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## 'WHY WE FIGHT': VOICES OF YOUTH COMBATANTS IN SIERRA LEONE

*Krijn Peters and Paul Richards*

### YOUNG PEOPLE AND WAR IN AFRICA

Young people are the major participants in most wars. In the African civil wars of the last twenty years combatants have become increasingly youthful. Some forces are made up largely of young teenagers. Combatants may sometimes be as young as 8 or 10. Girl fighters are increasingly common.

This is partly demographic. Africa is not only the world's poorest continent, it is also its youngest. Half or more of the population of African countries are under the age of 18 years. Militia life offers training and a livelihood in countries where poverty and numbers overwhelm education and jobs. But the trend to more youthful combatants also reflects the discovery that children—their social support disrupted by war—make brave and loyal fighters. The company of comrades-in-arms becomes a family substitute.

Technology also facilitates the rise in the number of child combatants. Battle kit was once too heavy, and too expensive, for children to handle. Automatic rifles are now light enough for a 10 year old. Cheap but efficient rifles flood the continent. An AK47, firing thirty bullets per trigger pull, costs the equivalent of the price of a goat (Machel, 1996).

Confusing war and play, child combatants are heedless of danger. Groups of youngsters in bush wars operate on their own initiative for long periods in remote terrain, sometimes without even radio to convey commands. Incompletely socialised, they make up rules of war as they go. Civilians bear the brunt of the unpredictable atrocity.

There are two main adult reactions. The first is to stigmatise youth combatants as evil (as 'bandits' and 'vermin'). Many under-age recruits are from remote rural regions. Poorly educated, they are readily despised by urbanised elites. Elites always fear 'unwashed' youth. Africa is no exception. Sometimes, as in Liberia and Sierra Leone, colonially rooted attitudes to interior peoples reinforce the stigmatisation of young rural combatants as 'barbarians'.

The other reaction (regularly espoused by agencies working with children) is to see young fighters as victims (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994; Human Rights Watch, 1994; Brett and McCallin, 1996)—as tools of undemocratic military regimes or brutally unscrupulous 'warlords'.

But, as will be seen, many under-age combatants choose to fight with their eyes open, and defend their choice, sometimes proudly. Set against a background of destroyed families and failed educational systems, militia activity offers young people a chance to make their way in the world.

The exemplary report by Graça Machel (1996) for the United Nations on children and war rightly cautions us against seeing child soldiers solely as victims of war. It is important to pay due attention to their agency in conflict.

As rational human actors, they have an at times quite surprisingly mature understanding of their predicament.

The purpose of the present article is to let young combatants explain themselves direct (cf. Cairns, 1996). The reader is left to decide whether they are the dupes and demons sometimes supposed.

#### WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

The civil war in Sierra Leone began on 23 March 1991. The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (henceforth RUF/SL) sought to mobilise a socially excluded youth underclass to form a 'people's army' to overthrow the All-party Congress regime of President Joseph Momoh. The RUF/SL drew some of its inspiration from the populist youth politics advocated in the Libyan *Green Book* (Gaddafi, n.d.). The leader of the RUF/SL, a cashiered army corporal, Foday Saybana Sankoh, trained as a guerrilla in Benghazi.

Following the precedent of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the RUF/SL chose to try and establish itself in an isolated border region (Kailahun and Pujehun Districts) alienated from the regime in power. At the outset the movement was assisted by hired Liberian fighters. The brutal terror tactics of the Liberian 'special forces' alienated local populations.

The RUF/SL abducted and trained numbers of captured border-zone youths. Some came from the most isolated and run-down schools in the country. Others were young 'tributors' working alluvial diamond mining pits for Lebanese and Sierra Leonean merchant 'supporters'. Abductees co-operated with the movement to save their lives, but some found the movement's analysis of the breakdown of Sierra Leonean society meaningful and accepted guerrilla training willingly.<sup>1</sup>

Opposed to the RUF/SL was an ill equipped government army, the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (henceforth RSLMF). Inexperienced war-front junior officers quickly learnt to survive by copying RUF/SL guerrilla tactics, including the recruitment and training of under-age irregulars. Much of the fighting was done by these locally recruited irregulars, less daunted than RSLMF soldiers by RUF/SL cadres prepared for combat with fear-inhibiting drugs.

In April 1992 a pay revolt by some war-front junior officers escalated into a full-blown *coup* against the Momoh presidency from within the RSLMF. The young *coup*-makers formed the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). Believing it had radicalised the *coup*-makers at the war front, the RUF/SL expected to be invited to share in some kind of government of national unity (RUF/SL, 1995).

But civilian, and especially capital city, political elements rallied to the personable young chairman of the NPRC, Captain Valentine Strasser, a Krio, persuading him against any negotiation with the discredited RUF/SL. The army was rearmed and transformed. From a fighting force of about 2,500 when the war began the RSLMF was increased under the NPRC to total about 15,000 hastily trained recruits. Many of the new intake were from the socially disadvantaged 'underclass' courted by the RUF/SL.<sup>2</sup>

The NPRC quickly lost control of its enlarged but poorly trained army. Jealousy between units was rife. The pay was abysmal and sometimes never

reached war-front units. Soldiers and NPRC officials engaged in the mining of alluvial diamonds—the country's main resource—in the war zone. Military officers would declare zones off-limits and drive civilians out while undertaking 'sweeps' against the RUF/SL but in reality digging for diamonds. Some rogue officers apparently conspired to buy diamonds from RUF/SL groups in return for weapons. Other units seem to have faked rebel attacks to drive civilians off in order to loot (Keen, 1995).

RSLMF irregulars continued to prove militarily effective, however, pinning the RUF/SL into a last redoubt in Nomo chiefdom on the Liberian border by December 1993. With its line of retreat blocked by a change of fortunes in the war on the Liberian side of the border, the RUF/SL had little option but to continue its struggle, now a fight for survival, from isolated camps in the Gola Forest.

Having little faith in the bloated, corrupt NPRC-enlarged army, citizen civil defence groups began to mobilise to protect rural areas against RUF/SL pockets and army renegades alike. Beginning as early as 1992, these civil defence groups drew upon the practical and esoteric knowledge of traditional hunters.

In parts of the north such hunters are referred to as *tamaboro*, in the south and east by the Mende term *kamajo* (pl. *kamajoisia*). Some *tamaboro* groups were assisting RSLMF units on the Liberian border in 1994. It was to hit at this co-operation that the RUF/SL undertook a daring raid on the town of Kabala in the far north of Sierra Leone, the base of one of the principal masters of *tamaboro* art, in November 1994. A famed *tamaboro* leader was killed and his house destroyed, striking a blow at the prestige of the NPRC leadership as well. Two British volunteer aid workers were taken hostage in the raid, and the local jail opened, several of the prisoners joining the RUF/SL.

