

CAUGHT IN A COMBAT ZONE

The urgent need to demobilise children
from armed groups in the Central
African Republic





In CAR, Save the Children is delivering life-saving medicines, equipment and health supplies to severely depleted healthcare centres and hospitals, treating malnourished children, and providing ante-natal and post-natal care to new mothers. Our Mobile Clinics support areas and displacement camps which otherwise have no functioning health system. Save the Children is also reuniting separated or unaccompanied children with their families, and placing children in host families while reunification efforts are underway. It has set-up Child Friendly Spaces and Youth Clubs so that children have a safe space to learn, play and receive the psychosocial support they need. Its education programmes provide children who have missed out on schooling with catch-up courses, training school supervisors on how to provide teachers with psychosocial support, and rehabilitating 46 schools affected by the violence.

Our teams are also working to help demobilise children associated with armed groups or forces and ensure they have the support they need to rebuild their lives afterwards, while working with partners to provide vocational training to vulnerable children, including children formerly in armed groups.

Each week, Save the Children programmes benefit around 25,000 people across the country, including over 17,000 children.

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* Children's names have been changed throughout to protect identities

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I INTRODUCTION

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been experiencing a deepening crisis since renewed armed conflict broke out in December 2012, following the seizure of power by Muslim-dominated Séléka armed groups and the subsequent emergence of so-called “anti-balaka” militias, made up of Christians and animists opposed to Séléka rule.¹ Both Séléka and anti-balaka forces are responsible for grave human rights violations against civilians.

Countless children have suffered appallingly, and continue to suffer from the violence, which is ongoing despite a ceasefire agreement between the two factions in July 2014.² Children are among thousands of people who have been killed or subjected to rape or other forms of sexual violence, and they make up a significant proportion of the hundreds of thousands of people who have been forcibly displaced. In addition, it is estimated that as many as 10,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 years have been recruited by armed groups for use in roles such as combatants, porters and spies, and for sexual purposes.³

In April 2014, the UN Security Council authorised the transformation of the existing African Union-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) into a Chapter VII UN peacekeeping mission, known as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Among MINUSCA’s priority tasks is the protection of civilians, including specific protection for women and children. It is also mandated to support the transitional authorities to develop and implement a revised strategy for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and repatriation (DDRR) of former combatants and armed elements, paying specific attention to the needs of children associated with armed forces and groups.⁴

In pursuit of its mandate, MINUSCA has an authorised strength of 10,000 military and 1,820 police personnel. The Security Council also mandated the deployment of child protection advisers. However, as of November 2014, only around 8,000 uniformed personnel had been deployed, and only a few of the 16 planned child protection adviser posts have been filled, placing severe limits on the mission’s capacity to fulfil its protection mandate.

Progress towards finalising a DDR/DDRR strategy has likewise been slow. A first draft strategy was adopted in November 2013 that envisaged the involvement of high-level government representatives, MINUSCA and relevant UN agencies, with UNICEF assuming responsibility for operational aspects relating to children. However, neither the overall DDR strategy nor the children’s element of it has significantly progressed since then. In the meantime, there are ongoing reports of under-age recruitment in the context of continuing insecurity, despite the continuing efforts of UNICEF and local partners to secure the release of under-18s from armed groups.

Two years on from the outbreak of the latest conflict, and three months into MINUSCA’s mandate, Save the Children urges that children be made the priority. The coming months will be critical for establishing a level of security in CAR in which children are protected against further human rights violations, including military recruitment and use. However,

¹ The Séléka overthrew former President François Bozizé on 14 March 2013 and its leader, Micheal Djotodia, became President. On 13 September 2013, Djotodia officially disbanded the Séléka, and he resigned the Presidency on 10 January 2014. The armed group, elements of which remain active, is now commonly referred to as “ex-Séléka”.

² The 23 July 2014 cessation of hostilities agreement commits the signatories, including representatives of ex-Séléka and anti-balaka armed groups, to an immediate cessation of hostilities and establishes a follow-up monitoring mechanism made up of representatives of political and armed groups, the transitional authorities and members of the international community.

