

## **Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers**

### **Forum on armed groups and the involvement of children in armed conflict Chateau de Bossey, Switzerland, 4 to 7 July 2006**

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#### **Sierra Leone**

#### **The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) Trying to influence an army of children**

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#### **The Sierra Leone civil war**

In March 1991 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), at that time a very small group of about 500 soldiers, crossed from Liberia into the eastern district of Pujehun in Sierra Leone, with the support of a faction of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor. RUF leader Foday Sankoh declared that the Front's objective was to overthrow the corrupt one-party government of the All People's Congress (APC) and the President, Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh, and bring democracy to the country.

On 29 April 1992 Sierra Leone junior army officers, apparently frustrated by the government's failure to deal with the rebels, seized power in a coup, overthrowing President Momoh. Captain Valentine Strasser became president of the newly formed National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). War continued through 1993 and in January 1994 the NPRC declared "total war" on the RUF. During January 1995 fighting continued with raids in central and northern regions of Sierra Leone and attacks on the hills surrounding Freetown.<sup>1</sup>

In February 1996 Strasser was ousted by Brigadier Julius Maada Bio as chairman of the NPRC in a bloodless coup. Following presidential elections in February and March 1996, won by Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, the government entered into the first peace negotiations with the RUF (the Abidjan process). In May 1997, another coup brought mutinous members of the Sierra Leonean Army to power. The new junta, known as the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), invited the RUF to join it in government. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah fled to exile in neighbouring Guinea.

In March 1988 troops from the West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), established by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reinstalled Kabbah in a settlement agreed with the AFRC, although fighting continued.

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<sup>1</sup> Conciliation Resources, *Paying the Price: The Sierra Leone peace process*, Accord Series, Issue 9, 2000, <http://www.c-r.org/accord/s-leone/index.shtml>.

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In January 1999 AFRC and RUF troops attacked Freetown. Their siege of the capital left over 5,000 people, predominantly unarmed civilians, dead. Kabbah was under pressure by the international community and local leaders to enter into peace negotiations with the RUF. Detailed peace negotiations between the Sierra Leone government and the RUF began in Lomé, Togo, on 25 May 1999, leading to a peace agreement in July. However, fighting resumed in May 2000 and continued until the final peace agreement in January 2002.<sup>2</sup>

**The RUF: revolutionary ideals turned ideology of terror**

The RUF was created around 1982 by a small number of disenfranchised Sierra Leonean intellectuals with an ambiguous revolutionary ideology with a poorly articulated socialist agenda.<sup>3</sup> The RUF's pledge to fight against the one-party system, imposed by the All People's Congress since independence in 1961, and for a more transparent and democratic state, initially received some popular support across ethnic and religious lines. However, until the RUF invasion, the group was relatively unknown. The increase in RUF activity was largely due to both the fight for control of Sierra Leone's mineral resources (a dominant factor driving the RUF for most of the war), and the impact of external influences, especially the spread of the Liberian civil war into Sierra Leone.

The military strength of the RUF was increased by considerable support from the NPFL, formed by Charles Taylor, one of the warring factions in the Liberian civil war, Burkinabè mercenaries, and the provision of military training to RUF fighters from Libya. Liberia, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya reportedly also provided the RUF with military equipment.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the RUF's original ideology was lost among RUF fighters themselves, since a large proportion were in fact Liberian rebels fighting for their own cause. Moreover, any initial popular support that the group had enjoyed in the past was undermined by its use of intimidation and terror tactics.

The RUF carried out massive forced recruitment and numbered over 24,000 by 1999. A large number of RUF officers were under 18 and most of the higher ranking officers shared very little of the group's initial ideology.

For most of the war the RUF's leadership was personalized in its founder, Foday Sankoh, who controlled all RUF policies throughout the war, even when he was imprisoned in Nigeria and later in Sierra Leone. Released under the amnesty provided for by the July 1999 Lomé agreement, his subsequent re-arrest in May 2000 was pivotal to the RUF's change of policy with regard to reaching a settled

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<sup>2</sup> A meeting chaired by the UN in Abuja, Nigeria, in May 2001, marked a renewed commitment to peace and set the stage for a resumption of demobilization on a wide scale. The war was declared officially over on 18 January 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Note from Christiana Solomon, Director of West Africa Network to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, London, May 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (eds.), *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, Small Arms Survey, May 2005, p. 370, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/books.htm>.

