

Review

The Effect of Conflict on Children: A Case Study of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Arinze Ngwube*, Jude Obeta and Saliu Ozimede Zuwelatu

Abstract

Federal University Oye Ekiti, Ekiti
State Nigeria

*Corresponding Author's Email:
ngwube@hotmail.co.uk

The new rebellion in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has led to the destruction of properties and loss of human lives. This has resulted in tens of thousands of civilians displaced in Goma to seek safety in the bush. Children have been separated from their parents in the rush to escape the rebel advancement, and could face recruitment from armed groups operating in the area. The conditions of these children have left nothing to be desired. They have found themselves in a morass with no hope in Goma and commotion back home with the rebel soldiers who loot, rape and kill. This has raised serious debates among policy makers, theoreticians and International relations experts on the part of the international community to assist the Congolese in keeping the peace. In any refugee crisis, children face a range of risks, including separation from their families, abuse and exploitation, but the long –term insecurity in the Eastern DRC means that children are in a particularly dangerous situation. Peace and the protection, has to be the number one priority for all parties. For these children who are already at the bottom of the ladder in terms of mortality, education, and resilience, this crisis means even more unimaginable violence and trauma. This has agitated the mind of the researchers to write this paper and come up with recommendations for a lasting solution.

Keywords: Children, Crisis, Democratic Republic of Congo, Protection

INTRODUCTION

A recent estimate for the number of refugees in the world is 16 million .This figure does not include those people displaced from their homes but not from their country. More than 50% of refugees have fled because of war and violence .In some situations, refugees have not been able to return home and have become assimilated into the host society. Within a refugee community, refugee children have always been awarded high priority for resources whatever the reason for their refugee status. The pictorial image of hungry, frightened, sick, and emaciated children stirs and creates emotional response from the public and politicians alike. That response when turned into resources, may meet only the immediate and apparent needs of the refugees. They may have lost their parents through violence or disease. Surely the hardest

faces to look upon during armed conflict are those of terrified or wounded children trapped by the war-making of adults. While humankind's inhumanity is not exactly headline news, resorting to armed conflict is always evidence of a profound moral and rational collapse. But there is something exceptionally awful about the suffering and incomprehension of children when fighting begins. The adult world around them has succumbed to some primal insanity, and safety and solace evaporate in a heartbeat. These children have been failed utterly.

In many African conflicts, children have been the targets of sexual assault, land mines, and amputations, and have been forced to act as child soldiers.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, rebel forces marched on the North Kivu capital city of Goma, sending

thousands into flight and directly imperilling more than 200,000 children.

We love to claim that children are our future, more care in our lips and less humanity in our hearts. Why are we so listless about the violence they suffer in our wars? 27th May 2012 marked International Children's Day; Congolese children in the town of Goma had a day off from school. Ipso facto, who knows when last they saw of their teachers? On that day the children hid in their houses, government and rebel forces fought street to street, in a struggle to control the town which sits right on the Rwandan border. Tanks, mortars, army and rebel soldiers stand between the children and their classrooms, some of which may no longer be standing after sustained fighting between opposing forces.

Education is an early casualty of armed conflict. The war in Eastern Congo is the main reason why over one million Congolese children are out of school. That's one million children who will not be able to read or write and who will struggle to find themselves a positive role to play in Congo's future. Fighting in Goma, sows the seeds for the next round of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and ensures that there will be a generation of traumatised young people with few options, available to fill the ranks of whatever revolutionary movement offers them what can keep them afloat.

The paper examines the effect of conflict on children: A case study of Goma in Democratic Republic of Congo. First, it looks at the crisis in Goma, secondly, conceptual clarification of the concept thirdly assess the effect on children in Goma. Finally, outlines what needs to be done at the international level in order to address it more properly.