³ The CAR transitional authorities’ draft disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration strategy uses a planning figure of 10,000 children associated with armed groups.

⁴ UN Security Council resolution 2149 (2014), 10 April 2014

without sufficient capacity, including child protection experts, MINUSCA will not be able to fulfil its protection mandate.

Greater priority and additional resources must also be given by the CAR government, MINUSCA, relevant UN agencies, and donors to accelerate efforts to identify and release children associated with armed groups, and to ensure their reintegration. Effective reintegration is a resource-intensive exercise, requiring the provision of psycho-social support and reconciliation efforts for children and their communities to overcome the trauma of violence and to learn to live peacefully. Returning children must also be provided with educational and vocational opportunities in order to support their reintegration and reduce their vulnerability to re-recruitment. This will require major investment in schools, training and income-generation schemes to benefit all of CAR's children, including those released from armed groups. While not underestimating the challenges involved, Save the Children believes **this investment must be made now**.



General view of a camp for displaced people in Kaga-Bandoro. In November 2014, 430,000 people across the country were still displaced from their homes. Armed groups are often present in camps, which are common sites of recruitment, as are refugee communities in the remote border areas of Chad, Cameroon and South Sudan.

Children bearing the brunt of the violence

Historically CAR has been neglected by the international community. Even before the latest upsurge in violence, the country was ranked one of the world's poorest, with over two-thirds of its population living on less than a dollar a day. One in three primary-school-aged children had never been to school, and many were associated with armed groups.

According to UNICEF, an estimated 2.3 million children have been affected by the latest conflict.⁵ Their daily lives are marked by the presence of armed groups perpetrating acts of violence with impunity, and by frequent armed clashes over control of territory. Hundreds of children are estimated to have been killed or injured, usually in the context of clashes between opposing forces, although children have also been directly targeted in some cases.⁶ Thousands of children have been separated from their families, and many have seen their homes destroyed. Sexual and gender-based violence is widespread, including that directed against children, often taking place in the context of sectarian violence, which increasingly characterises the conflict. Sexual and gender-based crimes are reported to include rape, gang rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery and sexual mutilation.⁷

⁵ Central African Republic Humanitarian Situation Report, UNICEF, 3 October 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20CAR%20Humanitarian%20SitRep%20Sept%202014.pdf>

⁶ Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict A/68/878-S/2014/339, 15 May 2014

⁷ Report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic S/2014/562, 1 August 2014

2 CURRENT REALITIES FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED GROUPS

Even before the latest conflict, there was a well-established pattern of child recruitment into armed forces and groups in CAR. In December 2012, about 2,500 children, both girls and boys, were reportedly associated with multiple armed groups, including self-defence groups allied with the previous government of President François Bozizé.⁸ Renewed fighting in September and December 2013 led to a dramatic upsurge in recruitment. Although difficult to establish precise numbers, UNICEF estimates that between 6,000 and 10,000 children may now be associated with armed groups.

The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (2007) define a child associated with armed forces or armed groups as any person under 18 years of age who is a member of an armed force or armed group and is used in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters and messengers, as well as anyone who is sexually exploited or forced into marriage, and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members.⁹

As is the case in many other situations of armed conflict, recruitment of children in CAR is both forced and voluntary; multiple vulnerabilities contribute to or result in children becoming associated with armed groups. Some children have been abducted or otherwise forced to join, lured into groups because they are easily manipulated and unaware of the dangers. Others are driven to join in order to survive, because they are seeking protection, food, clothes and money. According to Save the Children personnel working in CAR, others have joined under pressure from their peers or parents, out of a desire to protect their community, or in order to avenge human rights abuses or other acts of violence. Extreme poverty, lack of access to educational opportunities for younger children and to employment opportunities for older children, while not the only drivers of recruitment, are a contributory factor, effectively creating a reservoir of potential recruits.