The RUF/SL then began a new expansive campaign in late 1994, developing forward bases and launching hit-and-run raids on all parts of the country, aiming to cause economic devastation (especially to the mining economy), to advertise its political programme and to abduct new recruits. One such raid (on Kambia, in north-western Sierra Leone) netted about 100 schoolchildren—boys and girls—many subsequently inducted into the movement. By March 1995 Freetown itself was coming under pressure.

Resolution of the hostage crisis brought the RUF/SL wider publicity and initiated the building of a peace process, leading to a provisional cease-fire in January 1996. The NPRC regime, bankrupt of support in the country, and under considerable international pressure, split over the peace process. Strasser was replaced by Captain Julius Maada Bio in a palace *coup*, and Bio was steered by public protest, apparently reluctantly, towards elections. The parliamentary election was won by an alliance led by the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). The presidential contest was won by the SLPP candidate Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah, a former UN bureaucrat. Kabbah continued the peace process initiated by Bio and Sankoh.

The new democratic government was suspicious of the army and sidelined it during protracted peace negotiations, concentrating efforts on building up Kamajo militia activities. A major recruitment and training drive took place; there may have been as many as 15,000–25,000 Kamajo fighters by the end

of 1996. Kamajo militia units never observed any cease-fire, and key RUF/SL bases—including Sankoh's Gola Forest headquarters—were overrun during negotiations. Sankoh and Kabbah signed the peace agreement on 30 November 1996.

Under-age combatants from the government side began demobilisation in 1993–94, but demobilisation of the RUF/SL and the Kamajo militia was still pending when the peace agreement was signed. Surviving RUF/SL units went to ground in the forest. Kamajo militia operations continued. In February 1997 Sankoh, visiting Nigeria, apparently to buy arms, was detained by the Nigerian authorities.

On 25 May 1997 some disgruntled soldiers bombed the main prison in Freetown to release soldiers held by the Kabbah government on suspicion of involvement in an earlier *coup* attempt. The President fled to Guinea, and the RSLMF mutineers promptly invited the surviving cadres of the RUF/SL to join a new regime headed by RSLMF Major Johnny-Paul Koroma. Sankoh signalled 'yes' to the proposal, whereupon several thousand RUF/SL cadres were bussed into Freetown, to begin training and arming urban underclass recruits to a 'people's army'.

The RUF/SL and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) came together in alliance to form a new military regime in Freetown. The Kamajo militia changed places with the RUF/SL in the diamond-rich forested margins of the country, pledging to fight to restore the Kabbah government. The AFRC regime survived until February 1998, when the Nigerian-led West African intervention force (ECOMOG) took over the Freetown peninsula and the major provincial centres. RUF diehards returned to the forests of the Liberian border, vowing to fight on.

#### UNDER-AGE COMBATANTS AS VICTIMS AND AGENTS

The war began in 1991 with no more than a handful of insurgents ranged against small government forces. Today, estimates of the total number of combatants in Sierra Leone, including the Kamajo militia, range from 50,000 to 75,000—a fifteenfold increase. It has been estimated that perhaps half of all combatants in the RUF/SL are in the age range 8–14 years. There are also significant numbers of under-18 combatants in army irregular units and the Kamajo militia. Both RSLMF and RUF/SL have deployed under-age female combatants (interviews 2 and 3 below).

Male and female under-age irregulars are rated highly by their officers. Under-age irregulars fight without inhibitions (interview 5) and kill without compunction, sometimes casually (interview 4), sometimes as an extension of play. They are good in ambush situations, one of the main combat tactics (interview 2), and—separated by war from their kin—are fiercely loyal to their *bra* (Krio, lit. 'big brother'), i.e. the officer responsible for recruiting and training them (interviews 1, 4 and 6).

Interviewees report smoking marijuana, being prepared for battle with injections of amphetamines, taking crack cocaine or a cocktail of local substances including gunpowder (interviews 2 and 4). Atrocities are undoubtedly committed under the influence of drugs. Girl combatants regularly experience military rape (interviews 2 and 3; cf. Littlewood, 1997),

sometimes as a 'punishment' for losing ground (interview 2). Large numbers of children have been conscripted against their will, mainly by the RUF/SL (interviews 6, 7 and 8). In all these respects a majority of participants in the Sierra Leone war can be considered 'victims' of military manipulation.

But many under-age combatants joined up voluntarily (interviews 1–5), some looking for revenge (interviews 1 and 3), others to survive. Youngsters in a war zone find themselves 'on the street' (interviews 3, 4 and 6). Joining a militia group is both meal ticket and substitute education (interviews 1, 3, 4 and 6). The pay may be derisory (interview 1), but weapon training pays quicker dividends than school ever did; soon the AK47 brings food, money, a warm bath and instant adult respect (interview 4). The combat group substitutes for lost family and friends (interviews 1, 2 and 6).

Time and again interviewees return to the theme of educational aspirations. Economic failure, political corruption and structural adjustment wreaked havoc on educational systems in Sierra Leone. Formal education has not been effective in preparing young people for the economic realities of modern life (Mokuwa, 1997), and both RSLMF and RUF/SL recruited extensively from the swollen ranks of educational drop-outs hustling for a living in border logging and mining camps (Richards, 1996; cf. Reno, 1995; Zack-Williams, 1995). Yet loss of educational opportunity is seen as a major factor in the decision to fight (see especially interviews 1, 4 and 5).

The accounts repeatedly stress that it makes little sense to stand down voluntarily without any real promise of social reintegration, education or training, or civilian job prospects, and that failure to address this complex of aspirations caused and now prolongs the conflict. Frustrated by the failure of demobilisation to offer a way out (interview 5), several informants promptly re-enlisted (cf. interview 1) after the military *coup* of 25 May 1997.

Political understanding of the war is a striking feature of some of the comment. Informants rejected the idea that the conflict is barbarously purposeless (Kaplan, 1994) or the result of ethnic and religious tensions, preferring to interpret it primarily in terms of an intergenerational struggle for a fairer society (interviews 1, 5 and 7).

The single most remarkable commentary is from an articulate Kamajo militia fighter. Blaming the RUF/SL for the loss of his home and educational prospects, he nevertheless unerringly puts his finger on the failures of patrimonial politics as the cause of the anger of the young cadres of the RUF/SL (interview 5). From the notes they scatter in attacked villages he concludes that they are, like him, frustrated students. Patrimonial politics sent a few to study to the highest level overseas and denied that opportunity to a majority, not on merit but on grounds of political favouritism.

The capacity of the young combatants *opposed* to the RUF/SL to understand what their enemies are fighting *for* stands in stark contrast to the incomprehension of observers, to whom the AFRC/RUF alliance between military enemies after the May *coup* came as a complete surprise (Hecht, 1997). Those who posit a stark contrast between the merits of democracy and the evils of militarism in Sierra Leone would do well to heed the experience and opinions of these politically informed fighters not yet old enough to vote.

