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## 'Smallest Victims; Youngest Killers': Juvenile Combatants in Sierra Leone's Civil War

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We feared them. They were cruel and hard hearted; even more than the adults. They don't know what is sympathy; what is good and bad. If you beg an older one you may convince him to spare you, but the younger ones, they don't know what is sympathy, what is mercy. Those who have been rebels for so long have never learned it.

Once, a rebel, a small boy in full combats, he couldn't have been more than twelve, called everyone out of the house across the street. The papa of the family, Pa Kamara, said, please my son, leave my family, but the boy said, listen, we can do anything we want in Freetown. We don't have mothers, we don't have fathers. We can do anything we wanna do. And that is how Pa Kamara died; the rebel boy shot him, in front of his wife, his children, his grandchildren. They are wicked, those boy soldiers. They spare no human life. [Adama, a 42-year-old secretary (Human Rights Watch, *Sierra Leone: Sowing the Seeds of Terror*, 1999)].

Late one evening, a ten-year old with a pistol came, alone, into our house. He told my husband his commander was hungry and wanted one of our chickens. While my husband was catching the hen, that boy sat down to wait. He was thin and exhausted. I brought him a biscuit and water. He said he was tired and weak and as he left with the chicken, he turned to me and said, 'thank you, mam'.

Later my neighbours criticized me for giving him that biscuit. I said I didn't care if he was a rebel or not. He's still somebody's child. May be he was abducted. God knows what they've done to him. I wanted to hide that boy and take him with us as we fled and just knew he would've come with us if he'd had the chance'. [Zainab, a 24-year-old market vendor (Human Rights Watch, *Sierra Leone: Sowing the Seeds of Terror*, 1999)].

The above quotations capture the two dominant approaches – conscious actors or villains – in the study of juvenile combatants in the civil wars raging across Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Machel, 1996). Both quotations, however, presents the problem in the form of a binary either/or situation: children are either seen as conscious agents, 'fighting with their eyes wide open' or as victims of wars they had no hand in originating (Peters and Richards, 1998). This either/or problematic, raises the old argument of structure versus agency. Are juvenile combatants willing partners in war or are they reluctant actors being manipulated by unscrupulous army officers and warlords who press-ganged them into action with drugs after destroying their families and communities? When is agency not agency; or is structure a one-way street that leads only in one direction? These questions are difficult to answer but they begin to cast some doubt on the explanatory power of an either/or problematic. To get away from this binary, this chapter examines the problem from the point of view of labour recruitment and mobilization. It argues that the initial recruitment drive by the rebels and the national army in Sierra Leone did not involve juvenile combatants, that juvenile combatants only became a factor after it became evident that able bodied adults were either difficult to come by or were just not available. As the war progressed from the border region to engulf the whole country, the increasing presence of juvenile combatants became a marked feature of the RUF. As in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, the atrocities committed by juvenile combatants were seen as work by their RUF commanders. Commanders repeatedly congratulated their juvenile combatants for work well done, seeing the whole machinery of violence as part of the labour process of war (Mamdani, 2000). Key to understanding the phenomenon of juvenile combatant is the centrality of labour.

The exploitation of child labour is common to all societies throughout history. One of the most insidious forms of child labour is the use of children as combatants and auxiliaries in war. Children have participated in military conflicts in Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa. In Angola, Somalia, Uganda, Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia, children as young as seven years have been armed and allowed to participate in senseless civil wars (Machel, 1996; Dodge and Raundalen, 1991; Furley, 1995; Wessels, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 1994; Honwana, 1999). Between 1991 and 1999, the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces, the RUF and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) used children who were 15 years and younger in combat and support roles in their war effort. Whereas the RUF abducted, kidnapped, and press-ganged their juvenile combatants, the Sierra Leone army and the CDF seemed to have been swamped by under-age volunteers eager to avenge the death of their loved ones. All three military machines however fed drugs to their under-aged

combatants, encouraged them to commit atrocities, and deployed them in dangerous frontline positions (Interview with demobilised juvenile combatants, 1996; 2000).