Vulnerability is further heightened when children are displaced or separated from their families.¹⁰ Camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), in which armed groups are often present, are common sites of recruitment, as are refugee communities in the remote border areas of Chad, Cameroon and South Sudan. Teenage boys in refugee camps and IDP sites, without opportunities for education or work, appear to be among the most vulnerable to recruitment. Rates of recruitment among displaced children, children from very poor families, or among those with family members already in armed groups, are also higher. However, the risks are wider, with recruitment also known to have taken place from schools, on the roads while children are on the move, or when villages are attacked.

Underpinning these vulnerabilities is the ongoing high level of insecurity in CAR. Clashes between armed groups continue to be reported. The fragmentation of these groups creates further dangers to security, and poses new risks to children of military recruitment and use.

⁸ See UNICEF Press release, 'UNICEF calls for cessation of child recruitment in the Central African Republic', UNICEF, 4 January 2013, http://www.unicef.org/media/media_67117.html

⁹ The Paris Principles provide guidelines on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of all categories of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. They were endorsed in 2007 at the Paris Conference, 'Free Children from War', organised jointly by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNICEF. The accompanying Paris Commitments to Protect Children from Unlawful Recruitment or Use by armed forces or armed groups, have been signed by 105 States.

¹⁰ Unaccompanied and separated children have lost the primary protection of their families and are therefore at increased risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. Save the Children is actively involved in family tracing, interim care and reunification in Bangui as a consequence of recent clashes and massive population displacements, and aims to transfer the skills acquired and lessons learned to prevent and respond to family separation.

At 17, Maeva* has been in an anti-balaka group since 2013, when she heard about the militia movement after fleeing Bangui. One day she came home after church to find that her beloved aunt had been killed, allegedly by Séléka militia. Three days later, after the funeral rites had been completed, and after returning home, five Séléka men returned, found Maeva and raped her. Upset and furious at them for having killed her aunt, Maeva says she fled her home town to stay with relatives in the countryside, where she first heard about the anti-balaka and decided to join them. After months in the bush, in different roles, Maeva returned with the group to Bangui, where she lives at the armed group's base with a number of other children and youth. Maeva insists she could leave if she wanted to, but cannot see what options are open to her if she does. Without a job or skills to find work in the capital, which still hosts tens of thousands of displaced people, she longs to return to school.



“My aunt was the only precious thing I had,” she says. “She meant so much to me. Those who raped me were people who would not ever have deserved to sleep with me. Unfortunately they did. Before I became so angry, I could never imagine that I could be a rebel... But really it’s because my aunt was too important to me. She always took care of me, she paid for my schooling and covered all my needs. When she died, this affected me so much. That’s what pushed me to join the rebellion, where I learned to kill. I did things beyond my age, but I was obliged to do this because she was very important to me and I lost her – this made me so angry.

When I was in the group, I also realised things about myself. Like, that I am strong and that others listen to me. Sometimes others will get into arguments, and I will step in and sort it out.

The youngest children in the group are 10, 12, 15, 13, some are 14. They are all rebels. When and if there’s fighting again, they’ll also join the ranks to fight. Otherwise, now they run errands. They are couriers. Those who we have been with since the provinces, they fought with us. I know it’s not normal, but each one of us knows why they joined the group. Everyone has something that upset and hurt them, and everyone knows their reason.

I feel that I have avenged my aunt now. I feel calmer, things are OK. Some of the commanders have asked to marry me and want to meet my mother. But I don't want to get married yet. I'd like to continue my education. If I could find a job, I'd go back to school and get out of the group. I don't want to stay, but I need to have something to do.”



A French army patrols Bangui. Since April 2014, the French *Sangaris* Operation has officially supported the realisation of the MISCAs peacekeeping mandate, which in September was formally transformed into a UN peacekeeping force (MINUSCA). As of November 2014, out of 10,000 military and 1,820 police personnel authorised for MINUSCA, only around 8,000 had so far been deployed, and only one out of 12 planned child protection posts had been filled, placing severe limits on the mission’s capacity to fulfil its protection mandate.

