

Ishmael Beah hails South Sudan's former child soldiers as future leaders

Despite a Unicef-led education initiative, opportunities beyond the army are limited for decommissioned child soldiers in South Sudan. But the author Ishmael Beah believes these young survivors are vital to the country's future

Nadene Ghouri in Pibor

Wednesday 6 January 2016 11.10 GMT

Ishmael Beah listens intently as the group of boys sitting in a semi-circle talk about their experiences.

"I had to carry a lot of ammunition and we had to walk barefoot. But I had a gun and I participated in battles," says one.

"I watched as my sister and mother were killed," says another. "We were in the bush, we had no food, we were dying. I went with the fighters because I had no one to care for me and I wanted to help my people."

The boys are among 1,700 child soldiers newly released from the Cobra armed faction, which is discharging up to 3,000 after signing a truce with the government of South Sudan.

Beah, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, is a best-selling author and advocate for children affected by war for the UN children's agency, Unicef. He visited South Sudan to highlight the plight of the country's young fighters.

A tall boy in a blue T-shirt introduces himself as 15-year-old Bagari* and fixes Beah with an intense stare. "I know I don't have to tell you what war is like because I know you have lived it."

Beah smiles at him reassuringly. "I do. And if you survive war you are already strong enough to overcome this part of your life."

Bagari smiles. "I know. I'm good at sciences. I don't want to be a carpenter or mechanic."

Realistically, though, those are the only options open to Bagari and the others here. They live in Pibor, in the east of South Sudan, where educational opportunities are extremely limited. Bagari is receiving medical support from Unicef, and has been placed on a vocational training programme. But in Beah's view, offering such limited horizons for former child fighters may restrict the country's ability to move to a

peaceful future.

“You have to have a special kind of intelligence and confidence to have survived such horrors. If someone wants to be a mechanic that’s one thing, but why are we limiting them to vocational training? Surely this is where the future leaders of the nation can be found? They’ve lived war, they never want to return to it. They can be future leaders and the key to peace.”

Beah is proof that an early life blighted by fighting is not necessarily a barrier to greater things. Yet he made it to the US, was fostered and got a good education.

“Yes, but it wasn’t just that,” he says. “I realised there were certain things I learned as a soldier that I could use for education. One of them was discipline. I could read a book.”

The next day, while Beah is visiting another Unicef-supported school in Pibor where hundreds of former child soldiers are learning English, maths and social studies, a young man called Chol* stands on a chair to speak and the room falls silent. He tells Beah that they are happy to be out of the army and grateful to be in school, but the quality is lacking (pdf). “We need better teachers and we need books and nicer classrooms,” he says. The boys cheer.

Beah meets Chol and some of the boys again the next day to play a game of football organised by Chol. At the field there are dozens of former child soldiers wearing colourful shirts and shorts, some with shoes, some without. Chol, 16, presides over the warm-up and selects the teams.

“I was a regimental sergeant major,” he explains. “Logistics. I was in control of 50 people. Love of education forced me to come out. I want to be a doctor or a pilot so I can fly in medical supplies to people in rural areas. I was 12 when I joined the army. There were a lot of beatings and torture. I regret joining now.”

Chol is the type of potential leader Beah says he is describing. “Why is it so surprising to people that a boy like Chol, just out of conflict, has thought through the needs of his country in such a detailed way?”

While Beah’s zeal is laudable, the situation in South Sudan is dire.

A peace agreement was signed in August, but conflict rages across several parts of the country, involving about 16,000 child soldiers. Since fighting broke out in December 2013, nearly 1,500 children have been killed and more than 900,000 internally displaced, most of them out of the reach of aid agencies.

Unicef estimates that 600,000 children need psychological support as a result of the atrocities they have witnessed. Families have been burned alive, girls raped and boys castrated.

For Beah, “urgent and serious political will” is needed to address the situation.

“There are some armed factions refusing to give children back. But removing children is the best measure to keep peace on track and means these factions wouldn’t have as much power. I know these young men don’t want to be in war. It was the only choice they had in order to live.”

As Beah says his goodbyes, another boy shakes his hand.

“In the army I saw a lot of friends die. I would never go back to that life. I hope that in future we will have some boys and girls who can be leaders and one day stand in front of us like you do today.”

*Names changed

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