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agreement with the Sierra Leonean government, as until then, the group had shown little willingness to negotiate.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear what was the leadership structure of the RUF. Although some authors claim that there was a group of highly educated people at the top, RUF representatives during the peace negotiations reportedly did not appear to be highly educated.<sup>6</sup>

**Recruitment of children into the RUF as a military instrument and the influence of war on children**

Children were recruited by all parties to the Sierra Leone civil war. Official figures by the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reunification, and Reintegration (NCDDR) show that 5,400 children were officially demobilized from the armed forces and armed groups at the end of the war in 2002.<sup>7</sup> However, estimates of actual numbers of children who at some point actively participated in the conflict range between 10,000 and 30,000.<sup>8</sup> Many former child combatants from the RUF and other factions were young adults at the end of the war and were demobilized as adults.

During the first few months of the rebellion the RUF carried out massive recruitment of young children. Child abduction and recruitment continued for most of the civil war and intensified again towards its end.

At the beginning the RUF had very few fighters and desperately needed more. More than half of the population was under 15 years old, had few opportunities for education and employment and had been abused as child workers in mines and in other employment for decades.<sup>9</sup> Children in the RUF suffered the same forms of terror that civilians suffered at hands of RUF leaders, and were instructed themselves to commit these atrocities.

The vast majority of children associated with the RUF were forcibly recruited or had joined for fear of reprisals: some were taken hostage, some forced to join to prevent the killing of family members, while others were forced to kill a relative or villager so that they would be stigmatized by their community and forced to join for lack of any viable alternative. These patterns of recruitment are consistent with a wider pattern of behaviour exhibited by the RUF throughout the civil war: destruction

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<sup>5</sup> Foday Sankoh was captured in the hills behind Freetown in May 2000 and taken into custody. He died in custody from natural causes in July 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Coalition Interviews with three witnesses of the Lomé peace process, Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, *The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of children associated with the fighting forces, lessons learned in Sierra Leone, 1998-2002*, July 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Coalition meeting with UNICEF, Freetown, September 2005. Amnesty International estimated in August 2000 that more than 10,000 children had been associated with the fighting forces until then, 5,000 in combat positions. Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: Childhood – a casualty of conflict* (AI Index: AFR 51/69/00), 31 August 2000, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>.

<sup>9</sup> David Lord, "The Struggle for power in Sierra Leone", in Conciliation Resources, *Paying the Price: The Sierra Leone peace process*, op. cit.

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and annihilation.<sup>10</sup> Livelihoods and communities were destroyed so children had nowhere to return to if they decided to leave the group.

***War tactics reflected on children***

The RUF soon lost the support of the population and resorted to intimidation and cruel practices carried out by and against their own child combatants. From the moment they entered Sierra Leone they fought a war of occupation, where the occupied, mostly children, were forcibly recruited as soldiers.

Children were specifically targeted for recruitment. Very small children, some as young as nine, were recruited by the RUF as a tactic of war. Not having a wide popular base, the RUF could not rely on voluntary recruitment or even conscription of adults to fill their ranks but they needed to enlarge a group that was both very small and formed mainly of Liberian fighters. The RUF targeted two groups in particular: adults with a relatively high level of education, who were offered the chance to become commanders; and very small children who apparently showed little or no fear and were easier to manipulate.

At the beginning of the war, some young adults in the east were swayed by RUF ideology and the prospect of holding positions of authority, particularly in areas where there were limited job opportunities. However, death threats against them or their families soon replaced any remaining ideology and quickly became the main motivating force for them to join. Very young children were abducted, forced to commit atrocities, sometimes against their own family and communities, and used as soldiers in combat.

***External influences***

The use of children by the RUF was also influenced by the use of children by the Liberian factions, especially Charles Taylor's NPFL forces. The majority of soldiers fighting with the RUF in the first months of the conflict were Liberian fighters who brought with them some of the tactics used in Liberia, including the widespread use of children. Thousands of children, including under-15s, had been consistently used by the NPFL during the war in Liberia. As with the RUF, most children were abducted and some were forced to witness the killing or torture of members of their own families and were given drugs.<sup>11</sup>

The use of children by the NPFL as a weapon of war has its origins in tactics used by the *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (RENAMO), Mozambican National Resistance, in Mozambique. Human Rights Watch reported the use of children by RENAMO in very similar circumstances to the use of children by the RUF (see below). According to Human Rights Watch, thousands of Mozambican children were recruited -- mostly abducted -- by RENAMO, especially at times when there was a shortage of adult males. As in the case of the RUF, many children in RENAMO were

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, youth and resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Easy Prey: Child Soldiers in Liberia*, September 1994, <http://www.hrw.org>.