## SOURCES

The material below derives mainly from interviewing under-age ex-combatants undergoing rehabilitation in two programmes in Freetown in 1996 (the Children Associated with the War [CAW] programme based at the Wellington Approved School and the army demobilisation camp at Grafton). Additional interviews were obtained 'up country' with recently self-demobilised RUF/SL conscripts.

Our aim has been to build up a 'bank' of interview material as an input to community and agency discussions about options for the demobilisation and rehabilitation of children and young people affected by war. We have drawn inspiration from a collection of 'street children's' accounts of life in Freetown published by the People's Education Association (1989).

So far we have collected twenty-two accounts, but there is space below only to sample the material. Rather than paste together bits and pieces to illustrate an agenda of our own, it seemed better to present a smaller number of interviews *in extenso*, to give a sense of who these young people are and where they are coming from.

We have chosen a mixture of accounts representing all the major groups of under-age combatants in the war—RSLMF-linked irregular units, the RUF/SL and the Kamajo militia. For context we append two interviews with abductees who escaped from the RUF/SL. One of these interviews is with an unschooled middle-aged farmer rejected for guerrilla training. Since the RUF/SL depended on written messages to convey orders, young people with elementary schooling were its main target. But it seems also that the movement expected only the partially schooled fully to understand and respond to its political analysis.

Four interviews were carried out by Krijn Peters, three in English and one in a mixture of English, Krio and Mende with the assistance of a translator. Peters worked on a regular basis with informants in demobilisation camps for five months to establish *rapport* for interviewing. The other five interviews were carried out in the national lingua franca, Krio, by Paul Richards. Two of these interviews were carried out within a framework of co-operation established with the CAW project for Peters's study. The others were 'one-off' contacts but in communities where Richards has on-going anthropological fieldwork commitments.

Originally it was planned to contact interviewees to review transcribed material and discuss a final version for publication. Much of the material was given in the explicit hope that it would appear in print with the contributor's name credited. We had to review this possibility after the *coup* of 25 May 1997. Many under-age combatants were remobilised by the Armed Forces Ruling Council/Revolutionary United Front alliance and the Kamajo militia. Accordingly, steps have been taken to protect the identity of all interviewees, for the time being at least, by deleting personal names and some place-name references.

*1 Male youth ex-combatant, RSLMF-linked irregular*

This account may be considered typical of the experience of many male under-age RSLMF-linked irregulars. The young man comes from a rural

family in Kailahun, and was 18 years old when interviewed in October 1996 but had begun to fight in 1991, about age 13. His family had been scattered by the RUF invasion, a younger brother killed, and his education halted. He fought for about four years, responding to a demobilisation offer only when there was a cease-fire with the RUF. He is frank that revenge was one of his reasons for fighting.

The account is especially interesting in that the interviewee was recruited by Captain Ben-Hirsch, one of the first RSLMF officers in the war zone to respond to RUF tactics by creating his own force of under-age irregulars. Ben-Hirsch was allegedly one of the architects of the NPRC take-over in 1992, though ambushed and killed (the interviewee was an eye-witness) before the *coup* took place. It is interesting to note Ben-Hirsch adapting indigenous ideas, associated with the men's 'secret society' Poro, about *hindo-hindo* (the mobilisation of village young men for community defence).

The young man now wants vocational training, but would rejoin an irregular unit tomorrow if required. When he says, 'to defend my motherland', he is probably speaking about Kailahun, and perhaps his mother's village in particular. He has not seen his family since the RUF invasion in 1991 and does not know whether they are dead or alive.

*What is your name, age and where do you come from?* I am [. . .]. I am eighteen years old. I come from Kailahun district. It is in the east, close to the border. I lived in a village, a big village with more than a thousand people.

*You lived with your family there?* Yes, I lived with my father, while my father took me to my uncle at S., near Daru, to go and attend school. I was at the age of ten, then I went for the first time to primary school. I was attending the M. primary school in S. After primary school I attended W. secondary school.

*Do you have any brothers or sisters?* I have three brothers, all smaller, and two smaller sisters. I am the only one who was attending school.

*When you were with your uncle, did you visit your parents?* Oh, yes. Every holiday I went to visit my father.

*What kind of occupation did your father and uncle have?* My father, he was a farmer. At that age I liked farming. By then I wanted to become a farmer. . . . Not any more. My uncle, he was a medical cashier, at the hospital . . .

*So when the war broke out, do you remember that?* Yes. We were very close to the border, where the rebels entered. There was a time they even kept my father and mother. One of my smaller brothers was killed by the rebels, that was in 1991. They were with the rebels for eight months. After that I never set an eye on them again. I don't know if they are still alive. So after that I tried to join the army as a matter of revenging. I wanted to revenge my people.

*What was your first experience with the war?* The soldiers came to my village and they were telling that the rebels should come from the east and that they were trying to kill people. So they said that we had to move, and we went to Kenema. Me, my uncle and his family. I had already had been to Kenema, so it was not my first time.

*Where did you join the army?* I went back to Segbwema. I met the lieutenant there, Lieutenant Ben-Hirsch. So he tried to form some kind of organisation we usually call the Hindo-Hindo squad. That is a Poro Society [idea] . . . for the boys to defend the land. Normally the village chief takes the boys for the Poro, but now the lieutenant did. When we joined, he trained us and gave us some weapons to fight the rebels. The lieutenant died during 1992 in a rebel ambush. Before the

lieutenant died he was promoted to captain—Captain Ben-Hirsch. We were on a mission, and on the way we were ambushed, and he died.

*What did you learn in the army?* So many types of weapons—AK, RPG, grenade launcher—and how to use them. When we were in the jungle I usually held an AK47, twelve-inch, because that is the lowest weapon. I was able to use the gun. I was with six friends in the army. We stayed together. Now some have died, some of them are in Kenema and some of them are on this programme . . . Since I arrived here I haven't seen [the others] any more. I stayed for three years in the army.

*How did you come here [to Freetown]?* When I came to Bo, I was coming to trace my mother. When I came, I heard the announcement over the radio, FM 104. When I heard the announcement I went to the brigade headquarters to register. The announcement was saying, if any child had taken part [in the war], whether with the army or with the rebels, we should go and register at the brigade headquarters. So I went there and registered. After that they brought us here, in a bus.

*Were you happy to leave the army?* I was happy, because at that moment they had already told the rebels to lay down their arms. So [when] they took us, I was so happy, because the rebels had laid down their arms.

*Did you like staying in the army?* Yes, I liked to be free in the country[side]. Besides that, when they took you to training, they also tell you [things]. We were trained to save life and property. So I liked that, because I was saving life and property. That's why I loved the work. When we were in the army, every month the government paid us. They allowed us the amount of six thousand leones [about US\$12.00]. Not plenty. The actual pay was five thousand leones. I bought drinks and smokes: cigarettes and snuff, beer and wine. Just to have some mind [determination] to go and fight. I didn't use other drugs. The food was supplied by the government. Sometimes the food was delicious, sometimes not.