Boys and girls, some as young as eight years old, are being forced to fight, carry supplies and perform other frontline and support roles. Recruited children are routinely subjected to physical and mental violence by adult combatants and some have been ordered to kill or commit other acts of violence. Girls often seek the protection of soldiers by becoming their wives, while both girls and boys are raped and used for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Others are used as spies, to carry military equipment or supplies, such as water and food, or to serve as cooks or domestic servants. Association with armed groups brings many risks, including death. UNICEF, for example, recently reported the brutal killing in Bangui of two children accused of spying by anti-balaka forces in early October 2014.¹¹

In accordance with the internationally accepted principles that release, protection and reintegration of children unlawfully recruited or used must be sought at all times, and should not be dependent on any parallel release or demobilisation process for adults,¹² UNICEF and its local partners are engaged in ongoing efforts to release children from armed groups. More than 2,000 children have been released since January 2014. However, many thousands of children remain associated with the groups and efforts to secure their release and reintegration are being hampered by lack of funds and political will.



Grace à Dieu* was 15 when he joined the Séléka in December 2012. When his father was taken by the armed group, Grace à Dieu, who is the eldest of seven children, felt he had no choice but to join their ranks to support his family. He was given a tough induction ‘training’ and then sent off with one of the group’s units.

“When I joined, they transferred us to a village about 10km away,” Grace à Dieu recalls. “Every morning we trained hard and this

involved us crawling through the mud. They wanted to make us mean, unforgiving. When we fought, it was us, the children, who were often sent to the frontline. Others stayed further behind. Even during the fight to take Bambari, I was there, on the frontline. After we took Bambari, there was the battle of Benzabe, which was ferocious too... I was on the frontline. The battle of Buzanza, which was in the ancient President’s [President Bozize’s] home town, I fought there too to recuperate the old armoury. I saw many of my brothers-in-arms fall and were killed while we were fighting.

I always did my best not to kill innocent people. I saw a lot of things, a lot of atrocities... But there was no difference between Muslims and Christians. Until we arrived, fought and took Bangui. Then I found that politics were taking over our battle... That’s when I started to want to leave the group and return to my village of birth. I want to start a civilian life – a normal life again – now, either by going back to school, or doing some small trading.

When I was in the group, fighting, I was fine with everything we were doing. It was only afterwards, after I left, that I started to realise and regret what I had done. Morally, emotionally, that really marked me. It unsettled me.

¹¹ UNICEF Press Release, UNICEF reaching “forgotten children” in Central African Republic, 31 October 2014, http://www.unicef.org/media/media_76656.html

¹² The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (2007)

I have a message for all children in the world. For children, there really are no advantages from joining an armed group. I want children to become conscious of this and never again for a child to join an armed group. Because very often we are drugged or inebriated, it makes us do things we would never do otherwise. I really want this message to be heard. But especially by the children in the Central African Republic here and now. Because earning by one's sweat and toil, earning because one works hard in school, is much better than joining an armed group."

Having witnessed or committed killings and other acts of violence for months, children, their parents and caregivers are likely to suffer fear, anxiety, depression, grief and insecurity. Children, in particular, require specialised psychological support. Save the Children uses a community-based approach that promotes children's psychosocial well-being through child-friendly spaces¹³ and youth networks,¹⁴ which provide safe spaces to learn, play and receive psychosocial support. Training is also delivered to staff and community members to increase their ability to respond adequately to children's distress.

Save the Children also provides community-based interim care, family tracing, socio-economic reintegration and individual psychosocial support. We seek to strengthen community-based child protection mechanisms (RECOPE) to empower communities to participate in their own protection even in times of crisis. Working with existing associations, community leaders and families, Save the Children seeks to better understand and support, where appropriate, traditional coping mechanisms and responses to child protection violations for boys and girls. RECOPE groups can also play an important role in advocating for the release and reintegration of children and preventing recruitment— for example, through community-based awareness-raising activities, through monitoring and reporting on existing and potential recruitment risks, and by focusing on the root causes of vulnerability to recruitment and to peace-building.