### Juvenile combatants: Towards an explanation

From 1991 to 2000, Sierra Leone experienced a brutal and nasty war that engulfed all regions of the country and all sections of the population. From the moment when the RUF fired its first bullet in Bomaru village in March 1991 with the ostensible objective of ousting the decadent APC regime of Major-General J.S. Momoh, to the combined RUF/AFRC invasion of Freetown in January 1999, the country experienced an unprecedented orgy of violence, destruction and untold human suffering. Close to 50,000 people were killed or maimed in the process. Another 300,000 persons were internally displaced or fled into exile in Guinea, Liberia, the Gambia and Ghana. Nearly all the country's economic and social infrastructure disappeared under the rubble of the war. The war brought unprecedented social and economic disaster to the country.

The paradox of this brutal war was that children were its most vulnerable victims as well as some of its most vicious prosecutors. Between 1992 and 1996, more than 4,500 children were drawn into the war as spies, porters, sex-slaves, carriers and combatants for the RUF, the national army and later the CDF (Olanisakin, 2001). Children bore arms and took part in all aspects of the various military campaigns. They killed, collected and relayed intelligence, conducted reconnaissance mission, and disseminated propaganda (Human Rights Watch, 1994). Many children, particularly those who fought on the side of the RUF, took part in many atrocities, including the amputation and the disembowelment of pregnant women. Apart from fighting, children helped in the transportation of military supplies and looted items (Interview, 1996; 2000). Older male combatants raped female children or made them their 'concubines' or 'wives'. In the ten years of conflict, many young girls had their first sexual encounter with combatants, and grew into unwilling mothers and wives.

How do we make sense of these terrible crimes perpetrated by people barely old enough to go to school or pronounce their names correctly? What kind of society produces such murderous impulses and behaviour in children? What kind of military organizations arm such tender hands and then compel them to execute such hellish acts? Any research into the problem of juvenile combatants should start by looking at the partial disintegration of state and society in Sierra Leone in the 1980s and 1990s. This process arguably contributed to the weakening of social bonds and the restraining influences of family, communal and institutional structures. The state, for its part, could neither provide support to shore up these social structures nor establish any

lasting mechanisms to deal with the ensuing consequences. One of those consequences was the expansion in the pool of children who strayed away from home hanging out with lumpen youths and participating in their anti-social culture (Abdullah, 2002). This category of children, some in foster homes, others staying with blood or distant relatives, would become the partial reserve army for the warring factions, especially the RUF, and the national army.

If the partial disintegration of state and society constitute an appropriate point of departure for our understanding of the phenomenon of juvenile combatants, the character of the different contending factions in the war begins to explain why juvenile combatants are to be found in the current senseless wars raging across the continent (Furley, 1994). The RUF, the national army and the CDF share one thing in common: they were highly undisciplined. They lacked clear ideological focus, esprit-de-corps or guidelines on the conduct of war. For the RUF, this was not surprising since it drew its membership mainly from the lumpen urban and rural population. This population, long marginalized and alienated from mainstream society, felt no compulsion to conform to internationally agreed standards of war which protect innocent civilians, especially women and children. The RUF's idea of combat was the putting into practice of the cynical adage that all was fair in love and war. And as its leadership repeatedly pointed out, the ultimate goal was to 'level' Sierra Leone society and out of its ruins, create a new utopia. As the rate of attrition among its combatants increased with the prolongation of war, the RUF gradually lowered the age-range of its recruits by press-gang pre-teen boys, and some girls, to serve as combatants. There were no child soldiers amongst its ranks when the RUF entered Bomaru in 1991. Yet by 1997 when they occupied Freetown in alliance with the AFRC, half of their combatants were under-aged.

