

Sunday, April 15, 2010

Child Soldiers

I have been reading about children who are in the Sudan Liberation People's Army (SPLA). When I hear someone say ...child soldiers, I get a chill, something hits me, and shatters inside my chest. This is followed by a deep hot pain. I reach forward with both arms to grasp a deep breath, pause... the pain eases. I come back to reality.

Child soldiers are part of the African world. One terrorist group, calling themselves the Lords Resistance Army (LRA), operates from Northern Uganda and infiltrates into the border region of Southern Sudan. The LRA meet all the criteria of the worst sort of army you can ever hope to meet. They raid villages, capture young kids and force them to kill their parents or other adults. Girls are raped and used as domestic help. Boys. Some are as young as seven... they drug them, forced to kill their parents in front of other prisoners. Their heads are filled with stories of magic bullets and stories of invulnerability. After rape, starvation and an overdose of terror these kids are ashamed of their behaviour. If they do not engage in the killing sprees of the LRA they are then chosen as targets for death. African life is not easy, and the children learn to deal with enduring hardship.

Children, in fact, can do almost anything an adult can. I have seen a four-year-old girl with a baby, tied to her small back by the busy mother. This girl played with other children, but when the baby needed care... duty came first. A boy, a little older than her, helped to retie the baby firmly to her back. A few minutes later both children are playing again.

Children collect water, cut wood for the fire, prepare food and when meal times arrive they are often the last to be fed. Dad comes first, then the other male workers, followed by the mother. Children leave school early and it's usually the girls in the family who leave first. If the parents can't pay the school fees or domestic work looms, the girl is taken away from school. If she reaches her teens, she may be chosen for marriage and she will leave school. Possibly she will become pregnant within a few months of marriage and the following year and the year after that too. That puts an end to education. Some girls are chosen for marriage well before they reach their teens.

Last week I heard of Oluko Andrew, an official with a long-winded title which basically says – I look after getting kids out of the army and back into normal life. He's doing a good job and with the help of the good folk of UNICEF and others he has "demobilised" ... is that the right word... 3000 child soldiers ...from the SPLA since 2005.

There are many more kids in the army. All well and good, but this army called itself a liberation army, that is liberation from the hard slave like attitudes of President Bashir

of Khartoum, who along with his predecessors has treated the people of Southern Sudan like second rate citizens. A guerrilla war between North and South Sudan raged for over a quarter of a century and huge posters erected on the streets in Juba city say this war led to the death of over two million people.

But, there has been some peace in the Sudan since a peace agreement took effect in 2005. So why are there still child soldiers in the SPLA, they should have been “liberated” in 2005? After all, that is five years, and a long time for any boy!

My indignation rose when I read the quote by Oluko Andrew, “These children were not recruited. They found SPLA attractive. They see SPLA is better than their homes. They are not forced to become soldiers.”

He goes on to say “There are two types of children whom we are talking about; there are some children who cannot do army work. They are in the army so that they can get food from the soldiers. Some are in the army because a relative or friend is in the army. Some are there because they see the place where soldiers are living is like living in a town.” Oluko Andrew had little sympathy from me as I read his comments. Why had the army not taken action earlier to keep children out of the army? I would think that five years of a small boy living and working around soldiers with guns would bring about an attitude change, to say the least?

And what about education – did the army do anything about educating these boys? I doubt it. Their education was seeing the model of the military mind and their military actions.

I was ready to defend the children and take Oluko Andrew on in an argument and the whole SPLA too, but Oluko stopped me with his final quote,

“If the child needs to go to school, in the rural areas there are no schools. When the child was in the army, he used to get food. When you return the child to their home, there is hunger there. We have found in South Sudan that re-integration is the biggest problem.”

Re-integration. It’s a big issue in the Sudan and it encompasses children and adults, many who must now be middle-aged. Twenty years ago, or more these adults, many of them with young families, left the Sudan to escape the civil war. Maybe there are two or three or four million of these displaced people, no one knows for certain. They go to parts of Northern Sudan to get away from the killings. Some to Ethiopia, Egypt, Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States. Many are coming home before the referendum on independence due on January 9 next year, when voters will choose – to stay with the North as one country under President Bashir or to go-it-alone and become a new country. It’s expected that the go-it-alone vote will win hands down.

But, what of integration? The boys from the army have to integrate back into an uncertain future, which will include poverty. Many of the returning adults will have to do the same. Both groups have been away from normal life. Both will face another war - a personal one – to adapt to harsh conditions and a new life.