

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

GUINEA

MATENÉ, A TRAFFICKED CHILD YESTERDAY, A REINTEGRATED YOUNG GIRL TODAY

Eighteen-year-old Matené is a young girl with a muscular body and lively eyes. Wearing a black athletic pant and a top of the same colour, she concentrates for a few seconds before jumping with agility into one of the three hoops put down the ground.

The place is very jammed this morning, as usual. Hanging from the ceiling, fixed trapezes, flying poles, suspensions and smooth rope are being used for the acrobatic performance done simultaneously by girls and boys. Matené has been a member of the Kéita Fodéba Acrobatic Art Training Centre over the past 10 years. The troupe, who trained her in acrobatic art, song and dance, is her second family. The centre aims at reintegrating through the acrobatic art children and young people formerly living on the street or on the way to become pre-delinquents. That's why UNICEF supports this project providing equipment.

After a little silence, Matené tells her story, "I was 10 years old when my parents gave me to a man named Kanté. He behaved like a high-level and wealthy personality. He succeeded in convincing my parents that I become the seventh child to be taken to Niger and to be trained for a performing tour in the United States. He entered into an agreement with my parents and gave them GNF 350,000 (around US\$ 70) for me and the other six children he had already taken."

Matené travelled to Niger in a minibus. She ate at her satisfaction during the six-day journey. But her nutritional conditions changed after she arrived at the trafficker's hotel, located 60 kilometres from Niamey in the bush. There the whole band was forced to do housework: sweeping, cleaning, and washing clothes, and cooking for the girls. In the evening, they would perform in front of the lodger's hotel, often for strangers. As Matené and her poor friends did not get paid, they had to buy food with the tips they got from the spectators.

Matené closes her eyes. She wants to forget the house mistress, a woman she describes as awful and who refused to feed them. Her ordeal lasted one year, until the boys of the troupe rebelled. They were put in jail as the trafficker, an influential man in the area, claimed he was robbed. Thanks to the investigations and the vigilance of the Niger police authorities and the Guinea Embassy in Niger, the children were released and returned to their families in Guinea.

Today, Matené smiles as she performs at the rhythm of the drum. She dreams of one day travelling through the world and, above all, performing her art and talents. It's not yet the case. But the two-hour literacy course she takes every day will give her the skills to become self-sufficient. "I will never get in touch with illusion merchants and child traffickers, nor will my family," she says with determination.

A large UNICEF-supported multimedia awareness-raising campaign, comprising a musical album, a short film and video clips were aired on television during six months, sensitizing the population on the long-denied phenomenon of child trafficking. National, rural and community radios, community leaders and youth associations travelled all over the country to disseminate the message.

A coalition of 30 national and international non-governmental organizations working against child trafficking was set up with UNICEF's support and a training module on child trafficking included in the programme of the military instruction centres. Guinea signed a bilateral agreement with Mali to combat child trafficking as well as a multilateral agreement with nine countries in the region. Despite the progress achieved, more than 50 children have been intercepted along borders in 2008.

Yet difficulties remain, including poor coordination among non-governmental organizations, insufficient financial and human resources and weak law enforcement to bring traffickers to justice.