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used in operations against civilians, including food requisition, and were given drugs by their commanders.<sup>12</sup>

***Role of children within the RUF***

The RUF used under-18s in all kinds of roles, including combat, from the beginning of the war. Some estimates indicate that at times up to 70 per cent of all RUF fighters were children.<sup>13</sup> Many of the RUF commanders, especially towards the end of the conflict, were under the age of 18. More experienced commanders were at the front, while commanders at the rear were often children themselves.

In some areas, children younger than 16 were reportedly not used in combat roles for fear of being captured and made informants. They were used in “civilian relations”, that is, in intimidation operations, looting in the communities controlled by the RUF, and other more serious abuses.<sup>14</sup> In other areas, children as young as 12 were given military training, including in the use of firearms, and sent to the front. Towards the end of the conflict there was no minimum age for receiving military training or taking part in combat.<sup>15</sup>

The role of girls, as in most conflicts, was underreported. Although some girls took part in combat operations, most of them were assigned to officers as “wives” and subjected to sexual exploitation. Younger girls would be used as domestic help in the homes of commanders and later taken to camps to fight. The pattern of sexual abuse became much more widespread from 1995 onwards.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the conflict, it was common for senior commanders to give drugs to children to “improve” the quality of their fighting, a practice which intensified from 1995 onwards.

Atrocities committed by children were attributed by both the RUF and local communities to a lack of maturity of the children, as well as to the use of drugs. However, as noted above, children were routinely forced to commit atrocities against their own communities as a weapon of war, deliberately ostracizing and brutalizing them.

***Involvement of children with the RUF -- only through abduction?***

The RUF had some genuine youth support, mainly from highly educated rebellious youths who identified with the group’s discourse for democracy and a better distribution of natural resources, only at the very beginning of the war, when the RUF was opposed to the APC’s one-party authoritarian policies.<sup>17</sup> Many commanders themselves had heard Foday Sankoh speak of democracy on the BBC’s *Focus on*

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<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch Children’s Rights Project, *Children in Combat*, January 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Post-Conflict Reintegration Initiative for Development and Empowerment (PRIDE) and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), *Ex-Combatant Views of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court in Sierra Leone*, 12 September 2002, <http://www.ictj.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Coalition interview with former RUF commanders in Kono, November 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Coalition interview with former RUF nurse from Kalahum in Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Coalition interviews with former RUF commander in Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>17</sup> “Youth” in this context covers a broad age range, and refers primarily to unmarried men.

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*Africa* but did not join the RUF until they were given no choice by the advance of the RUF invading their villages and communities. Fear, lack of economic alternatives and perhaps some sympathy for Sankoh's rhetoric played a part in the recruitment of some of the higher and medium commanders and possibly some of the older children. However, given the massive intimidation of civilians and the destruction of territories under RUF control, this meagre popular base quickly diminished.

Although most recruitment took place through kidnapping or intimidation, some youths, primarily disaffected rural and urban marginal youths, were attracted to the RUF, which appeared to represent a plausible alternative and the chance to resume some sort of "education" and be "respected" (if not feared).

Similarly, some "voluntary" recruitment took place in the east, especially at the beginning of the war in Kailahun District and in the RUF stronghold of Kono.<sup>18</sup> In some cases families apparently gave their children to the RUF voluntarily.<sup>19</sup> Voluntary recruitment by children was particularly widespread among child workers in the diamond mines in eastern district of Kono.<sup>20</sup> As the RUF expanded towards the northwest, however, forced recruitment became increasingly important, to the extent that nearly all children recruited in Makeni were abducted and forced to join the RUF.

**Efforts to influence the RUF to stop child recruitment**

Although the international community was aware of the use of children as soldiers by all parties throughout the conflict, it was only at the time of the Lomé peace process in 1999 that international organizations and agencies began to consistently and publicly condemn child soldiering in Sierra Leone.

Prior to 1999, opportunities to influence the RUF were extremely limited as the RUF was demonstrably reluctant to enter into negotiations. For much of the war Foday Sankoh dictated a policy of virtually no negotiation, allowing for very little contact with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governments.