Brigitte Isabelle Andara, Mayor of Bangui's 4th District, has witnessed the violence on all sides and today works closely with Save the Children and other partners to help demobilise and protect children from armed groups. She is pictured here during a weekly Sunday meeting she set up with local leaders of the anti-balaka armed group: "I started this work when I saw that among the anti-balaka, there were children aged 12, 14, 15, and older. I thought, 'We worked with an armed group during the end of the President Bozize's regime, and we reintegrated these young children. Why can't we do the same today with these children who are among the ranks of this group?'"

¹³ In child-friendly spaces, Save the Children facilitators organise child-centred recreational and educational sessions aiming at building healthy interactions among children, adapted to their age groups.

¹⁴ Save the Children supports youth clubs and youth centres and facilitates focus-group discussions with youth on selected themes. Adolescent boys and girls are encouraged to discuss protection issues affecting their lives, with a particular focus on developing mechanisms to cope with post conflict distress symptoms, awareness-raising on the risks of recruitment, non-violent conflict resolution, civic education and other life skills, including specific life skills for adolescent girls.

Lack of access to education and vocational opportunities

While insecurity remains the key driver of child recruitment and use, broader responses are essential to reduce children's vulnerability and to break the cycles of violence in CAR. In particular, ensuring access to education for school-age children and providing opportunities for vocational training and income-generating opportunities for older children are necessary elements of any strategy to prevent under-age recruitment and to support the reintegration of demobilised children. In addition, it is vital that children who have missed periods of formal education are able to get a basic education (basic literacy, numeracy and essential life-skills).



Jean*, whose father died when he was young, joined the Séléka when he was 16 because the family struggled to make ends meet and he thought he could earn money this way. For six months, he manned a rebel checkpoint in a town near Bangui, and was at different points involved in direct fighting, such as during attacks on their position. Jean describes witnessing some acts of terrible violence. Jean left the group of his own volition and returned home, where he says he feels much happier, though he is unsure of what the future holds for him. Though he is a

Christian, he says he grew up with Muslim friends and feels that community relations where he lives remain good, and that this cohabitation will continue.

“When I was young, when I joined, I didn't know what I was doing... Now I've grown up. I joined a Séléka group because I thought I would earn money despite my age, but I was disappointed. My father died when I was very young. It's my mother who raised me and still takes care of us today, buying food with what she earns selling things at the market.

The time I spent in the group was intense. I had no idea it would be this way. I had an AK47, and I sold it when I came back and kept the money. I used it, and I killed with it. I killed a lot of people... With the presence of the anti-balaka militia there too, it struck me how much this was not like me or my life before. I was scared of the leaders in our group, the ones who were my chiefs. I was also afraid of enemy anti-balaka fighters, as they were known to come, behave in mystical ways, and decapitate fighters like us. I have friends who they decapitated. What is bad about the anti-balaka, is that they are killing in any which way, which is not good.



Adolescents playing football in Kaga Bandoro in front of a looted school

My life now is good compared to when I was in a group. Here I feel happy, I go on walks with my friends and we play football. Whereas back then, you always had to be on your

guard, attacks could happen anytime, gunshots would ring out, violence would flare up. I like this world today of football. But being at the checkpoint was not good.

I grew up in a Christian family, but I had Muslim friends. I still do. Even though I was in the Séléka, we play football together like we did before. The Séléka and Muslims continue to live side by side with Christians. I joined this group at the time because it wasn't about being Christian or Muslim. Today, here there is cohabitation. I just needed the money. It's not good for a child to enter an armed group. You have to go to school. But for me it's the situation that brought me there, otherwise I wouldn't have joined. But for a child to engage in this, it's not good. Because when you get involved, you see people killing people, you see dead people. It's not good, because you're still a child, your mind is not yet solid and you look at things like that."

For many children, education is the most effective potential route out of entrenched poverty, which is one of the factors contributing to children's vulnerability to recruitment. It is also an important way of providing a sense of normality and purpose, and social experiences that can allow released children to find their place in society again. Attending classes can help enhance children's inner resilience, and increases their chances of reintegrating into their communities.