*Did the army lay ambushes?* Well, in the army we don't like to fall in an ambush, we only lay ambushes for the enemy.

*Did you actually take part in the fighting?* Yes.

*Do you know if you killed somebody?* By then [i.e. at the time] I did not know if I killed somebody, because we were fighting and shooting, and only after the fight we went out to search for the dead bodies.

*So in 1996 the bus took you to this place. Do you like it here?* We are still managing it. I'd like to go back, but if they say I should stay here: no problem. We wait for the order.

*What would you like to do in the future?* I would like to attend school. After that I want to do motor engineering. I want to become self-reliant. At the moment I have nobody in Freetown I can stay with. [If] someone wants to take care of me, I [will be] glad to do my course here at the Technical Institute . . .

*Why do you think the war is still on?* I don't know the rebels' motive for fighting. I don't know if they will soon stop or not.

*Do you feel that you have taken revenge?* They have already demobilised me, so at present I have no power to hold arms. Unless they allow me back.

*So when they say they want you back, you will go?* Yes.

*And fight again?* Yes.

*You want to go back to the army?* Yes, to defend my motherland.

## *2 Female youth ex-combatant, RSLMF-linked irregular*

Now aged 20, this young woman was 16 when she first became a combatant. Unusually, she had a strong and supportive family background and good educational prospects in Freetown when she volunteered. She followed a

soldier boyfriend to the front—an old story—and there became an irregular associate of the RSLMF in Daru. Intelligent and brave, she soon became a valued fighter. Her testimony speaks of the horror of war, the ingenuity of young people in surviving it, and specifically of the sexual harassment that is routine for young women in war zones. It is especially worth noting that being a combatant does not protect a young woman from the threat of military rape (cf. Littlewood, 1997). The comments on tactics are interesting. Like many RSLMF-linked under-age irregulars and Kamajo fighters she justifies her participation by saying, ‘I was defending my country.’

*Where and when were you born and what is your work?* I was born in Freetown 1976. I now work as a seamstress, but I want to study again.

*Do you have children?* One child.

*What were you doing at the time you joined?* I was at secondary school in Freetown (Form 2).

*What made you join up [as an RSLMF irregular]?* I had a boyfriend who was a soldier, and I followed him from Freetown to Daru. I was attracted by the uniform. Full combat looks smart. I sent my mother a picture of me in full combat [gear] . . . That was the first she knew I had joined.

*Is the combat gear what makes girls want to fight?* Lots of young women followed the rebels [RUF/SL] because they offered them items, and their regular men did nothing for them.

*Did you take part in fighting?* Yes.

*How did you prepare for battle?* I just prayed . . . I did not take any drugs.

*Where did you fight?* Daru, Manowa, Pendembu.

*Did you kill rebels in battle?* Yes, plenty. Also, when soldiers came back to camp with rebel captives I would be ordered to ‘wash’ them.

*What was that?* To kill them.

*Why was that ‘washing’?* *Did you spray bullets?* No, bullets are expensive. I would kill them one by one.

*Did you ever feel it was wrong to fight?* I was defending my country.

*Did you ever feel sorry for the dead rebels?* At first, when we advanced, and saw their dead bodies, I would feel sorry, but we had to kill them . . . They would kill us first if they had the chance. Rebels kill and split open the bellies of pregnant women. Rebels rape any women soldiers they catch . . . [Government] soldiers raped us sometimes in the forest, but they are more careful . . . The rebels, they all join in.

*Did you fear to become pregnant at the war front?* I swallowed gunpowder as a contraceptive.

*Who showed you that?* No one . . . I discovered it for myself. But I first took it to become brave for battle. If you take gunpowder before you sleep you will wake with red [fierce] eyes.

*How did you fight?* I know the ambush tactics. We have rations and a special belt, and use sign language. We can be in the bush at the ambush point for up to five days.

*How did the rebels fight?* The rebels are no good at ambush. They are not disciplined. They cannot ‘bear’ [stand the suffering] . . . they more commonly attack according to time. Fourteen-hundred to sixteen-hundred hours is their time. They want to be off, and go with loot. But when the rebels ambush an army ‘big man’ they know that you must go back for the body, so they use that to trap you.

*Did the soldiers attack civilians?* They fought among themselves. An army paymaster [Dabo] was ambushed by army units. There was jealousy [about money]. Many soldiers attacked, and many died.

*Why did you decide to leave the army?* The rank smell of blood. Also it was the sight of dead comrades, their arms and legs smashed by RPGs.

*How are things now?* My heart is now cool. I don't want to fight again. I work as a seamstress and have my own machine. But I still hope to study. I want to learn languages—French and Dutch—and become an air hostess. [KLM and Sabena are the two foreign airlines flying to Sierra Leone.] But I have this sickness [showing us a large tumour on her leg]. It started before I joined up. I can't sleep at times because of the pain.

### *3 Female youth ex-combatant, RSLMF-linked irregular*

This young woman was about 14 years old when she first joined up. Her story is more typical in that she is an uneducated village child whose family support was destroyed by the RUF invasion; she joined an RSLMF-linked irregular group for revenge. Badly traumatised by the violence, she is still drug-dependent and living an irregular life in Freetown, despite foster-family support. (Her child has been taken from her.) Once again there is emphasis on the theme of sexual violence.

*When and where were you born?* Kono, in Gbeni [Gbense?] chiefdom, in 1978.

*What are you doing now?* I want to learn hairdressing.

*Do you have children?* I have one child.

*What were you doing when you joined up?* Nothing. I was in the village. I never went to school.

*Where were your parents when you joined up?* I was living in the village in Kono with my mother. My parents parted before the war. Mother remarried.

*How did the war first affect you?* People in our household were scattered or killed by the rebels, and the house was destroyed. Afterwards I could only find my grandmother.

*What made you want to join up?* When the government soldiers came I wanted to join to get revenge.

*Where did you fight?* In Segbwema.

*How did you find the war?* I did not like the man business [sex].

*Can you explain?* I was afraid of soldiers raping us in the forest. They would rape us if we retreated.

*Did you have sex first at the war front?* I began man business before I joined [in 1992] but the army men harassed women, and never gave us posts.

*Did you take anything to help make you brave?* We would eat gunpowder, or sprinkle it on rice. Also I took capsules.

She was no longer able to concentrate, and the interview came to an end.