The national army, which was supposed to be the professional standing army of the country, behaved no better than the RUF. In the course of the war, it converted its boy-soldiers into active combatants. Like the RUF, it also recruited under-aged boys to create an auxiliary army of irregulars. These irregulars were put together early in the war by the late Lt. Ben Hirsch to serve specific purposes: intelligence gathering and support network in their home community. But as the war progressed these irregulars also came from the ranks of children who had been orphaned by the war, and made the revanchist decision to join the army to avenge the death of a loved one. In character and behaviour, these irregulars were no different from the combatants of the RUF. The morale and professionalism of the army declined almost in inverse proportion to the number of irregulars that were brought in its fold. The irregulars prosecuted the war with the same brutality and disregard for the civilian population as the RUF combatants. They became *sobelis*: soldiers

by day and rebels by night. In the blighted economic climate of war-time Sierra Leone, many destitute children and families came to regard the military and the war as a source of 'employment'.

While some children may have found 'employment' in the ranks of the RUF, not all child-soldiers 'voluntarily' joined the fray. As the testimony below demonstrate, majority were kidnapped and abducted from their homes, schools and communities. The RUF seized the children of families and the communities that it ravaged and converted them into military labour. Specific raids, such as the one in Pujehun in 1994 and Kambia town in 1996, were organized to capture young school children. The kidnapped or better still captured children experienced their initial baptism of fire when the older combatants forced drugs down their throats, threatened them with execution mafia-style or made them witness or participate in atrocities against their communities. Such initiation rituals were common with all the fighting forces more but so with the RUF; they went the extra mile to brand their recruits with RUF tatoos.

Why did the RUF and RSLMF use children in support and combat roles? Who made the decisions to recruit and employ children? What were the reasons they gave to support the recruitment of children? The first reason was the shortage of able-bodied male to fight for the RUF and the RSLMF. The high death toll, the wretched conditions of service, the meagre salary which forced some soldiers to augment their pay through looting or mining, the summary executions, and above all, the senselessness of the war, discouraged responsible adults from enlisting on either side. Unable to tap the labour of the adult population, the two main fighting factions turned to children and the under-aged. As the war progressed, more children and under-age combatants were recruited to serve in various capacities, so that by 1998, close to about 25 per cent of the fighting forces were children and the under-aged.

For the top military officials of the national army and the 'revolutionaries' of the RUF, children represented a cheap and exploitable form of labour. By 1993, the war had become a profitable business for the senior military officials in the NPRC. Millions of dollars were requisitioned and allocated for the army which never found its way to intended recipients. Some of them were 'ghost soldiers', many of them irregulars who had never been formally registered as recruits into the army. 'My intention was to stay with the military until I could get a number. It is only when I get a military number that I will start receiving my salary. Until then, I only get what my commander gives me' (Interview with demobilised juvenile combatant, October 1996). Apprenticed to an army officer, these child soldiers never got paid or receive any benefit. And the senior military officials rarely accounted for the allocations set aside for the 'irregulars', which included the child-soldiers, who were officially not in the army pay roll. Since the military were in control of state power during

the NPRC period, and various officers controlled their own little fiefdoms, no one could compel them to account for the allocations or even audit them. Regular soldiers in the military usually received salaries and compensation in loot. The military was less concerned with compensating juvenile 'irregulars'. These irregulars had less clout than regulars and because of their age and position had less inclination to resist authority. Most of their compensation came from the largesse, looted and otherwise, of their patron officers. The ability of the leadership of both the RSLMF and RUF to appropriate resources at the expense of child-soldiers made them more attractive than adults, especially if they could perform similar military functions like them.

By drawing children into their military organizations, the RUF and the national army deprived them of the protection, sustenance and authority of their families, communities and social institutions. This displacement or capture of parental responsibility was not a new phenomenon. Parents have routinely given up their children, particularly the troublesome ones, to the military to discipline them (Interview with rank and file soldiers, 2000). The institution thus became their surrogate parents. Once within military institutions, the children came under the heavy and despotic hand of older soldiers and combatants. The RUF underlined its own surrogacy over its child-soldiers with its national anthem: 'Go and tell my parents they can see me no more I am fighting forever' (*Foothpath to Democracy*, n.d.). The military institutions took over the role of 'disciplining,' or more exactly, manipulating these young minds to serve a variety of purposes.

