



RELUCTANT REBELS

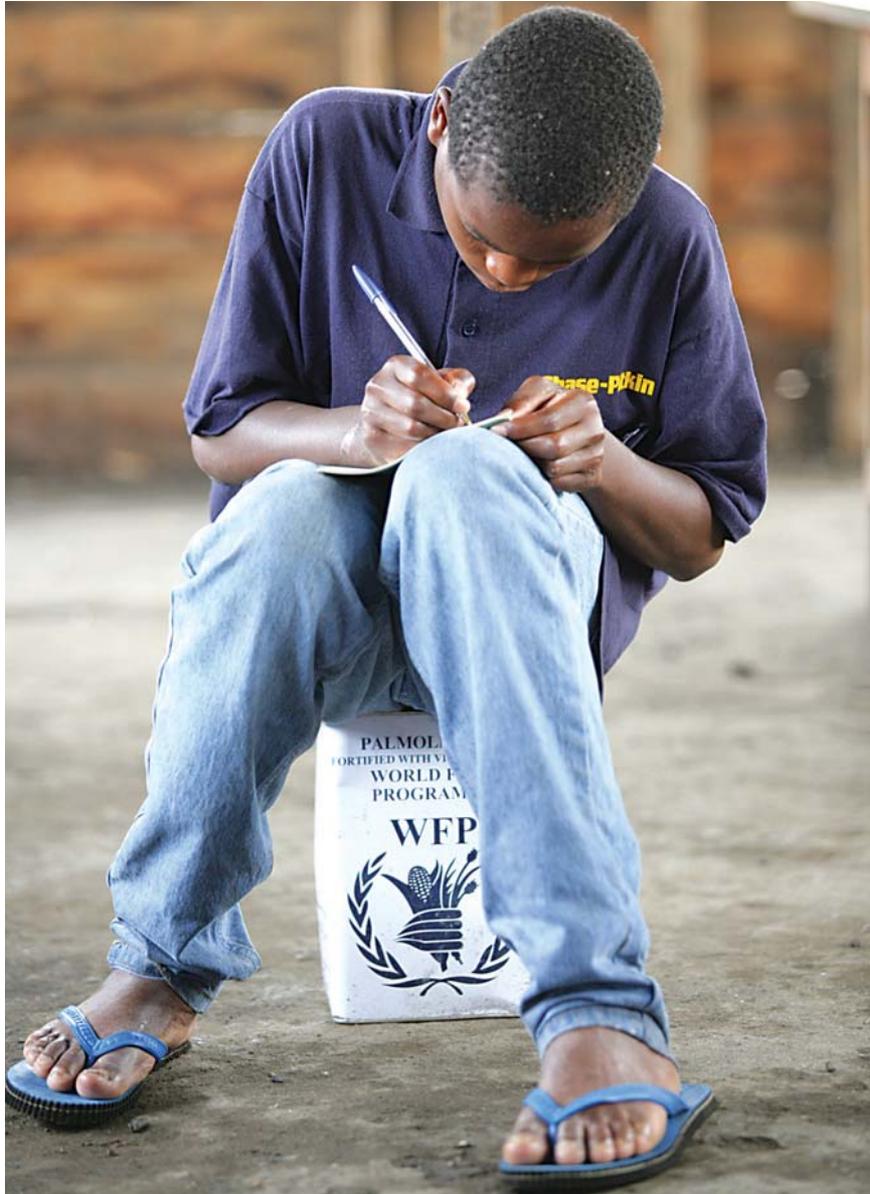
As they wait to be reunited with their families, children who fought in the civil war while away the hours in transit centres in Goma, North Kivu.

Someone carrying a weapon is never called “little boy,” but 11-year-old Joseph fits the description. He has just arrived at a transit and orientation centre in Goma, the capital of North Kivu. The centre is called Karibu, the Swahili word for welcome, and it is run by SOS-Enfants, an NGO and UNICEF partner. Its dormitories house about 30 children aged 11 to 17 who have run away from several rebel groups.