Most efforts to engage or influence the RUF made by UN agencies, international NGOs and even other governments focused on gaining humanitarian access. Contacts on other issues were virtually impossible for most of the conflict. Humanitarian negotiations were difficult given the RUF's lack of regard for the population in areas under its control, as demonstrated by its policies of intimidation and destruction of homes and lands.

Local organizations, including local and traditional authorities, were also regarded as government supporters, and often shunned by the RUF. Although the RUF maintained a non-religious ideology, many of its members were Christian or Muslim. RUF members are reported to have held religious leaders in high regard, and local religious leaders appear to have had more influence over the RUF than other actors (see below).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Coalition interview with Chief of Prosecutions of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), November 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Coalition interview with former RUF nurse from Kalahum in Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Coalition meetings with Paramount Chief and local authorities in Koedu, November 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Coalition interviews for former RUF soldiers, Makeni, December 2005.

***Efforts by the international community, international NGOs and the media***

From the beginning, international human rights organizations were very active in denouncing human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict. These NGOs reported widespread and systematic RUF abuses against unarmed civilians including killings, torture, sexual abuse, abductions and obstruction of humanitarian assistance.<sup>22</sup> Most reports included examples of child recruitment by the parties to the conflict, including the RUF, especially from 1999.<sup>23</sup>

From 1999 onwards the UN system consistently and publicly denounced child recruitment in Sierra Leone, as well as other abuses committed against children. For instance, in September 1999 the UN Secretary-General, in his Eighth Report on the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), stated that “the plight of children is among the most pressing challenges currently facing Sierra Leone”.<sup>24</sup>

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict carried out several missions to Sierra Leone between May 1998 and July 2002. On his first visit, he obtained commitments from the government and the pro-government Civil Defence Forces (CDF) to stop child recruitment. The RUF made commitments only in September 1999, after the start of the Lomé peace process in May that year. It agreed to facilitate the necessary security arrangements for a humanitarian team of UNAMSIL (UN Mission in Sierra Leone) and UNICEF representatives working on the demobilization of child soldiers, and committed to end child recruitment.<sup>25</sup>

Following initial peace talks at the beginning of 1999, some international NGOs, including International Alert, gained limited access to the RUF to support the peace process, while NGOs that had some access to RUF commanders for humanitarian issues were able to include issues such as the release of child soldiers in their contacts. However, between 2000 and 2001 most relief agencies refused to work in areas controlled by the RUF, in line with a UN-led policy of isolation in response to the AFRC-RUF attack on Freetown in January 1999. However, despite this policy, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Action Contre la Faim (ACF) continued to engage with the RUF and AFRC, in the belief that isolation would not change RUF behaviour, nor would it promote protection of the population.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, Human Rights Watch, *Sierra Leone: Getting away with murder mutilation and rape*, June 1999, and *Sowing Terror: Atrocities against civilians in Sierra Leone*, July 1998.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone, Childhood – a casualty of conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Coalition meeting with Chief of Prosecutions, SCSL, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> UN Security Council, Eighth Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone, UN Doc. S/1999/1003, 28 September 1999, <http://www.un.org/Depts/DPKO/Missions/unomsil/Unomsil.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> UN Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, [www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/English/SierraLeone.html](http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/English/SierraLeone.html), accessed January 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Max P. Glaser, *Humanitarian Engagement with Non-state Armed Actors: The parameters of negotiated access*, Humanitarian Practice Network paper No. 51, London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005, <http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/hpnpapers.html>.

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It was only after 1999 that negotiations between humanitarian agencies and the RUF on the release of child soldiers took place.<sup>27</sup> UNICEF was unable to negotiate a comprehensive release of children with the RUF for most of the conflict although, even before 1999, they did have sporadic negotiations at the local level in some villages and towns.<sup>28</sup>

The reluctance of the RUF leadership to negotiate the release of child soldiers does not mean that its members were unaware of the prohibition on child recruitment under international law or of efforts being made at international and local levels to stop child recruitment in Sierra Leone.

The Sierra Leone conflict was arguably the first conflict where the international media focused extensively on the use of children in war, considerably raising awareness of the issue. RUF commanders and soldiers were aware of this international attention, mainly through their access to international radio stations, and therefore knew that the use of child soldiers was a violation of international humanitarian law, but this had no impact on child soldier use for most of the conflict, and even during later peace negotiations the impact was minimal.

