

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 1993-2003 UN Mapping Report

Acts of violence committed against children

Section II, Chapter 2 of the report (paragraphs 655-725) focuses specifically on violence against children, who represent almost half of the population and who were victimized by all parties to the conflict. Throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as a whole, from 1993 to 2003, the report says. “Children were not spared the successive waves of violence that spread across the country. Quite the contrary, they were the primary victims.” (657)

During conflicts such as those that took place in DRC, “children are the exclusive victims of some crimes, such as the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the hostilities. They are sometimes forced to commit crimes themselves. In areas of conflict, they are often even more vulnerable because the violence wipes out their first line of defence: their parents. Even when they are not the direct victims, witnessing their parents being raped or killed, their property looted and their homes burned is deeply traumatising for them. Having to repeatedly move home makes them more vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. Their young age and their virginity make them the target of abject beliefs and superstitions, particularly the belief that sex with children can cure some illnesses or make the rapist invincible. Lastly, war generally deprives them of their right to education and thus has a lasting and negative impact on their future.” (655)

In DRC, children were not only not protected in war zones, they “were even sometimes deliberately killed or mutilated by the parties to the conflict, often in particularly barbaric ways.” (658)

During the refugee massacres of 1996 and 1997, the report says, “AFDL/ APR¹ troops allegedly killed men, women and children indiscriminately, some with hammer blows to the head. From 1998, during campaigns against the civilian population, elements of the armed branch of the RCD, the ANC and the Rwandan Army (APR) reportedly attacked groups of primarily women and children and killed or mutilated them (North Kivu), attacked women and children in churches (Maniema), set fire to huts and houses with civilians – including children – locked inside them (Katanga) and even decapitated children (Orientale Province).” (659)

The ex-FAR/Interahamwe also allegedly deliberately killed children, for example in Équateur in April and May 1997, “in retaliation for the Zairians' refusal to give them food, or their bicycles in some cases.” (660)

The regular national armies also reportedly committed crimes against children, “including, for example, the Forces armées angolaises (FAA), allied to the Kinshasa Government, in Bas-Congo in 1998, and the Forces armées congolaises (FAC) in Maniema and Katanga. On one occasion, FAC soldiers allegedly killed seven boys who refused to hand over their bikes.” (661)

In Ituri district, numerous children were horrifically killed or mutilated by armed groups. (662)

Even places where children are traditionally looked after were not respected by the warring parties: “A large number of schools, hospitals, orphanages and the premises of several humanitarian organisations were the sites of massacres of children...” the report says. (664)

Nor did children, including Hunde, Tutsis, Banyamulenge, and those of Rwandan origin, escape the ethnic violence that swept different regions of the country: “During various attacks on Rwandan Hutu refugees in camps and on roadsides, members of the AFDL/APR allegedly made no distinction between armed elements and refugees, amongst whom there were numerous children. More serious still, the AFDL/APR is said to have frequently attacked camps that had already been deserted by the ex-FAR/Interahamwe and which contained the weak and the vulnerable – typically unaccompanied children, the elderly, women and the wounded.” (665-667)

¹ Given the heavy presence of Rwandan army soldiers (APR) among the troops and commanding officers of the AFDL Congolese rebel group, and the difficulty witnesses had in distinguishing between members of the AFDL and the APR on the ground, the report uses the acronym AFDL/APR to refer to armed elements of the AFDL and soldiers of the APR engaged in operations in Zaire from Oct 1996 to June 1997. Other acronyms in this fact sheet include RCD: Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie; ANC: Armée Nationale Congolaise (armed wing of the RCD-Goma); and ex-FAR: the Rwandan army prior to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

As noted in the chapter on violence against women (see Factsheet No. 3), sexual violence was a daily reality from 1993 to 2003, and one that children also suffered. "Used as an instrument of terror, on the basis of ethnicity or to torture and humiliate, sexual violence often targeted young girls and children, some no more than five years old." Local beliefs and superstitions also led to children being targeted for their virginity, "in the conviction that sexual relations with children could cure certain diseases (HIV/AIDS) or make the perpetrator invulnerable." Numerous different groups also allegedly used children as slaves and sex slaves. (669)

In addition to being subjected to direct attacks, children also suffered the indirect consequences of the armed conflicts. Repeated displacements, malnutrition and disease affected children to such an extent that, in 2001, the International Rescue Committee concluded that those under the age of five accounted for one-third of the civilian deaths caused by the conflicts in eastern DRC between August 1998 and May 2000. The report notes that the infant mortality rate was particularly high during the Mobutu regime's 1993 persecution of Kasaiens (people from the Kasai region in south-central DRC), especially during their forced deportation under inhumane conditions. In South Kivu, in 2003, Oxfam estimated that, in some regions, one-quarter of all children were dying before their fifth birthday. UNICEF reports that these terrible statistics show the DRC to be one of the three most dangerous countries in the world in which to be born. "In 2006, more children under the age of five were dying each year in the DRC than in China, despite the Chinese population being 23 times larger than the Congolese." (671)

The report describes how the wars in the DRC were marked by the systematic use of children by all armed groups and forces involved in the conflict. "Many battles were won in the DRC simply on the basis of a superiority of numbers. The armed groups therefore often recruited children to serve as cannon fodder. Some were even sent into combat without any arms... In order to force them to overcome their sensitivities and unwillingness to kill, they were brutalised by their superiors and forced to commit particularly horrific crimes. If they refused, they would be executed. On capturing an area, girls would sometimes be taken to child soldiers for them to rape in front of the villagers and adult soldiers. This strategy of 'toughening them up' was also used in training camps, where children were forced to kill and commit atrocities in public." (704)

According to child protection agencies working in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of children, "at least 30,000 children were recruited or used by the armed forces or groups during the conflict," giving the DRC the one of the world's worst records for such activity. (673)

"These and other children were subjected to indescribable violence, including murder, rape, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, forced displacements and the destruction of their villages, and were deprived of all their rights." (723) While some 30,000 have been demobilized since 2004, many others have been recruited in the same period. While a number of international human rights and humanitarian law treaties ratified by the DRC explicitly prohibit child recruitment, the use of children by armed forces or groups continues today, the report says. (717)

Noting that almost an entire generation of Congolese children has missed out on an education, the report concludes that "children in the DRC have suffered far too much and, if this situation is allowed to continue, there is a risk that a new generation will be created that has known nothing but violence ... thus compromising the country's chances of achieving lasting peace." (725)