Crisis in Goma

Goma is a city in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is located on the northern shore of Lake Kivu, next to the Rwandan city of Gisenyi. April 2012, the eastern region of the DRC experienced violence owing to clashes between a new rebel movement called the 'M23' (March 23 Movement) and the National Congolese Army. The M23 offensive stemmed from the defection of a significant number of commanding officers of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, affecting the capacity of the Congolese security forces. The vacuum left by those troops contributed to an overall climate of lawlessness and insecurity characterized by widespread, systematic and violent attacks against civilians by a variety of armed groups, including the fragmented constellation of self-defence militias commonly known as Raïa Mutomboki, which, together with the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), was responsible for reciprocal retaliatory attacks.

Confrontations between the two parties and attempts to seize and maintain areas of control have shocked the

whole communities. Almost a quarter of a million people were displaced by the conflict in North Kivu alone (UNOCHA 2012). The area is now home to well over half a million internally displaced persons (IDP) (UNICEF 2012). Scores of people have fled. People are now living in makeshift camps for internally displaced people around Goma. A further 57,000 people are estimated to have fled into neighbouring countries (www.relief.int). In 2012, 578 children, including 26 girls, were recruited into armed forces and armed groups. The main perpetrators were Mai Mai groups (263), including the Mai Mai groups under the command of "Colonel Tawimbi" operating in the area of Uvira (116), the Mai Mai groups under the command of "General Lafontaine" and former Patriotes résistants congolais (PARECO) elements (29), the Mai Mai Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain (APCLS) of "Colonel Janvier" (21) and other Mai Mai groups. Other perpetrators included FDLR (83), M23 (65), the Front de résistance patriotique en Ituri/Front populaire pour la justice au Congo (FRPI/FPJC) (52) and LRA (31) (Children and Armed Conflict report of the Secretary General 2013). However, there have been reactions from Rob McGillivray, Save the Children Fund's Country Director in the DRC "Any child separated in the rush to flee the fighting is at grave risk of being recruited by one of several militias in the area. We know that these groups have had few altercations about forcing children to join in the past and have no reason to suppose they will take a different approach now. The situation is extremely chaotic, with some families being displaced more than once, and we can only imagine how confused and frightened children caught up in this violence will be."

DRC has a predominantly young population that have been severely impacted by renewed clashes: the UN emergency response cluster for education has found that "275,606 primary school-aged displaced children have been affected "by the recent violence (Amos 2012). DRC has experienced crisis upon crisis which has created ongoing displacements. Due to the risks of impending violence and insecurity, the majority of those that have been forced to flee their homes years ago are still not in a situation in which they can return home. As a result,

IDP camps run by the United Nations and its partners are already beyond manageable capacity. DRC have some salient paradoxes:

DRC I

- It is one of the most resource rich countries in the World and yet it is also the least developed.
- It is home to the largest UN Peacekeeping force on Earth and the largest humanitarian coordination office (UN OCHA) and yet it has some of the highest levels of Violence and humanitarian needs in the world.
- The urgent needs of the population of the DRC have been rising, yet DRC ranks as the 5th most underfunded emergency in the world (OCHA 2012).

Each of these factors demonstrates the need for a thorough assessment of current policies and practices related to DRC. The current outbreak of violence exposes the fragility of the peace deal in the Congo and failure on the part of the international community to assist the Congolese in keeping the peace. These have led to serious humanitarian crisis leading to the outbreak of some diseases in some of the camps at Goma. It is of interest to note that since the five year war, the international community and parties to the conflict have paid more interest in the Democratic Republic of Congo's natural resources rather than the people. Onesphore Sematumba of the Pole Institute, a peace institute in Goma, claims that Kabila in fact depends on the rebellion, and its links to Rwanda, for whatever mitigated support he still enjoys. "The Rwandan link [to M23] has had the perverse effect of drawing attention away from the failings of the government and the global problems in the DRC," says Sematumba. "People are focused on M23 and Rwanda; they have forgotten about the problems in the army, and all of the other armed groups in North Kivu."