Most former RUF members contacted by the Child Soldiers Coalition, regardless of their rank, were aware that from early on in the war there was strong international condemnation of the RUF use of child soldiers. Middle and lower commanders obtained information from the international media, especially satellite TV and radio, to which most soldiers had access: Voice of America (VOA), *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), *Deutsche Welle* (DW), and more importantly BBC World Service, which quite frequently broadcast bulletins about the use of child soldiers by the RUF and other parties to the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

The role of Sierra Leone state radio was less important. RUF members contacted by the Coalition have stated that while they were allowed to listen to international radio, they were forbidden by their commanders to listen to state radio in an attempt to block government propaganda.

***Local organizations and child recruitment by the RUF***

Dialogue between local and national organizations and institutions and the RUF was very limited throughout the war, especially outside the RUF's stronghold in the east. In the north, for instance, which the RUF occupied for nearly three years, local chiefs and elders were too intimidated to approach RUF commanders on matters such as human rights.<sup>30</sup>

Nor was the local environment conducive to enabling national organizations to engage with the RUF. An attempt to enter into dialogue with the RUF often led

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<sup>27</sup> Coalition interview with interagency representatives in Kono, November 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Coalition interviews with UNICEF staff in Freetown and Makeni, November 2005. For instance, 340 children released by the RUF between September 1997 and January 1998 were successfully reunited with their families by UNICEF.

<sup>29</sup> Coalition interviews for former RUF soldiers, Makeni, December 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Coalition interviews with the Paramount Chief of Bombali Shebora Chiefdom and chiefs and elders in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone, December 2005.

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such an organization to be branded a “collaborator”, ostracized by the community and harassed by the government.<sup>31</sup>

The RUF maintained a façade of accessibility to the communities it occupied through the so-called “G5”, a kind of community liaison officer structure within the group. In theory, these officers were in charge of civilian welfare. In practice, they acted as conveyors of instructions from the RUF commanders to the population on issues such as confiscation of land or food.<sup>32</sup>

There was, however, an important role for civil society groups in indirect engagement with the RUF, especially religious or inter-confessional groups, such as the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone. Although the RUF’s ideology was non-religious, the group had followers of various faiths and it showed a degree of respect for religious institutions. Pastors and priests in some places had some success in approaching RUF commanders.<sup>33</sup>

In some areas, local organizations with a religious background had limited access to RUF commanders for humanitarian negotiations provided they were seen as impartial and could guarantee confidentiality. For example the chairman of CARITAS-Makeni, the Bishop of Makeni, succeeded in obtaining the release of some children from the RUF after the Lomé process started in May 1999. RUF Commanders in Makeni who signed the release orders signalled it was a “gesture” towards the peace process and a sign of trust in the Holy Church.<sup>34</sup>

CARITAS-Makeni launched a campaign to end the use of child combatants in March 2000 and made public a Declaration of Commitment to the Release of Child Combatants and Child Abductees, signed by the government, the CDF and the AFRC, although the RUF declined to sign the declaration.<sup>35</sup>

***The Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone (ICSL)***

The ICSL was arguably the most important community player around the Lomé peace process. It was created in 1996 by the Christian and Muslim spiritual leaders of Sierra Leone. The Council was inspired primarily by religious beliefs in the promotion of social justice, by the example of the Inter-Religious Council in Liberia and by calls from their membership to be more proactive in the peace process. The Council had a large network of religious leaders in every region of Sierra Leone.

Unlike most local organizations, the ICSL gained the respect of the RUF leadership because of its religious nature and impartiality. In March 1999 President Kabbah allowed the ICSL to meet Foday Sankoh to discuss the opening of peace talks.

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<sup>31</sup> Note from Christiana Solomon, Director of West Africa Network to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, May 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Coalition interview with Campaign for Good Governance representatives in Makeni, December 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Coalition interview with the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone (ICSL), Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Coalition interview with Caritas Makeni, Makeni, December 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Coalition interview with Caritas Makeni, op. cit.

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In April 1999 when RUF leaders met members of the ICSL in the bush for the first time, in a surprise move, 32 children were handed over as a sign of goodwill towards the peace process. This was the first time the RUF had publicly released child soldiers, and indicated their awareness of child soldiering as a political issue.<sup>36</sup>

The ICSL continued to play an important role throughout the peace process and together with other human rights organizations was granted observer status and invited to attend the Lomé peace talks.<sup>37</sup>

### **A timid change in RUF child recruitment policy driven by the peace process**

While some former RUF members have claimed that guidelines not to recruit children existed, there is no written evidence of these, or of any official policy against the recruitment of children.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, such claims would hardly be credible given the RUF's persistent targeting of children for recruitment and the high percentage of under-18s in its ranks.