In return for the 'discipline' and 'protection' that these institutions provided during the war, the officers and commanders, demanded the unflinching obedience of the child-soldiers. It is this blind obedience, usually bolstered by psychotropic drugs, that the military organizations manipulated to get children to commit an array of violent, destructive and atrocious acts. Older combatants, more independent and needing longer periods to break in, may question superiors, disobey orders or desert. Children rarely exercised such options because of fear and dependence on the protection of the military organizations. The harrowing confessions by ex-child soldiers point to conflicting 'zeal' and 'pain' with which they carried out their military duties (Interview with demobilised juvenile combatants, 2000).

Regardless of the zeal with which they executed their duties, child-soldiers were expendable to the two military organizations. The 'protection' and surrogatehood/ parenthood provided by the RUF and RSLMF were limited. Older combatants had greater access to scarce food resources during lean periods. Child-soldiers had the least access to resources and starved when food was unavailable or in short supplies. Child-soldiers were usually haggard, poorly attired and lean. One of the quotations at the beginning of this chapter captures the plight of the child soldier. His commander had sent him to get

chicken so that he can eat but the woman whose house he went to obtain the chicken noticed that he was lean, hungry and tired and therefore offered him biscuit and some water. The lives of child soldiers had the least worth. They performed dangerous tasks and were sometimes sent recklessly into dangerous military situations by their superiors to draw enemy fire. Without strong family or the communal ties or institutional protection, both the RUF and RSLMF had no obligation to account for their juvenile combatants, whether alive or dead. Many ex-juvenile combatants got missing. Families and communities are still trying to account for children who disappeared during the war between 1991 and 1998. Life and death is even more tragic and pitiful for destitute children whose family had given them up, even before the war.

### Telling their own story: Juvenile combatants speak

Below are four testimonies by juvenile combatants. Two of them were abducted by the RUF the other two willingly enrolled in the national army. One of these saw action with ULIMO-K – one of the armed factions in Liberian war – and later with the national army. The testimonies of those who fought with the national army were obtained from the office of the Children Associated with War project (CAW), those of the RUF were interviews conducted by us. The testimonies obtain from the Children Associated with War project are reproduced here as they appeared in the original.

In 1992, I was a form two student at the Koidu Secondary School in Koidu Town. Then on 23 October of the same year, rebels attacked Koidu Town. It was on this day that I got separated from my parents and family. The family had escaped to the town of Kwakor together with retreating soldiers of the Sierra Leone army. In the ensuing confusion, I got separated from the rest of my family. Because of this I was forced to stay with the soldiers. I knew no one else and the soldiers were kind to me. Later on, I learnt that my family had gone on to a village called Kamba Yondeh, which is near the Guinea border.

On the 25 October, news reaching the soldiers at Kwakor indicated that reinforcement from Freetown had recaptured the town of Koidu. So, that same day, the soldiers moved from Kwakor to join forces with the new comers in Koidu. I went together with the soldiers.

While I was with the soldiers at Kwakor, I came in contact with a former school mate called Tamba Komba. He was a soldier. I admired him so much that when we reached Koidu Town I asked him to recommend me for recruitment into his battalion. This he did, and on 28 October, just five days after the attack, I was recruited into the sixth battalion of the Sierra Leone Army based in Koidu Town, together with fourteen (14) other boys of about the same age group as vigilantes.

We were trained for a period of about two months. Our training was basically centred around the use and maintenance of the gun (cock and fire). We were also instructed on some ambushing techniques. After this short training, we were sent to fight in various places in the Kono District. Some of the places I fought included Njabwema, Manjama and Baidu.