### *4 Male youth ex-combatant, RSLMF-linked irregular*

This account can be considered typical of the experience of a rather different class of youngster—the urbanised, part-educated son of a northern migrant to the diamond fields. Here is a teenage combatant with a tendency to a 'rarray' [street] life. (He was on the street in 1993, immediately before becoming a combatant.) The war for the economically crucial Kono diamond fields has always been much more manifestly a direct struggle to control material wealth. Politicians and illegal miners have long defended their interests in this region with armed gangs (Reno, 1995). With some prior youthful experience of diamond mining, the interviewee reveals a knowingly cynical

attitude to war and its material benefits. There is no sense of 'defence of motherland' here. The RUF/SL attack on Koidu disrupted schooling and family support, but note that the boy abandons the father in the bush because he can no longer feed his children, and joins up with a Boy Scout troop that has already become a gang of survival-oriented bandits of the sort one might expect to meet in the pages of William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. Later the boy, coached by his elder brother, already a regular soldier, becomes a combatant irregular almost by accident. He freely admits that he and his friends enjoyed army life. They were free to lord it over civilians, loot, and rape women. Drugs were routine; cocaine was supplied to the fighters by their officer. The casual way in which the boy describes shooting an RUF prisoner dead for 'insulting his mother' is chilling. He wants to go back to school, because he once showed great aptitude, but already senses it may be too late. The performance of the democratic regime is assessed solely in terms of food hand-outs. Here are some of the problems of the war in a nutshell.

*What is your name, age and religion, and where do you come from?* My name is . . . I'm [now] seventeen years old. I'm a Muslim. My father came from K., from the north. We settled in Kono District. That is where I was born, I was born in Kono District.

*What kind of work did your father do?* My father was working for one of the companies . . . SLST [Sierra Leone Selection Trust], a diamond company.

*Do you have brothers or sisters?* I have five brothers. One is in the army [RSLMF] up till now. He is a sergeant. And I have five sisters. My mother is in K. . . . They are not divorced, the war set them apart. I have contact with my father. The last time he wrote to me a letter about the family. I lived in a town, Yengema town. It is a big town. We have an airport and a good social life.

*What did you do when you were young?* The time I was young I used to go with friends to the beach, to the cinemas, after school. Just after school. Because, that time I was young, I didn't listen to what my elders said. I just did things on my own will. Sometimes we went out just [to] make some fun, make up some devils, dress up like devils and then go dancing in the streets. It was a way to get small money. The time I was young, I also went out hunting. But I remember once me and my best friend went out to the bush and I had a sharp razor blade and I cut off his . . . his [foreskin]. After some time my father came and gave me a serious beating and then took the boy to hospital.

*But why did you do that? To make him a Muslim?* No, just to circumcise him. I said to him that I was a doctor.

*And he believed you were a doctor?* Yes. He was small and I too was not circumcised, so I took it and cut it off.

*At what age did you go to school?* I was seven years old. When the war broke out, in 1991, I was in Form 1 [of secondary school]. I was good at school. In primary school I had double promotion. I didn't do Class 2 and I didn't do Class 4. At that time I wanted to become a doctor.

*Your town . . . Many people mined diamonds, but was it safe?* Yes, we had so much security—SSD and at times some special South Africans—protecting the diamond fields. But the time my father was working for the company I was not yet born. But later I accompanied some workmen [diamond diggers]. So when the diamonds came out, they gave me some and then I gave them to my father. So I did some small diamond work. But at present I want to become a nurse.

*What was your first experience of the war?* I was in school when I heard a

gunshot coming from the headquarters, where the soldiers stay. So I heard a gunshot from there and I was really scared. The rebels had already captured the place, so we never turned back. We went to the bush area, to escape to stay alive. We only stayed for a few hours in the bush. So after two days I went back to the town, but the township was [held by] the rebels. I entered the town at around eight-thirty in the evening. The place was so dark. I entered my house and took some of my things away. I went to my father's room and took his clothes, leaving the place at night again. I went back to the bush.

*Did your father survive the rebel attack?* My father managed to escape with my brothers and sisters. I met them at one village, one day after the rebel attack. After that, because my father had not enough to give us food, I left him and joined the scouts, the Boy Scouts. We then took property from people from the town. We took what belonged to them. I was already, before the war, with the Scouts. They gave me a knife, but I was not wearing a uniform, a Scout uniform. I just had the knife. We met one man standing with luggage, containing clothes and other things. We pushed him into the bush and took his luggage. The leader of the Scout boys was called Hamad. He was an older boy. I stayed for five days with the Scouts. Later I went to a checkpoint, the last checkpoint as you enter Kono. So I was sitting there and I saw my elder brother. He was with his lieutenant. He told the official that I was his smaller brother. So then I joined and became a soldier. So later, when the rebels attacked us, they gave me a rifle to fire.

*So the moment the rebels attacked they gave you a rifle?* I was having a rifle already. I had the weapon when we entered the bush. I was just behind my brother, because he knew how to fight. They taught me how to use the gun. So when the rebels attacked Kabala a message came to our officer that he had to go there. So the next [day] we moved for Kabala. We went with a truck. I was at that time sixteen-plus, that was in 1994. In 1993 I was living a street life, I was not with my father or mother.

*How was the first time you had to fight?* I was sitting next to the sergeant, down at the checkpoint. We heard some gunshots. I was afraid, so I jumped down into the gutter. And then the soldiers said, 'What are you doing there?' and he laughed. So I came out and took my rifle. So two of my friends who were sitting at the checkpoint answered, 'Just fire where the rebels are.' I was glad that my brother stood behind me, because I didn't know how to fight. The second time I fought was in Kabala, then they shot me here, in my foot.

*When you were with the army did you fall into ambushes?* Yes. There were ambushes I fell into, in Kono district. That was with Lieutenant K[. . .]. He is still alive, in Gandohun.

*How many years did you stay in the army?* A year and six months. I liked it in the army because we could do anything we liked to do. When some civilian had something I liked, I just took it without him doing anything to me. We used to rape women. Anything I wanted to do [I did]. I was free.

*Did the army pay you?* Yes, but I had no official number, so normally the lieutenant made sure that we got something. Sometimes I went to my mother, to buy some rice for her . . . a bag of rice.

*Were you not afraid to fight?* The first time I was really afraid, but later I got used to it and I was not afraid any more.

*Do you remember the first time you killed somebody?* I remember. An officer captured a rebel. He told me to take care of him. He was tied up with his hands on his back. So he was sitting and I had my rifle. But he was talking in a bad way to me. He even insulted my mother. And then I asked him, 'Are you talking to me?' He said, 'Yes.' So I shot him in the stomach and he fell and bled to death. Later, when the lieutenant came back, he took me to the captain, and I had to stay for

seven days in a room. That was my first killing. But in the battle I also killed.

*Did you at that time drink or smoke anything?* Oh yes, the lieutenant used to provide us cocaine. I put it here, on my nail, which is very long . . . [the nail] of my thumb, and sniffed it. It was free, for us to fight. Just before the fight. We also used to smoke marijuana. It was common to us. Every day we smoked it. And Totapak, a long packet, it is a rum. And Ramram, you smoke it. It is like a leaf, like marijuana.