The year 1999 marked the beginning of an international outcry against child recruitment by all parties to the conflict in Sierra Leone. Some of the first signs of a possible change in attitude by the RUF leadership were the limited releases of children for demobilization from 1999 onwards and the commitments made to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in September 1999. These changes appear to be linked to the Lomé peace process, which started in May 1999.

Although the Lomé peace agreement of July 1999 included important provisions regarding the special needs of child combatants, it did not contain provisions regarding the obligation of the parties, including the RUF, to demobilize children from their ranks.<sup>39</sup> At the time of signing the peace agreement RUF commanders had no fear of possible indictments for child recruitment as there was no talk yet of a special tribunal on crimes associated with the conflict and the Lomé agreement controversially included an amnesty for "anything done [by the parties to the conflict] in pursuit of their objectives".<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Coalition meeting with the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Negotiating Justice? Human Rights and Peace Agreements*, 2006, <http://www.ichrp.org>.

<sup>38</sup> Coalition interviews with former RUF commanders in Makeni, Kono and Freetown, November 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Lomé Peace Agreement (Ratification) Act 1999, Part 5, Article XXX, Child Combatants: "The Government shall accord particular attention to the issue of child soldiers. It shall, accordingly, mobilize resources, both within the country and from the International Community, and especially through the Office of the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, UNICEF and other agencies, to address the special needs of these children in the existing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes." See <http://www.sierra-leone.org/lomeaccord.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Lomé Peace Agreement (Ratification) Act 1999, op. cit., Part 3, Article IX, Pardon and Amnesty (extract): "... the Government of Sierra Leone shall ensure that no official or judicial action is taken against any member of the RUF/SL, ex-AFRC, ex-SLA or CDF in respect of anything done by them in pursuit of their objectives as members of those organisations, since March 1991, up to the time of the signing of the present Agreement."

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On 14 August 2000 the UN Security Council called for the creation of an independent special court to prosecute those bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international crimes under relevant Sierra Leonean law.<sup>41</sup> However, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) was only officially created on 16 January 2002, after the final peace agreement, and it was only in March 2004, when the war was well over, that the court refused to recognize the applicability to crimes against humanity and war crimes of the national amnesty granted in the 1999 Lomé peace agreement.<sup>42</sup>

These important measures came too late to modify the use of child soldiers during the conflict and when the Lomé peace process collapsed in May 2000, child recruitment by the RUF continued unabated until the last stages of the war. In May 2000 S.W.B. Rogers, a RUF spokesman, was quoted as saying that “the RUF only use older boys to fight, from ten or eleven upwards”.<sup>43</sup>

The role of RUF leader Foday Sankoh is key to understanding the actual RUF policy on child recruitment. The RUF operated under a very strict hierarchy and was totally dominated by Sankoh. He frequently denied that the RUF had abducted children and until the beginning of the Lomé peace agreement, the group did not admit publicly that they used children and failed to release any of them. As late as March 2000 Sankoh claimed that the RUF had not abducted any children but had “rescued” them and was not holding any of them captive.<sup>44</sup> His arrest on 17 May 2000, and subsequent apparent refusal to discuss child soldiers, stopped any possibility of further demobilization of children until the end of the conflict.

***Why were children not released from the RUF?***

As stated above, it seems clear that the issue of child soldiers was linked to the political process. As long as peace negotiations were out of the question for the RUF leadership, so was any openness to discussing the release of child soldiers.

RUF military considerations cannot be ignored. Much of the child recruitment by the RUF took place at the beginning of the war, driven by the need to quickly and dramatically increase the number of fighters. Likewise, as the RUF expanded westwards, they again found a need to recruit new soldiers in the new territories under their control.

Moreover, the general context of child recruitment by all parties to the conflict did not encourage RUF willingness to release child soldiers. In particular, it was at

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<sup>41</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1315 (2000), <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/2000/sc2000.htm>; Coalition meeting with Chief of Prosecutions, SCSL, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Amnesty International, *Special Court on Sierra Leone: A historic decision to reject amnesty for crimes under international law* (AI Index: AFR 51/006/2004), 18 March 2004. The Special Court later indicted 13 people for war crimes, including recruitment of children under 15. Five alleged leaders of the RUF were indicted by the SCSL separately in 2003.