It was in Manjama that I shot and killed my first rebel. We had caught and tied up a rebel suspect after we recaptured the village. I was ordered by our officer Lieutenant 'T' (then a Sergeant), to stay and guard the suspect till he was interviewed. My companions had gone into the house to loot. Then suddenly, the suspect got loose somehow and stood up. I was so scared that I ran and stood some distance from him. Then I started shouting and calling for help. No one came to help. I was so small and the man was such a big fellow. When the man saw that I was scared he started backing away from me. It was then that I realised I held a gun in my hands. There and then I became bold and told him to stand still or I would fire. At this, he turned sharply and began to run. I followed him slowly. He turned and saw me following, so he stopped and stepped into some bushes by the side of a hut. I called him to come out or I would fire. There was no response from the bush. After some time I thought he had escaped and gone further into the bush, so I decided to fire some shoots after him so that I would tell my boss that I tried to stop him but he ran faster. I set my gun to rapid position and let go at the bush. I was really surprised when I heard a cry of pain coming from the bush. I removed my fingers from the trigger and listened. On hearing the shots my companions left their looting and raced to where I was standing. I couldn't answer any of their questions until our officer himself came rushing up to the scene of the firing. I explained exactly what had happened. The officer then ordered some of the men to enter the bush and investigate. They came out barely two minutes later dragging the body of the rebel suspect between them. I will never forget that sight. The bullets had entered his one side and came out with all his intestines on the other side. I felt very bad for the rest of the day and night. I could not eat anything for almost two days. My friends praised me, but I did not feel I had done anything brave.

I fought until August 1995. By this time I had gained contact with my family. Luckily I had been part of a patrol sent to the area around Komba Yende. While in the area I had made inquiries about my family. As my father was a very popular hunter, there was no problem in locating them. I found them in the Loi Chiefdom of Kono District. It was a joyful occasion. All my people were happy to see me. My father told me that they had long since given me up for dead. I stayed with them for three days and before I left to join my fellow soldiers, my parents and other relatives begged me to leave the army and stay with them. I told them I would consider and left.

After some time I was visited by my father in Njabwema, where my group was then based. He talked to one of our officers – one Corporal Ballah who was in charge of medical affairs. My father told him that he had come to take me home

because I was still a child and so he wanted me to continue my schooling and get some education first. Corporal Ballah agreed and I was called from the billet and disarmed. I was given civilian clothes to wear. This was in August. I cannot remember the date. My father took me to Senehun to join the family.

I felt sad at leaving my friends with whom I had stayed and fought with for more than two years. Moreover, I was not happy to return home because my father was a very strict and no-nonsense man. While at the war front I had been used to an unruly way of life. If I stayed with my father, I know sooner or later, there will be problems. I stayed with my parents for only two days and I left to join my uncle (mother's brother) in Koidu Town.

I stayed with my uncle until I heard about CAW and decided to join the programme. The CAW officers were based at Koidu Secondary School (K.S.S) compound, which was visited by us children. That was how I learnt of the programme and what they can do for us children who had taken part in war.

The second account is by Foday Sesay (not his real name) who was in Kenema District when the area was attacked by rebels. He was born in February 1978 and started fighting when he turned twelve in 1992.

Around the early part of 1992, while I was living with my parents in Panguma village, we got wind of rebel attacks in a nearby village called Talama because of this, my parents left our village for Kenema town. I stayed behind with a friend called Mustapha who was later killed in one of the many ambushes we do regularly fall in.

As the rebels were now on the rampage in many places, a ULIMO General called Gbupleh recruited me together with Mustapha and many others and we were taken to a training base at the Moa Barracks where we were subjected to vigorous military training for a month. By the end of this exercise, I was taken together with 51 others back to Tongo field where rebel activities were now very frequent. In Tongo under the command of General Gbupleh, I fought in almost all the villages in the chiefdom including Lowuma, Bomi, N'geyima and Wima amongst others.

When asked as to how many times he was involved in direct combat, and ambushes and how he survived them, Foday said thus,

I was a platoon commander and in fact one's survival in an ambush does not depend on what you know but God. Since he said such attacks do come by surprise.

After about six months, in Tongo, I was taken along with others for further briefing to Daru from where I was deployed to fight in Zimmi, Koidu, Kwiva, Pendebu, Mabgie and Nomofama villages.

When asked as to how many of his friends were killed during his time of fighting, with the ULIMO group Foday said they were many and that was the

more reason why he continued to fight because 'each time we had cause to fight, we do have a few some times many'.