*How did you come here to this programme?* Well, our commanding officer called us and mentioned that those who are not at least seventeen or eighteen should leave the army. And that they should go to Freetown, where there was a place for us, where we could forget about all we had done in the army. I heard that before but I never listened to it. I always wanted to keep fighting. Until I was seriously shot. Then I went to the hospital, it was the headquarters hospital in Yengema. I was there for just two weeks, for my foot.

*So after that you came to this place, in a bus?* Because I had not had so much money I got a lift to the checkpoint. Someone told the soldiers about me. Most of my friends are still in the army. They will stay in the army till they die.

*Were you happy to leave the army?* Yes, really happy. And the people here take us like we are their sons. So I hope I can continue my schooling, but now it is a long time since I was in a real class. After secondary school I want to learn nursing, here in Freetown. But when I qualify I want to go back to Kono to help my people.

*The war is still on. Why do the rebels still fight?* They want the foreign troops to go back, according to their leader Foday Sankoh. But they also want that the government should take care of them after the war, to pay salaries. But the reason is best known to them why they are fighting.

*What do you think about the present government: good or bad?* I say [they are] good, because the time when people were suffering to get food they helped.

### *5 Male youth ex-combatant, Kamajo militia fighter*

This interview with a fighter with the Kamajo militia is remarkable in two ways. First, it provides valuable evidence concerning the formation and tactics of hunters' militia groups, and their effectiveness against RUF/SL units, helping confirm their genuinely 'grass-roots' origins, before they were transformed into a semi-official 'ethnic' militia by the Kabbah government in 1996.

Second, the interview provides a most telling political analysis of the war. Here is a young man who took up combat when he was 16 because his schooling had been halted by RUF attacks on Kono. Driven into Guinea as a refugee by fighting, he returns to his village to 'represent' his father—owner of a hunting gun—in the Kamajo militia on the orders of the local chief, subsequently engaging in extensive combat operations against the RUF/SL. All the time his dream is to return to school. He is bitter against the RUF for disrupting village life and his education. Fallen fighters are not even buried, because they are 'the enemy'.

Yet he understands the RUF/SL and what it is fighting for with remarkable insight. First he concludes the RUF cadres are, like himself, students or would-be educated youngsters, from the letters they leave behind in the villages they attack, outlining their aims and beliefs, and that their bitterness stems from a corrupt patrimonial system that fails to deliver education and jobs except to a favoured few. Yet he is also aware that the movement's

major strategic mistake was to import violent methods of destabilisation from Liberia and target them on the rural poor, instead of directly on the oppressive one-party regime.

He is very impatient with the demobilisation programme, since it has failed to keep its promise of a rapid resumption of his blighted education. His dream of becoming a scientist (mathematics is the key to all science, he tells us), travelling overseas to study, and returning to benefit his village, is becoming more distant with every wasted day, and he delivers himself of some sharp comments about the educated elite who so exploit the system.

And yet he has gained something in Freetown. He has become a born-again Christian. This gives him a new insight into the war. The magical techniques of the Kamajo militia, he now understands, are from the devil (although insisting that their certainty is as well established as the mathematics he so admires). No war can be won by weapons. The fighting only escalates. So he has advice for the government, from one who has fought against the rebels with bravery and vigour. End the war by sitting down to find out what has made the RUF/SL so angry. But if the government pays no heed it does not matter. The system is now democratic. The regime will be judged by the electorate and removed.

Throughout the account we use the anglicised plural 'Kamajors' rather than the Mende plural *kamajoisia*. The interview began and ended with the boy offering up a prayer.

*You pray every day?* Yes, in the morning, twice in the evening.

*But first I want to know your name and where you came from.* I am [. . .]. I am eighteen years old. I come from Kono District, in the east.

*And your father and mother lived there together?* Yes. Both my parents are alive. And I have about four sisters.

*What kind of work did your father do?* Well, my father was a carpenter. But he had no shop. I lived in Kono, in the city, in the headquarters. I lived there for school. When the war came to Kono I travelled to Guinea as a refugee student, from where I came back to my village. There I was with my father. I was born in [. . .]. It is not big. There are around forty houses. There I grew up.

*When you were young what did you want to become?* The time I was small I desired to become a doctor. That was at the age of seven. The time I began to develop to an adolescent age my intention was to do physical science. While I was in school, during 1992, the rebels came and attacked the place. I decided to leave school and go back to my village, to my father.

*Why did you go back to your father's place?* Well, my father was a hunter. He had a gun. There was a mandate signed by the paramount chief that every man with his own gun . . . should go and defend his ground at the war front. So by then I was with my father during the war. And my father was now moving to an old age, so I went to represent my father with the gun. So this led me to take part in the war, but war was not my career. It is just because of problems and difficulties. But during my childhood it was not my desire. My desire is to be educated.

*Tell me about your primary school.* My first year I took first position to go to the second class. The second year I took the second position to go to the third class. The third year my academic interest began to decline. But when I went to the fifth class I regained my power and began to study again . . . and the subject I liked was maths. From there I started to score. Even the last time, when the war approached Kono in 1992, I took the first position. I want to believe in studies,

because when you study, when you work, you receive. If you do not study you do not get any result.

*So in 1992 you went to your village?* At that time I was in the headquarters of the district, named Koidu town. I was there attending school. There was no school in our village, so I left the village, to go to the city to seek education.

*And then the war came to Koidu?* When the war came to the headquarters, it was—let me see—six to seven in the morning, when the rebels attacked. I was preparing to go to school. It was a Friday. But when I heard the gun, then I decided to undress [get out of the school uniform]. After the enemy invaded the town, we managed to escape. I had to go to Guinea, as a refugee. I later decided to go back to the headquarters. By then the government soldiers had [retaken] the place. They drove the rebels from the headquarters. When I heard about this I decided to go back. But back in Koidu I decided to go back to my village, only to return when education improved. But the war became worse. So eventually I decided to represent my father at civil defence: the Kamajors. My father had bought a gun with his pocket money. There was an order that everyone with a gun should go to the front. You and your gun should go to the war front. When you had a gun you had to go by force [it was compulsory]. If you refused they would take the gun from you. So I decided, when that situation comes, to take part, to go. That was in 1994. I was sixteen.

*Did you go alone to join the Kamajors?* No, we were many from my village. There were more than fifteen from my village. They sent you by turns. You go for three months. After that you come back, and the next man goes for three months. They go by turns to the front. When you finished your time, you came back and started to work [on the farm, etc.]. You can be a hunter at the war front and at the same time a farmer or a commercial businessman or whatever. You only go there for months, maybe two or three. That was the way we protect ourselves, because the government soldiers were then in certain situations maltreating our people. But we, the civil defence, had the same right as the government soldiers on the battlefield. So when you became a civil defence man the soldiers would not disadvantage you. We were both fighting for the land.