According to CAR legislation, boys and girls under the age of 15 years old are prohibited from working or participating in vocational training. In accordance with national law, and reflecting international standards,¹⁵ Save the Children supports the return of released children below the age of 15 into the formal schooling system and additional measures to encourage and support attendance, such as regular meetings with teachers and families, support for the payment of school fees, and the provision of school kits to the most vulnerable pupils.

However, even during times of relative peace, education in CAR was under-resourced. The latest crisis has effectively paralysed the provision of basic services, including education. Schools across the country have been damaged, destroyed and looted. Many remain in a chronic state of disrepair and others are occupied by displaced civilians, depriving teachers and pupils of their facilities and equipment. Education personnel have been displaced, attacked and threatened. Low attendance of teachers also results from non-payment of salaries. Moreover, the use of schools by armed elements has compromised their civilian nature and puts pupils at risk.



Gladys*, 17, who has been a member of an anti-balaka faction since November 2013, listens to Save the Children Protection Officer, Ndo, during an open discussion with the armed group.

Gladys joined the group because Séléka forces killed her mother and other relatives. She wanted to pursue her studies but had no choice, she says, but to

¹⁵ International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 138 concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, sets the general minimum age for admission to employment or work at 15 years (13 for light work) and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18.

join the group to survive. At the moment, she and other children in the armed group spend their days idly, doing some patrols around their encampment, and sometimes cleaning up their neighbours' homes in exchange for food.

"I'm 17 years old. I became very angry and joined this group after armed men killed my mother, my grandfather and my uncle. They also came to my home and killed my other uncle and threw his body into the river. They destroyed my father's property. My parents are both farmers, I was still at school and there was nobody to look after me. The leaders look after us. I would like to resume my studies because last year we couldn't continue our schooling because of the violence. When we went to school they were shooting at us, so we failed the class. I'd be in 4th grade now, but there's no one to support my studies, because my father only cultivates a field and can't afford the costs. But I need to go to school to succeed. Maybe tomorrow I will be able to succeed. If I pursue my studies and I get a bachelor's degree and go to university, I could also work as others do."



Vocational training, such as carpentry, is an important way for children to rebuild their lives and earn an income after spending months, sometimes years, in armed groups.

Many schools across the country remain closed, while the 2014-2015 school year only just officially started in late November. Children in many areas have now missed two school years. Those children who have been able to continue may not be able to take their annual examinations because of ongoing insecurity and logistical issues, and therefore cannot progress to the next level. The already low capacity of the Ministry of Education has been further undermined by destruction and looting of buildings and the loss of staff who have fled during the various waves of violence. As a result, classes and national examinations have been heavily disrupted. The cumulative result of long-term under-investment and conflict is that an entire generation is today at risk of growing up illiterate and unable to achieve its potential and thereby to contribute to the development of the country.

Save the Children works in close coordination with communities, parents, children and local authorities in five prefectures of CAR: Ombella m'poko (Bangui), Kemo (Sibut), Nana Gribizi (Kaga bandoro-Mbrès), Nana Mambere (Bouar) and Ouaka (Bambari-Grimari), and will soon launch an education programme in Nana Gribizi and Ouaka. Save the Children's education programme will enable more than 24,500 children to enjoy renewed access to good-quality education through the rehabilitation of schools and the distribution of school materials and supplies to 46 schools in Bangui (8), Nana Gribizi (19) and Ouaka (19). Good-quality education will be promoted through the training and supervision of teachers.

To support the reintegration of children over the age of 15 who do not wish to return to school, vocational training will be essential to help them find employment and play a positive role as contributors to their families and communities. However, given the collapse of the formal economy, which preceded and was then exacerbated by the conflict, any vocational training will need to go hand in hand with measures to rebuild the economy and strengthen governance.¹⁶

Save the Children provides socio-economic support to the reintegration of vulnerable youth, including those formerly associated with armed groups, through livelihoods training and the provision of business start-up kits. Local mentors have been identified and supported to provide on-the-job training, for example, in auto mechanics and baking. However, community-based economic reintegration projects for older children and young adults are needed on a much larger scale.



photo: Krista Armstrong/Save the Children

Save the Children Protection Officers, Ndo and Favourite, lead a discussion with a faction of the anti-balaka armed movement in Bangui, which has many, often very young, children in their ranks.

