child soldiers have committed, the civilian can only see the gun in the arms of a child soldier and not the eyes of a child.

The former child soldiers need to hear at least apologies from their recruiters. This will help them to know that it was never their fault. It will help them to wash their "guilt" away since they never knew it was against their rights to be a child soldier. Reconciliation between a child soldier, the villagers and the commanders has absolute priority for the centers. Much more funding is needed, so we can sleep knowing that there are no bitter hearts growing each day which later will be passed on to our own children. The work of the centers is so hard because these child soldiers know only the sound of guns, violence and hate. During the time as a child soldier you are so busy that you lose touch with your fellow children and this makes you feel isolated outside the army. It feels as if no one else knows you outside. In the rehabilitation centers you get a chance of being together with other children and this makes you feel like a child. You get an idea how the life at school could be. You also do not feel shy to look into another child's eyes because you all have been in the army and nothing to hide from each other.

I was a child soldier for nearly 10 years and I am sure that no child soldier is a monster. Because of my life in Denmark I have changed. The way I look, the way I feel and the way I am in

contact with me is absolutely different from 5 years ago. Now I know my rights and I am accepting myself more and more. Therefore if we give a chance and help former child soldiers in rehabilitation centers, we would get out more and more China Keitetsis. I was separated from my children for 10 years and they did not know each other for ten years either. Now I got them back, and I realized that no woman should ever be separated from her child. Every woman who does not get to see her child grow suffers an unrecoverable loss and so does her child. When I think of a 14 year-old girl child soldier separated from her child or giving away the child because she cannot afford to look after it, it is a bigger pain for her than to give birth.

The rehabilitation centers are successful in:

___ The former child soldiers now know that the military is not their only home or their grave.

___ The former child soldier gets first-hand help.

___ The child soldier recruiters are aware of these organisations and they know they are being watched.

___ The former child soldiers have learned their rights and now they know that it is wrong and against their rights to be taken to the army.

The rehabilitation centers need more money to do the following:

___ A permanent future to former child soldiers;

___ a home so that the former girl soldiers can raise their children for a long-term healing process;

___ long term education for former child soldiers because they are growing from child soldier to woman/man.

What I have done to help is only a small step: Some years ago I founded a non-profit charity in Berlin "Help for former child soldiers and war victims." We try to inform society about the problem of child soldiers, we pay school fees for young students in the Lake District, and we have the aim to build a house for at least 15 former child soldiers and orphans in Rwanda, to give them a home, to show them that there is somebody who cares about them. Other young people may join during the day to find a place, to get a meal at least once a day, and from there they can go to school. Why do we do this? First of all we want to help some children living in the street. We want to give them a home and education in many respects. But we also want to make the people in Africa to take it as their own responsibility to care about their children. Everybody here is invited to support and join my charity, to become a member.¹ Still today there are many people in the world who have never heard of the existence of child soldiers. We have to give more interest to the public and put pressure on the governments. We know that nearly all child soldiers experienced severe trauma and showed a high rate of post-traumatic stress reactions. The recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts all over the world is now widely recognized as a violation of children's rights and demands now again and again a robust international response.

Sometimes the words are too heavy – it is not because I want them to be but this is what is happening to many little children just like it happened to me when I was their age. So many things happen in a war zone and this is the softer way to put the words. The centers are not enough – the former child soldiers need more. We must face it because we are not facing it the way we should. 2007 the whole world

spent more money for armament than ever before, USA nearly half of the total amount of the world; Germany is no. 7 for instance with their budget.²

In recent years a little hope has grown in some countries, e.g. in Liberia: With the first elected woman as president in Africa and since the end of the war in 2003, more than 100,000 soldiers, rebels, and child-soldiers have been demobilized.

There are many child soldiers who never get to know the centers. This is the reality – they are walking and trying to find. But they will never find or be found. We need more so that they too can be found and join the others.

I thank every government which contributed to such a realization so that every child can be like that child sitting next to us e.g. the Swiss Government. It makes me hope. And for those governments who have not yet joined this important call I hope that they will soon.

At the age of eight, **China Keitetsi**, born in Uganda



in 1976, got into a recruitment-camp of the Ugandan Resistance Army NRA which was led by today's president Yoweri Museveni and was given a new name: "China." After Museveni's victory 1986, China Keitetsi became

a bodyguard of a high-ranking functionary before changing to the Military Police. At the age of 19 she escaped to South Africa where she was tracked down by the secret service of Uganda and heavily maltreated. In 1999 she arrived in Denmark with the help of the UNHCR. In order to overcome her experiences, China Keitetsi wrote down her story which was published under the title "Fighting for my life." China Keitetsi gives lectures on the problematic nature of child soldiers all over Europe, the USA, Canada, and Japan; she has spoken at the United Nations, UNESCO, and the German Parliament. She is supported by many organizations such as UNICEF, Amnesty International, Terre des hommes, Oxfam, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. In 2004 China Keitetsi founded "Hilfe für ehemalige Kindersoldaten und afrikanische Kriegsopfer e.V." ("Help for former child soldiers and African war victims e.V.") with the intention to build a center for the reintegration of former child soldiers in Rwanda. She has been awarded the "Certificate of Appreciation for dedication and commitment to translating the ideals of human rights into practical reality: Ambassador for Human Rights." Her second book "Tränen zwischen Himmel und Erde" (Tears between Heaven and Earth) appeared in September 2007.