There is certainly an overriding perception in eastern DRC that Rwanda to an extent, seeks the balkanisation of the DRC. This fear tends to override domestic complaints, and playing the 'Rwanda card' can shift attention onto a common external enemy. However this solution has a built-in expiring date; the absence of functioning state institutions in the east has allowed Rwanda and its CNDP now M23 proxies to operate with relative impunity. "When it confronts the M23 crisis, the government is dealing with the symptoms rather than the cause of our problems," says Sematumba. The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo needs to turn this problem into an opportunity. They need to identify and address the global problems in the Congo. They can't just focus on the M23, which is in its infancy. Above all, they need to rebuild a new, functioning army; integration of various rebels will never work. It has to be done through dialogue. This is a challenge for the government if they possess the political will or capacity to do so.

In spite of the growth in size and population of the spontaneous camps, their location – having close proximity to areas of violence and no water sources nearby – means they do not meet international guidelines. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) is not able to officially recognise camps until they have existed for three months. Instead, those that ran away with nothing, including children on their own, and who are based only 20 kilometres from the frontline, are without any reliable access to food, water and shelter. The designated mechanism responsible for meeting the needs of IDP's (RRMP 2012), in the period before UNHCR recognises official camps, is underfunded by donors and has been consequently slow to respond. Comprehensive help is not yet on its way and people's personal supplies are

running short. Individuals must be registered as a matter of urgency in order that aid reaches those in need and UNHCR must continue to monitor the situation closely to ensure their response is commensurate to the level of need. The rainy season as at the time of writing this paper is already beginning to set-in, bringing with it high risks of endemic diseases breaking out and spreading rapidly through the camps, where families sleep on bare floor and no couch to recline on. Children face immediate health risks from contaminated food, unclean drinking water and insecure living environments. This is an all-out emergency in a country that was already deemed to be one of, if not the, worst humanitarian crises the world has seen "in terms of both intensity and magnitude"(IRIN News 2012).

Conceptual Clarification

The Psychological literature describes a range of mental health and development associated with child and adolescent exposure to armed conflict. Comprehensive reviews of the literature on children exposed to war (Jensen et al 1993; Shaw, 2003; Stichick, 2001) and more specifically on refugee children (Athey et al., 1991; Keyes, 2000; Lustig, Kia-Keating et al., 2004; Rousseau, 1995) identify elevated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD), depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, insomnia, and behavioural problems in these children. Studies find high rates of exposure to traumatic events and a cumulative effect of multiple traumas, often referred to as a "dose effect," such that higher rates of trauma are often associated with higher rates of PTSD, depression, and behaviour problems (Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, and Cabral, 2008; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996; Vizek-Vidovic, Kuterovac-Jagodic, and Arambasic, 2000). This dose-effect relationship between war trauma and psychopathology—i.e., the finding that more frequent and severe trauma exposure leads to worse psychological outcomes—only partially describes the experience of war-affected children, many of whom demonstrate high levels of resilience and do not develop enduring patterns of distress (Bonanno and Mancini, 2008). Further, the dose effect cannot fully explain the complexity associated with the type or impact of specific traumas on individuals at different phases of their lives. For example, the experience of even one incident of sexual trauma in the context of war may constitute a profoundly traumatic and life-altering event for girls in terms of the impact on their worldview, relationship to their communities, and functioning.

Despite the risk for mental health after exposure to unimaginable hardship and trauma, the literature and clinical experience suggest that war-affected children demonstrate tremendous resilience (Garmezy, 1988; Klingman, 2002). While many published studies document the negative psychological associated with war