<sup>43</sup> “Sierra Leone - The battle for Freetown”, Africa Confidential, Vol. 41, No. 10, May 2000, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/bpl/afco>. See also Radda Barnen, Children and War Newsletter, July 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: Childhood – a casualty of conflict*, op. cit.

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the end of the war that the pro-government CDF increased the recruitment of children.

The release of children was problematic in itself from a military point of view. Some RUF commanders have claimed that the RUF wanted to release the children in the ranks but could not do so because they wanted to protect the children from the enemy; others have stated that the real motivation was that they were afraid that the children, once demobilized, would reveal sensitive information to the enemy.<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the case of the RUF, the issue of child soldiers was directly linked to the political process. As long as the RUF refused any kind of contact with the outside world to begin peace negotiations, it was impossible to raise with them the issue of child soldiers (and many other human rights and humanitarian questions).

However, international attention did have an impact on the RUF, shown by the fact that, as soon as the group entered into a peace dialogue, they released some child soldiers in what could be interpreted as a gesture to show their willingness to abide by international law.

Unlike other cases where child soldiers were released before the conflict was over, such as Sri Lanka or Sudan, no parties to the Sierra Leone conflict seriously considered the demobilization of child soldiers until the end of the war.

In spite of the RUF's formal refusal to negotiate with third parties, it did allow interaction with religious groups when they considered these groups impartial, genuinely local, and representative of all the religious beliefs of the RUF soldiers.

The case of the RUF may serve to understand some aspects of child recruitment by armed groups which are not responsive to pressure by the international community or humanitarian organizations or which are unwilling to enter into peace negotiations, such as the Lord Resistance's Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda. Both the RUF and the LRA have recruited a large number of children as soldiers, mostly by abduction or force, as well as having a very limited leadership structure, depending mainly on a single charismatic leader.

There are, however, three main differences between the RUF and the LRA:

1. The RUF decided to begin negotiations when their leader was arrested. LRA leader Joseph Kony is still at large.
2. It was only after the AFRC-RUF attack on Freetown in January 1999 that the Sierra Leonean government understood that even with a weaker RUF, the military option was not viable. In the case of Uganda, the Ugandan government is persuaded that it can beat the LRA militarily.
3. RUF commanders entered peace negotiations without knowing that there would be a Special Court that would indict its main leaders for war crimes. In the case of Uganda, the International Criminal Court has already announced

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<sup>45</sup> Coalition interview with Hope Sierra Leone, an organization of former RUF combatants, Kono, November 2005.

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the indictment of five members of the LRA, including Joseph Kony, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it would be wrong to think that there is no risk of another civil war in Sierra Leone where children could be used as soldiers. It is true that a group very similar to the RUF is unlikely to exist again, especially because it developed mostly as an extension of the Liberian civil war into Sierra Leone. It is also true that most children who fought with the RUF were kidnapped and forced to join. But many others (adults and children) joined as an alternative to poverty, exploitation, marginalization and lack of opportunities. Most of these factors, which played an important role in fuelling the conflict dragging thousands of children into it, remain. The international community must not become complacent and should continue supporting Sierra Leonean children at this point in time.<sup>47</sup>

**Further points for discussion**

- The impact of indictments by the Special Court for Sierra Leone (the first indictments for child recruitment by an international criminal court) on child recruitment policies of current armed opposition groups elsewhere should be analysed, as should the impact of post-conflict amnesties.
- In spite of the non-religious nature of the RUF ideology, it was the religious leaders of Sierra Leone who had the most access to the group for the release of child soldiers and ultimately brokered the peace agreement. Those seeking to influence other hard-line armed groups (those less permeable to influence by the international community) on child recruitment should look at factors contributing to the access and role of religious and community leaders in the case of Sierra Leone.
- The stated fear of armed groups that children might be used for intelligence purposes by the armed forces or the government is often cited as a reason for not releasing children into demobilization programs and poses a significant challenge to humanitarian organizations engaged in negotiations for their release.

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<sup>46</sup> In July 2005 the court issued sealed arrest warrants against Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and four other LRA leaders; the warrants were unsealed and publicly announced in October. Alleged crimes include abduction of children to serve as soldiers.

<sup>47</sup> As of January 2005 the European Union (EU) was reviewing its Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict. Among other amendments, it decided to withdraw Sierra Leone from its list of priority countries for EU assistance to children in armed conflict.