All of these ... do frustrate people leaving them with no alternative but to avenge the loss of a colleague.

While we were at Koidu in 1993, our boss, one Captain Keitta, told us that UNICEF was now concerned with the way children were been used in the fighting and he suggested that we (about twenty of us) were taken back to Daur Barracks from where we were conveyed on board a UNICEF mini bus to Freetown to a place known as Conakry Home in the Westend of Freetown.

I spent about seven months in this camp and I was finally taken to my mother in Kenema around December, 1993. I stayed with my mother for sometime until early 1994 when I decided to again take up arms under the command of one Captain Messeh, this time with the Sierra Leone Army. While I was with Messeh, I fought in places like Mano-Junction, Bo, Kenema Highway and others until Captain Messeh was transferred to the Moyamba Operational area and I together with a few others were taken along. We lived and fought along side the Sierra Leone Army Forces in the Mokanji Rutile and the surrounding villages. As the fighting in this area was now getting tough and tougher every day, I decided to travel unauthorised (AWOL) on my own to Bo town where I again rejoined other troops at the Brigade Headquarters then under the command of one Colonel Samura. There again I was in almost all the fighting and ambushes in areas like the Bo Mile 91 highway until we at one time lost track and spent three days in the bush feeding on wild fruits but we finally surfaced around Tikonko where some Nigerian troops covering that area were alerted by civilians and we were captured by the Nigerian contingent and taken to base in Bo.

After a while, Colonel Samura was re-deployed back to Freetown and I was his personal bodyguard, I had to come to Freetown with him. In Freetown, I lived with Colonel Samura for about a month going to work, and around town with him until he was sent to Ghana on a staff course, leaving me in his house with his family. While there, I used to go around town with the driver one Sergeant Conteh with my military uniforms on. It was during one of these shopping rounds that we ran into Tom Yuma a Captain then who said that I was too small to be in the army, and that I should be taken to Major Max Kanga. At Major Max Kanga's office in Cockrill, I was strip off all military gears and was later taken to the CAW office where I was made to answer few questions after which I was given a hand written note and Le 500.00 in cash to travel and report to Mr. M'briwa the home administrator in Benin.

I arrived in Benin around three in the afternoon on 1 February 1995 and was allocated to the care giver in dormitory two after few minutes of question and answer session.

When asked why he rejoined the army, Foday said it was because he was not visited by CAW field workers as promised so he lost hope.

As to how many rebels he killed during the time he fought Foday said it is indefinite but he said he can remember a few times when he was ordered to kill captured rebel. On how this was been done, he said these normally depends on the circumstances in which rebels were captured. When asked to comment, he said,

if we catch any during a bloody battle, these are taken to our base, where they are made to dig their own graves, and depending on orders given we will plug eyes, cut off the nose, ears, fingers and then bury them half dead. While for those who were caught during fact finding mission, depending on the officer commanding and our position on the ground the rebels will dig their graves, and then either shot to death or buried alive or kept in custody and encouraged to obtain information.

On his responses and intension to get back to the Army, Foday said he is now happy to have been with CAW again.

As to what he would do on CAW field component's failure to visit him again after resettlement he said that he will do his best to stay with his mother and then go to school. As to what his going back to school was aiming at, Foday said he plans to become a motor mechanic, in the future and as such a carrier will require some reading and writing knowledges, he said he will try to attain a fourth form level in school before embarking on the carrier.

The account by juvenile combatants who fought with the RUF stands in sharp contrast to those who fought with the national army. Below are two accounts of juvenile combatants abducted by the RUF.

'What is your name?'

'My name is Momodu, I was born in Masiaka, Port Lokko District in 1982'.

'Did you live with your parents before the war?'

'I lived with my parents, both mother and father, not too far from the Masiaka police station before I was kidnapped'.

'Who kidnapped you?'