trauma, some authors criticize the narrow focus on PTSD that dominates the field. This critique focuses on the fact that the diagnosis is a Western medical concept that posits disorder in the individual and assumes a universal response to trauma. In this way, the diagnosis does not reflect the socio-political context of an individual's exposure to war trauma and also may not reflect cultural variations of distress and well-being (Boehnlein and Kinzie, 1995; Bracken, Giller, and Summerfield, 1995; de Berry et al., 2003; Summerfield, 1999). Others challenge the use of traditional Western measures of psychopathology and methods of assessment with children from a wide array of cultures and backgrounds (Birman and Chan, 2008; Holyfield et al., 2002). Furthermore, despite frequent acknowledgement in the literature of the resilience of children who survive armed conflict, only a few studies specifically focus on understanding the factors that contribute to this resilience. Recent summaries of the literature suggest that contextual, social, family, demographic, and individual variables all contribute to resilient Outcomes in war-affected children (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Bonanno and Mancini 2008). Finally, Pynoos and others (1995) have argued more broadly that study of trauma in children must take into account developmental stage and processes.

Effect on Children in Goma

A child is predominantly vulnerable to the ravages of war. According to a United Nations study on children in war by Grace Machel, "The physical, sexual and emotional violence to which they [children] are exposed shatters their world. As a result, they are hemmed in all corners because of their vulnerability. War undermines the very foundations of children's lives, destroying their homes, splintering their communities and breaking down their trust in adults." The number of displaced children in North Kivu could fill the Olympic stadium almost three times (UNOCHA 2012). There are over 275,000 children affected by the current crisis (Amos 2012) and an estimated 26,500 children (UNICEF 2012) at acute risk in the spontaneous camps. 60,000 children are at a risk of losing out on their education due to the current crisis. (UNHCR 2012). Half of the overall 2.2 million displaced population of DRC are children; One million children are now suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition (UNICEF 2012).

The lack of basic service provision and daily need for survival on top of what they have experienced before entering the camps, children are desperately lacking the support structures needed for their protection. Years of conflict have created a web of human rights abuses perpetrated against children and young people in the DRC. In times of acute crisis and emergency, they are increasingly vulnerable and unprotected and risks to their

safety and security are heightened significantly. Without sufficient trained police or UN presence around the unofficial camps, these include:

- Sexual violence, abuse and rape
- Forced marriages
- Being conscripted into the armed forces or armed groups to be used as soldiers or carry out other military duties
- Becoming permanently homeless and displaced
- Becoming involved in dangerous and exploitative livelihoods (such as sex work) as a means of survival. In addition to these immediate and serious threats, there is an added dimension of complexity which prevents children and young people receiving the care they need in the result of any of these atrocities taking place.

Only 28% of the population of DRC are registered at birth (UNICEF 2012) – this means that almost three-quarters of those seeking any form of service from medical to social, may be unable to get access in the aftermath of disease and trauma. This is extremely pertinent to the current crisis in which children have been separated from family and care structures and - if unregistered - there is no official record of the child's existence. This presents a real challenge that may prevent their reunification with family members.

CONCLUSION

The time to act is now; All lovers of peace must come together to prevent another crisis that will exploit the citizens of Congo who have had no peace ever since they gained independence. The solution to this crisis lies with Government of Paul Kagame and his counterpart Joseph Kabila to put their houses in order. It is high time Africans must give peace a chance. The United Nations needs to increase the number of peace keepers and provide adequate equipment for them. Pressure must be put in place to disarm all the major rebel groups that operate in Congo. The UN Secretary General, the Security Council, and the Regional countries who all understand the dangers involved in D.R. Congo, need to come together as soon as possible to chart a route to peace in Goma. Congolese children who are out of school are in need of some strong international leadership.

RECOMMENDATION

- Child protection measures must be put in place by UN actors with immediate effect to prevent further risks to children and young people, including the deployment of police/MONUSCO staff in around the camps that are trained in child protection, to provide security.

- Vulnerable children must be proactively and quickly identified in order that they can receive the vital services required for their survival and protection.
- Requirements must be comprehensively assessed in order to ensure adequate food and water supplies, durable and appropriate shelter, sanitation facilities and education provision.
- UNHCR must closely monitor the situation for children in IDP camps and recognise the camps in order that individuals are registered and included in urgent aid distributions.
- Long term planning for this crisis must be prioritised in order to provide reintegration for separated children in the camps.

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