¹⁶ See International Crisis Group, *The Central African Crisis: From predation to stabilisation*, 17 June 2014.



Jules*, age 12, is a former child combatant with an anti-balaka group, who was recently reunited with his family after months spent in the bush and in Bangui. Jules, who had been quite ill as a young boy and underwent several operations, came from a poor family. When his older brother left for Bossangoa, 300km from the capital to find work, he took Jules with him and into his care. After an armed Séléka group arrived in Bossangoa, it was not long before they attacked the area where Jules and his brother lived, killing his elder brother during the onslaught. Jules describes feeling so distraught and angry that he joined an anti-balaka group to avenge the murder of his brother. He says he fought in their ranks for months.

Recently, Jules' mum heard that he had been spotted at one of the group's bases near a camp for people displaced by the violence. So she came to find him, ensured he got rid of his weapons and amulets (which he believed protected him from being harmed by bullets), and brought him back to where the family was sheltering. The family is living in a camp and struggling financially, but Jules' mother is adamant that

she wants to protect him from joining an armed group again.

Jules still occasionally acts as a 'runner' for the anti-balaka, doing errands for them in exchange for food, clothing or provisions. While Jules appears like a child, when describing his experiences, he sits up straight and tall, and his body language takes on another, harder persona. He speaks movingly about his brother and how he still misses him. Right now, he is eager to start school and learn again.

“After they attacked, I left Bossangoa, and we went through villages and to Bangui. We had to fight along the way. I saw people and children being killed. When we arrived here in Bangui, we found out that the Séléka had attacked Bossangoa, so we had to return and fight them again there. When there was fighting, I fought using weapons and knives and machetes. I myself was never injured. Sometimes I would get told to do things, and I would do them. Sometimes I would be told to go and fight, sometimes when I'd get back, I'd be told to cook and do other errands. From time to time, I have nightmares – I see Muslims, Séléka, all around me, and they want to cut me up in small pieces.

For me, my brother was such a good person. He took care of me, he paid for my schooling, when I had any problem, he would take care of me. My mother came to find me in the anti-balaka base and brought me home. Someone had told my mother that I was there. Now I want to work, I want to learn and go back to school. I used to like maths and some of the homework I had to do.

My wish is to tell all children to take the path back to school. I would tell children of my age and others not to join groups like the anti-balaka. Because this could make them fight and commit acts that they won't want to.”



(photo: Krista Armstrong/Save the Children)

Jules and other children take part in recreational activities at a Save the Children child-friendly space.

3 CONCLUSION

Without rapid and sustained interventions, many more children risk being recruited or re-recruited, and those who are released from armed groups will be condemned to impoverishment. This has potentially dire consequences for individual children. The prospect of tens of thousands of children and young people, traumatised by their experiences, without access to education and facing a future without economic opportunities also poses serious risks to longer term security and stability in the CAR.

A comprehensive strategy is urgently needed to address protection against military recruitment and use, and to bring about the release and reintegration of children already associated with armed groups. The two are intrinsically linked. Both require a significant improvement in security conditions, and both require significant expertise and funding, including to provide educational and other opportunities for children. Protection and reintegration strategies for children should therefore be linked to wider efforts to resume education and to strengthen formal and informal child protection structures, the development of employment opportunities and reconciliation initiatives.

This will require coordinated and urgent efforts by the CAR government, MINUSCA, UNICEF, NGO partners, and other relevant stakeholders, including existing child-protection mechanisms in communities, national and local health services and police forces. It will also require significant and sustainable resources and support from international donors.



A MINUSCA vehicle carrying Moroccan peacekeepers driving through the Muslim quarter in Kaga Bandoro.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Protection of civilians

The UN, UN member states and MINUSCA should:

- Ensure the accelerated deployment of adequate capacity within MINUSCA to effectively fulfil its protection mandate. This should include the authorised strength of uniformed personnel, and of child protection advisers and experts on sexual and gender-based violence.