*Were there other boys with the Kamajors?* There were small boys who were not even my rank. Fifteen, fourteen [years old] and even younger, small boys. They are more brave than the bigger boys. A person [not yet reaching] adolescence does not think much. What he desires to do, he will do it.

*Were you not afraid?* I was not afraid, because what I think is: when I have to die, I die. If God saves me, then I will be saved. Whether you die or live, the rebels were maltreating us. They came and killed our people, they came and stole our properties. So as a man you have to stand for your right and fight for your property, fight for your land.

*But were those your own ideas?* Yes.

*Were you able to use a gun?* The gun was not heavy. You can take it with one hand.

*Was there any training?* Yes, there was. The village leader goes for training. Because the skills—the tactics—of the hunters applied when going to kill an animal in the bush are the same tactics we should apply in the field to get rid of the rebels. So you don't need to go for training, because the skill is with you now. The idea to go and kill an animal in the bush is the same idea to go and kill the rebels. Because the animals stay in the bush there, you pick up an idea: you want to kill it. And so also with human beings. Maybe you will go around the people in the bush, examine them in what way you can get rid of the people. Because the Kamajors are very, very wise. The wisdom they use to kill an animal is the same wisdom that they use to attack the rebels.

*So they are good fighters?* Yes, they are very, very good. In fact the enemy has more fear of Kamajors than of government soldiers. Yes, they say that the civil defence used to attack them unexpectedly. Because, the place where you [do] not expect human beings to be, a Kamajo can be possible [in] that place. So when the time reaches for the rebels to share their food, and they think nobody is around, there could be a Kamajo around. And if the Kamajo happens to fire, just a shot—because the bullet we use in this civil defence gun, it is many in the shell—so when you release one shot, that bullet will kill many, many people. The bullets are very, very tiny, but when you shoot, it spreads.

*So it can kill three or four people at once?* Even more than ten.

*But what are the big guns, the long ones?* You mean the ones the government soldiers use? [RPG?] They use them in combat areas. They use them in clearing an area. But in bush fights with that gun, you would not be able to go. The rebels always like to go in the bush. The Kamajors go and search in the bush and kill them. In the bush you are only able to take a light object with you. You are not able to take a heavy object with you in order to go and fight in the bush. You must take a lighter object in order to do the thing.

*Did you also fight the rebels when you were with the Kamajo militia?* Yes, at regular times.

*And did you also kill somebody?* I am not sure if I have killed somebody, because it is group fighting. So maybe you are pointing at one man and your neighbour also [is aiming] at the same man. So after the operation there will be a lot of dead bodies. But you will not be able to identify [which ones you killed] because there were many in the action.

*You go out with a group of—say, for instance—ten people?* Yes, yes, more than ten, even more than twenty. When you want to capture a large village . . . we even go with more than forty. We go there and surround the place. We travel in the bush. We travel a lot and then surround the place. Then the operation takes place.

*After a fight what do you do with the dead bodies?* We don't have anything to do with them.

*You do not bury them?* No, we don't bury them, because they are the enemy. They come to spoil our land. They come to disturb our future as well. They even kill our people, so that's why we kill. So we don't have any sympathetic feelings for them.

*What happens to their guns?* If we happen to kill them we take their arms.

*How long were you with the Kamajors?* In 1994 I decided to go to represent my father. In 1995 I left to go back to Koidu, and from there I heard about this project.

*Why did you leave?* Well, because my career is to go to school. And the situation had become [more] normal, [so I could leave] the village in order to . . . follow my education. When I came I met some fellows and even a [Catholic] Brother and I discussed the issue with him. So I was in preparation to leave the war and go back to school. So eventually I heard about this project, and they told me that this project can assist you with school, and help you forget the war. So I was glad to come. But when I came, and when I saw the situation, I [thought about going] back. But some of my friends encouraged me not to go back.

*How did you hear about this programme?* Well, the way I heard about this programme, if I had known how it was [really] like, I would not have come from Kono. The way I heard about facilities, the way I heard about education, if I had known for sure I would not have left my land to come here. Because the motive I [had in leaving] Kono was to come and be educated. The Brother convinced us to come, [but] when we [arrived] we were discouraged, so we thought we would go back. Some of our friends, they just went. But . . . I [now] thank God, because the first thing that happened was [that] I knew Jesus Christ. There was a time when I

was in the provinces I didn't know Jesus, but then the missionaries came to teach us, to preach to us, to enlighten us, to teach us about the way of God.

*When you were in Kono you were not a Christian?* I was a Christian, but I didn't believe in the Christian life. I only went to church on Sunday.

*Did you tell me that you wanted to go back?* Even now, my desire, if it becomes real, is to leave here in order to go back to Kono . . . Yes, I will go . . . because if I stay here I will just be at this CAW. It would give me no benefit. We just eat in the morning, in the day and in the evening. But if I can go back to Kono and attend school, because every day you sleep time goes out of you. So that is why I desire now to go back to Kono to [re-]start education. Because God knows it is a long time since I left school. The time I started to go to school I was just age five or six. I thank the Almighty, because I was brilliant in school. But then the war approached. But I said, when this situation is normal I will go back to school. The reason why I took part in the war was because there was no education in our headquarters.

*In the future, as you once told me, you want to be a biochemist?* So I desire, whether I become a biochemist, or an engineer. Because I want to study pure science, and I might be able to specialise. That is the reason why I always do mathematics, because mathematics is the key of science.

*I heard that some Kamajors have bullet-proof vests.* Yes, there are [such] people, most Kamajors have [them]. Only the young boys like me—maybe fourteen or fifteen years old—did not have it. They make it with local witchcraft.

*How do they make it?* Ordinary shirts, a set. They take the set and worship the set, and if you [the wearer] happen to be fired [upon] the bullet will not enter, because there is a witch guide on it.

*Did you know any Kamajor with a bullet-proof vest?* Yes, I knew some in our own group. But there were also some from other areas [who] came to us. And when they came to us they fought for the same purpose. They also had the bullet-proof vest.

*Did you ever see what happened when the rebels fired but . . .* Yes, yes. Yes, I saw. The Kamajors of the north [*tamaboro*], they don't use the English gun. They use the native gun . . . those with the native gun [and jacket], when the enemy shoots them, they don't bother [about it], they just continue to go [towards] the enemy.

*Do you also know other witchcraft defences?* OK . . . They use a grid, it is just like chain armour. Or the helmet . . . [like] the helmet the government soldiers use. They [Kamajors] have their own. They have their caps, and do some worship on them, and when it happens they are shot at, the bullet will not enter. Because there is a witch effect on the helmet. It happens physically. I'm not saying this by parable—it happens. It really happens.

*Now you are a Christian, what do you think about such witchcraft?* [At that] time I didn't know Jesus Christ. I didn't know the life of Jesus Christ. But when I came to Freetown I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and personal saviour. So all what the Kamajors are doing—their witchcraft, the wishes [charms] they use to fight—all is work of the devil. When I came here I had the desire not to fight again, to be a real Christian. I don't want to be with these people again.

