

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

"I WANT TO GO BACK HOME!"

A former child soldier, Fikiri dreams of family life

His muscles are well developed for a 17-year-old, and do tell of his recent past and the two years of physical military exercises he regularly did while he was with the militia in Masisi region, in North Kivu.

Fikiri is leaning against the wall, supported by his wrist while he recounts, "I often saw the militia come through our village. They had nice uniforms and lovely boots. One day, they came back to our village. I followed them, I and some other children. They let us join them. They kept telling me that I would be well treated, I would be well clothed, and would have plenty of other things for myself. Soon, the leader of our unit selected me as his chief escort. I was the one to guard him and his belongings. I earned the respect of all the other militia. I was given a nice new uniform."

"But you know what," Fikiri continues, "it was not easy at all, especially at night when it rained and became very cold. I could not even leave my post. A slight act of disobedience, and I would be beaten, given about ten lashes with the cane. I began to feel very disappointed. I found out that, for people in uniform, things were not as pleasant as they seemed to us children. In the end, I could no longer bear the way they treated me. I realized that what I had been seeing was not really the true life."

"When I grow up and get married and have my children, I will not let them go and join any militia group. They will have to stay with me and go to school," he adds.

After many days of hiding, Fikiri ran away and went to the camp of the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "They took me and handed me over to Concert d'actions pour jeunes et enfants défavorisés, or CAJED, a local non-governmental organization. They in turn sent me to the transit and orientation centre in Goma." There, Fikiri found other young people like himself – children who were once with militia and armed groups.

Since 2002, out of a total of about 33,000, it is estimated that some 29,000 children have been released from armed groups through the combined efforts of UNICEF, the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion, and other partners.

On the day he joined the CAJED transit and orientation centre, 76 children were waiting to be reunified with their families. "Normally," says Fikiri, "I should only have stayed at this centre for three months. But I have been here for six months already. The situation in the place where my family lives is still not safe for me to return there."

"It's true that I am very happy to be in this transit centre. In the six months that I have been here, I have learned to read and write; and also how to tend a garden." In fact, Fikiri is very proud to show off his little plot of land where a handful of tomato and cabbage plants are sprouting.

In spite of all that, Fikiri is still quite concerned. "They treat us well here in the transit and orientation centre. I have made friends; we eat, learn and play together. I sleep quite well too, and they have given us new clothes to wear. But as for me, I want to go back home! I really want to see my family!"

Nothing too much for any child to ask, one would say.