- Ensure that child protection advisers are deployed to locations most affected by the conflict, in order to support the development and implementation of national and local child protection and DDR strategies, and the identification, release and reintegration of children associated with armed groups; and to undertake monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children.
- Provide training to all peacekeepers in international human rights and humanitarian law, including in relation to protection of civilians in general, and women and children in particular. Specific training should be given on topics such as safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse, and on issues relating to unlawful military recruitment and use of children.
- In accordance with the UN's December 2012 "Policy on Human Rights Screening of UN Personnel", ensure that all peacekeepers are effectively screened to ensure that perpetrators of human rights violations are excluded, and that no under-18s are deployed in military or police contingents.

2) Prioritise the implementation of a comprehensive DDR strategy for children

The CAR government, in collaboration with MINUSCA, UNICEF, NGOs and communities, should:

- Accelerate efforts to develop a comprehensive DDR strategy for children.
- Ensure that reintegration plans include access to education, vocational training and income-generating opportunities for released children, and are integrated with broader efforts to rebuild the education system and restore the economy.

3) Increase funding to prevent child recruitment and support the release and reintegration of children

Donors should:

- Announce new commitments to the humanitarian response, channelling resources to under-funded sectors, including child protection and education.
- Commit resources to rebuilding state services, and support the strengthening in particular of child protection services, education, appropriate vocational training and employment opportunities for families and older children.

4) End impunity for crimes against children

The CAR government, supported by MINUSCA, the UN, other governments and donors should:

- Continue to pressure all parties to halt abuses against children by armed groups.
- Ensure that during the disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups, thorough investigations are undertaken into allegations of grave abuses of human rights against children, including their military recruitment and use, and that individuals responsible, including those with operational or political command responsibility, are held to account.
- Accelerate efforts to establish the rule of law and rebuild the judiciary.



Cristal*, now 17, was 16 when she joined the Séléka. She currently earns her living by selling peanuts on the street to passing vehicles. Her brother was taken and beaten by the Séléka. Cristal, who had already considered joining, became determined to do so as she thought this would help get him released. She herself never suffered any abuses or mistreatment, but saw a lot of violence and people killed. After a year, her father came to find her in Bangui, and gave her some money to start a business so that she would come home.

"It wasn't difficult to join, I just approached the fighters and showed my interest. They brought me to see the chief, and he said if I wanted to join their ranks, I was welcome. They took my name, gave me a uniform, and then we went to another town, and then onto another one. And from there, eventually, we descended onto Bangui. I was a corporal. If there was a problem at the checkpoint, they would ask me to sort it out. The chief would then decide what to do when I gave him the information. I never felt afraid, as I was in the group then.

After a year of being with the Séléka, my father came down to Bangui to find me. He asked me what he could do to convince me to leave the armed group and return home. And I told him that I wanted to start a small business. So he gave me a little money to buy some tools, and that's how I came to finally leave the Séléka. Before, Christians and Muslims lived peacefully together. It's the anti-balaka who came and changed all this. But here and up until Kabo, there is a perfect cooperation between Christian and Muslim people.

Before the fighting started, I went to school. But after the violence began, I was just hanging around, I had nothing to do. It's not a good thing that a child joins an armed group, because you're going to see horrible things. You'll see blood, you'll see people who are decapitated, you'll see death, and it'll play on your psyche. It's not good. I saw all this, but today I go to church, I pray, I read my Bible, I feel I have freed myself from all this so it doesn't have an impact on me. This will end, because peace is starting to return. They say there'll be disarmament, many people who came, they come to help with this disarmament [process], then peace will return. There'll be agreements.



Christians and Muslims parade the streets in the mainly Muslim PK5 area in September 2014, calling for reconciliation between the two communities.

My current life is better than when I was in the armed group. It's my father who helped me out and gave me some money to leave. My brother was also released and he's managing his business. Now I have a bit of money, I take care of myself, and I'm beautiful [laughs]."



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