'The RUF. It was on a Saturday, early in the morning, and I was going to meet my father in the farm. The rebels were in the bush, about twenty of them, some looked tired and were resting, but the others were busy doing something with their guns. I was scared when I saw them and wanted to run but they threatened to open fire so I cried and waited until one of them came and grabbed me'.

'What did they want you to do for them?'

'They started asking me questions about soldiers on the Freetown-Masiaka highway. I told them that I did not see any soldiers that morning but that the police were on the road with guns at a check point. They also asked me where I was going that morning and I replied that I was going to meet my father in the farm. We went round and round in the bush and by the afternoon we got to their base'.

'How did you know it was their base?'

'There were many people there – young boys and girls, old men, but they were mostly young men. It was in this place that they taught me how to use a gun'.

'For how long where you there?'

'I was there from the time I was captured to about the middle of 1995 when we were told to leave because of the Nigerian Alpha jet'.

'What was the Alpha jet doing?'

'They were shooting from the sky. They started one morning and we were told to leave the place because it continued for about two days'.

'Where did you go when you left the place?'

'We went to the bush because the place is on a hill and we walked for about two days in the bush. It was very tiring, there was no food, and water was a problem'.

'How did you survive?'

'I think I was lucky because some boys collapsed on the way and we just left them there. It would have been easier if we just had to walk by ourselves but we had to carry weapons and ammunitions. It was when I noticed that everybody was tired on the second day that I started planning my escape'.

'What do you mean by planning your escape?'

'I was in that camp for about ten months and I saw what they did to two boys who were caught escaping'.

'What happened?'

'They chop off their feet with cutlass (machetes) and we buried them alive'.

'Who buried them?'

'I mean we the small boys'.

'So the RUF did such things?'

'Yes, it was the wounding (violence) and killing that made me want to escape. I did not understand why they were doing it'.

'Did they not explain to you why they were fighting?'

'No they only told us that Sankoh wants to make Salone (Sierra Leone) a better place for children so that they could go to school and after school get a good job.

I did not understand what they meant and they only told us that one night when the Commander came with about forty young men'.

'So this is why you escaped?'

'Yes, but the wounding (violence) and killing was the big thing for me'.

'But you only saw them do this once. That is true but when you stay in a place for a long time and you do not see people you ask questions'.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I had a man who liked me, Commander Wan Bone, and I asked him about people in the camp. He would tell me that so and so has gone on a mission or that so and so has been killed'.

'Did you ask him why they got killed?'

'I did but his answer was always the same: *dis nar revolushon* (this is a revolution) people get killed by the revolution if they fail to carry out a task assigned to them'.

The other interview was with a teenager abducted in December 1998 by the renegade national army. This interview was conducted in February 2000.

'What is your name? My name is Momoh Sesay'.

'How old are you? I am fourteen'.

'Where you a soldier? They did not give me uniform because I am too small but they thought me how to use a gun'.

'Did you kill anybody? Yes, I killed many people and everyday I pray to God for forgiveness'.

'When did you join the army? My brother and I were kidnapped together with eight other boys in Songo'.

'When was this?'

'In December 1998. We woke up one morning and saw soldiers in our compound. They told our father that they want all the men in the compound to accompany them to Freetown. My father pleaded with them that we were small boys but they insisted and threatened to burn all the three houses in the compound. My mother and all my sisters were crying and begging but they refused'.

'So what happened after they took you? We trekked to Benguema where we stayed for about three weeks. It was in Benguema that they thought us how to use an AK47. This took about three days'.

'Did you fight at Benguema? No, we were in the bush most of the time until after Christmas when we were ordered to move to Kossoh, were we stayed for another two days, and then advanced to Allen Town. At Allen Town we washed our bodies for the first time and we were given some powder to put in our nose'.

'What kind of powder? It was a kind of white powder. Everybody was given a pinch after which we were ordered to advance to Calbah town (on the outskirts of Freetown). We stayed there for a while before we were ordered to move to the hills over looking Kissy'.

'Did you enter Freetown?'

'No I did not I only fought in Kissy'.

'What did you do?'

'We killed people and burnt houses'.