Joseph was part of a group who call themselves the Mongols, a faction of the Mai-Mai, insurgents who recruited many children to serve as spies, porters and cooks. Some learned to use weapons. Others, especially girls, were victims of sexual abuse. Why did they choose the name Mongols? “The Mongols were great bandits,” explains Joseph. “They stole. They killed. And they never had to pay for it.”

Joseph was out tending to his family’s banana plantation when the rebels kidnapped him. He ran away immediately, but the Mongols found him at home (in Luashi, in Masisi District). They stole two goats and beat his father before Joseph’s eyes. As he said goodbye, his father placed his trust in the Almighty. “God will help you,” he told Joseph, “and you’ll come back.”

A few months later, this wish was nearly granted. Joseph escaped once again. But this time, he did not go straight home. Instead, he went to Karibu, the transit and orientation centre. “God sent me here, and I’m thankful,” he says. “I was



lucky because I prayed a great deal." He is already thinking about the day when he will see his father again, which is quickly approaching. "The minute I see him," he promises, "I'm going to dance."

Pascal Mugula, a Karibu educator, has taken children right to their door. He says that the reunions are emotional, especially when parents have lost hope of seeing their child alive again. Some families offer him chickens to show their gratitude, but he politely declines and explains that he is only doing his job.

In anticipation of his homecoming, UNICEF gave Joseph a "reunification kit" consisting of clothes, a notebook, a pen, a hoe and some seed. He will be offered training in the trade of his choice: mechanic, cattleman, welder or baker. But Joseph says he would like to stick to a trade he already knows: Farming.

Innocent was only twelve years old when he joined rebel ranks. Other children were kidnapped and enlisted

by force, not him. He ran away from home without telling his parents. "I have my reasons," he says.

At 12, he decided that the insurgents would be his new family. Rebel life appealed to him, in part because he felt that he would finally be able to stand up to the soldiers who had despised him as a civilian.

In the rebellion, Innocent supervised a group of 12 other children. The older ones took part in the fighting. The younger ones served as messengers or sentries. Girls carried weapons, did the cooking or were used as "wives." For his work, Innocent earned 5,000 Congolese francs (US\$10) a month, a third of a teacher's salary. His earnings were supplemented by a few perks: Goats and chickens he took as he pleased. "Anything we could take," he confesses, "we took." That was before Innocent turned in his weapons in the aftermath of the Sun City peace agreement that was signed in South Africa.

Innocent is staying at a Goma transit and orientation centre run by CAJED (Concert d'action pour jeunes et enfants défavorisés), an NGO and UNICEF

partner. Before being reunited with their families, the demobilised children spend two or three months in transit and orientation centres. This is how long it takes to find the child's family and to send him or her home. Those who need medical attention stay longer.

Like many veterans, Innocent easily talks about his part in the war. He proudly explains that he is proficient in the use of mortars, grenade launchers, machine guns, and assault rifles. War is nearly the only thing he knows how to do, he admits. He cannot read or write, and he is pessimistic about the future. "What does civilian life hold for me?" he asks.

Innocent is too young to take part in the brassage, the "blending" of former soldiers and former rebels into the country's restructured armed forces. Since he is a minor, he will be sent home to his family. This makes him uneasy. He is not worried about his parents' reaction, but he is afraid that his peers will judge him and call him a failure. They will probably compare him to his brothers, who started small businesses and now earn a good living. Will he be held up to ridicule?

Innocent already feels that he has been used and exploited by unscrupulous superiors. "They 'ate' [took or stole] a great deal and took advantage of me," he says in Swahili. "But I ended up with nothing." Except perhaps for some shrapnel in his left thigh.

Children who fought in the war often complain that they did not receive the same treatment as adults. When they retire from military life, whether from the regular army or the rebel forces, adults receive "severance pay" under the country's disarmament and demobilisation process: US\$110 when they leave, and US\$25 a month for the following ten months. The children would like the same. In Goma, they even organized a protest to demand equal treatment, setting up a roadblock and taking one of their nurses hostage. The man was later released safe and sound. It is not surprising that they have the reputation of being difficult children. But like all children, even the toughest, they belong at home.

Thanks to a UNICEF-backed programme, Innocent will at least be able to receive skills training in an informal school setting.