'For how long where you doing this? We started after New Year and continued until ECOMOG pushed us out of Kissy'.

'So you were a rebel?'

'No I was not a rebel. I did what I was told to do but I am sorry for what I did'.

'Where you not afraid of anything?'

'In the beginning I was, but after taking the powder and when they killed my brother, everything changed. I mean I became crazy (mad)'.

'Who killed your brother?'

I don't know. He went on a mission and did not return'.

'Why did you not escape after you discovered that your brother was dead?'

'There was nowhere to run to. I was in a war situation and if I had gone to any civilian they would have identified me as a rebel'.

'But you just said you are not a rebel'.

'What I mean is that one can easily identify me as a rebel'.

'How so?'

'I was dirty, scruffy and smelling. I went on for days working without eating or sleeping. It was the most difficult time in my life'.

'Where you working?'

'Killing people and burning houses is work. We were not paid but our commanders always congratulated us for a job well done'.

'Where you involved in amputation?'

Yes, I did it many times'.

'Did you know why you were doing these horrible things?'

I did them because I was ordered'.

'Will you do anything you are asked to do?'

'No, that was a different situation. I think the powder was also a factor'.

### Understanding juvenile combatants: By way of conclusion

The testimonies presented above reveal the pattern of recruitment of juvenile combatants by both the Sierra Leone Army and the RUF. Whereas the national army attracted combatants bent on avenging the death of a loved one, the RUF had to resort to unconventional methods of recruiting their under-age combatants. Both armed factions, however, treated their juvenile combatants as expendable commodities to be captured or recruited as the situation demands. But combatants also had a choice, however, limited to fight with one faction or another, or to leave the theatre of war and re-enlist if and when they choose. This element of choice is key to unlocking the victim vs villain prism through which the issue has been studied. RUF recruits did attempt to escape, while those with the national army could switch sides or withdraw from combat voluntarily if they so desire. This was because the national army, unlike the RUF, had to justify or explain why they were using juvenile combatants.

The deliberate targeting of children in Mozambique and the indiscriminate supply of drugs to keep children as combatants in Liberia underscores the nature of both RENAMO and the NPFL. Lacking a clear ideological thrust or a concrete programme of societal transformation, these two movements came to rely heavily on violence as a form of terror directed principally against civilians. It is therefore not coincidental that the RUF, similar in make up to RENAMO and the NPLF, also deliberately targeted children and fed them drugs. The terror in Mozambique and Liberia were reproduced ten fold in the Sierra Leone context. The character of these movements contrast sharply with that of the NRM in Uganda. The *Kidogos* in Uganda, as child soldiers are referred to in Kiswahili, were marked by their discipline and orderliness. The atrocities committed by juvenile combatants in Mozambique, Liberia, and Sierra Leone were totally absent in Uganda. And this was not because Ugandan children are well behaved. Rather, it was because the NRM had a clear direction about why it took up arms and why it wanted political power. The NRM did not press-ganged or abducted its *Kidogos* nor did it feed them with drugs or forced them to commit atrocities in their communities. An armed political group without a concrete programme of societal transformation that could attract members willing to fight and defend that programme, would sooner than later turn to children to replenish its fighting forces so as to continue fighting. In such contexts fighting becomes a campaign of terror against the very civilians that such movements claim to be fighting for.

By historicising the phenomenon of juvenile combatants we begin to understand why only a fraction of children in conflict situations are recruited or abducted and why these 'recruits' are predominantly from the rural areas. With the possible exception of the RPF in Rwanda, where juveniles were

recruited before the outbreak of hostilities, all the other armed movements only turned to children as the war progressed to replenish their labour needs. Labour shortage and the nature and character of armed movements are therefore central to understanding the phenomenon of juvenile combatants. To broach the subject from the perspective of total state collapse and the absence of institutional structures to contain a looming anarchy leaves us with too many unanswered questions. These questions range from the ingenious ways in which some children are able to negotiate their way out of war situations to the use of voluntary enrollment as a survival strategy. The element of choice is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of juvenile combatants.