*You see the bullet-proof vest as the work of the devil?* Yes, it is the work of the devil, not God.

*I heard from some other boys who were with the army that . . .* Yes, the same thing. There are some people . . . the staff. Most of them have the same thing. But war is the work of the devil. Because, according to the Bible, if you are a soldier . . . even in the Bible we have soldiers. Isn't it so? . . . We have Joshua, King David, they fight . . . they fight with nothing. With nothing [except] the support of

the Lord. Even the time when they killed Goliath, [David] picked up the stone and what he said was, 'I'm going to kill in the name of the Lord. But now, these days, people fight with other forces, with other supernatural forces. Now, according to my own view, this is not the work of God. Because if you are fighting an enemy in that evil way . . . I don't even believe now that arms can . . . because since I was here in Freetown I discovered that ammunition cannot finish a war. Only the Lord God will bring war to an end through peace talking. But, if we continue to use arms, we end up killing ourselves. In the end there will be nobody in the land. If I am asked by government officials I will say, 'Stop using arms [and] try to make peace.' The reason that made the war to come, let them search for that [reason]. And if they know the reason, or the problem, how the war came to the country, then you can make the situation become normal. But if we start to fight, eventually there will be no person left.

*What are the reasons this war started and continues?* Well, according to my own view, [it started and continues] because when the rebels caught some of our brothers and sisters they took them along with them and told them the reason why they are fighting. Because of the past government, the APC government, the way the government maltreated people. No freedom of speech. When you emphasise on your rights, they take you to court or jail you. And the same bad thing with education. Most of the rebels are students, the majority are students.

*How do you know?* They write on paper that they drop. After an attack, they write a message and drop it. These are the reasons why they are fighting, they say. The government doesn't give any encouragement to people to get land or to go to school. When you come from poor families, but with talent to be educated, there is no financial support. The government doesn't give a helping hand. They are only bothered about themselves. That was the reason this government made the war to come, according to my own view. When the [rebel] people attacked a place, the paper, the document they leave at that place, when you come and read the document, this [gives] the[ir] reason to fight. The other reason is assistance. If Mr A. happens to be in the head office [top position], and you, Mr Z., you don't know him, there is no political influence between you and him. So when you come with your problem to him, he will not assist you. Only if you are the man who [wishes?] by him, whether his son, his brother's son, or his brother's relation, or his wife's sister's relation, or his relatives. But for you as a low man, when you come to that person, to that official in that place, he will not give you any assistance. Because he doesn't know you. This made the war to come.

*But are these good reasons to fight?* Yes. But if the rebels had come peacefully, if they hadn't stolen our people, hadn't burnt our villages . . . if they hadn't done anything that harmed us . . . but if they had only gone to the government with blood . . . If they had come trustfully [forcefully?] to the government, come and attended to the government [changed it?], we sure [would] have been glad. Because, according to their view, they are fighting for their rights. That was the reason why the war came, the reason why I was against them. They are fighting for their rights, but during their fight for their rights they go to the villages. They go to [persons] who don't know anything about the government. They go and kill [them] and steal [their] property. That was the reason why I was against them. But if the rebels [had come] down here [to Freetown], to this people . . . because these are the people who created the war . . . if the rebels would have come to them, plenty of Sierra Leoneans would have supported them. But because they went and [attacked] the poor, that's why I was against them. Because when you consider the rebels the way they think about [them] in the provinces, it is that they are just armed bandits. They are just thieves.

*What do you think about the present government?* The government now? The

government comes, [with] their mass media, to make things normal. Well, we are watching them. If they do as they say, OK. If they are not responsible for what they say, we are still with them.

*If they are not doing what they promised, it is all right? If they are not doing what they say, it is all right. All is all right. Because now it is a democratic state. Now what they promise to do, if they fail to do it, the next elections, the people will not vote for them. But if they do the will of the people it is good.*

*A last question. If you had three wishes, what would you wish? My first wish is to be educated. Because why? Because of the too much illiteracy, the way our brothers in Sierra Leone don't know their rights. Because when you are educated you know your rights. This is the first wish in my life. I admire education above anything, I admire academic education above anything in my life, according to my own desire. Second, after I am educated I wish to go to the Western world. To study . . . and because when you travel you see changes. And when you are in those areas people are moving faster. When you [go] and you see people, how they move with their lives, how things are going . . . when you come back to your country, [and] you apply the same method, then you become developed. But some of our brothers . . . they get money to be educated. But instead of helping the poor they steal the money. They do things that are not beneficial to their country. If I happen to cross to the Western world and go and finish my course, I [must] come with a new improvement to develop the area where we live in the country. If I happen to study much I [will] go to study to serve my country.*

*And what is your third wish? My last wish is that the war . . . according to God . . . that the Lord . . . may it come to pass . . . that the war finishes. Because when the war finishes all these things I mentioned will be fulfilled. If still the war is existing, these things will not be fulfilled. Because after this project will be finished, after two or three years, then I will be relying on the resources of my village. So from my parents, they make some money through their farm, the coffee farm, the cocoa farm. When they harvest they support us with education. But these past years they harvest nothing. But when the war will come to an end they can again support me to get education. So this is my last wish. I pray to the Lord that He brings peace to this country, because people are suffering. People are dying, the poor become homeless, people became fatherless. Yes, I want to stop the war.*

#### *6 Child ex-combatant, experience with both the RSLMF and the RUF/SL*

This sad, inarticulate account by the youngest interviewee in our selection is representative of the experience of child combatants in the war, some of whom [as in this case] have found themselves fighting on both sides of a struggle they are hardly old enough to understand. Only 9 years old when the war started, the interviewee fought as an army irregular and is being demobilised as one, but it appears from his file that his account is selective. Captured by the RUF, he stayed for more than five months with the rebels, and became the leader of a group of 'small boy' rebel fighters. He did not say this in interview because other boys were around, and most were former RSLMF associates. It may be that the attempted amputation of his foot, from which he still suffers, was RUF punishment for trying to run away.

*What is your name and where and when were you born? My name is [. . .]. I was born in 1982. I'm fourteen years old. I was born in Bo District, Jimi Bagbo chiefdom. It is the J. chiefdom headquarters town.*

*Did you live there with your father and mother? Yes.*

- Do you have brothers or sisters?* Yes.
- How many?* Four brothers and one sister.
- Did you go to primary school?* Yes, in Kenema.
- Did you move to that town with your father and mother?* No, I was taken by my aunt.
- How old were you at that time?* In 1988.
- Did you like school?* Yes.
- What do you like the most?* Carpentry.
- Was your father a carpenter?* No, a farmer.
- Did you have many friends in Kenema?* Yes.
- What did you do after school?* We went [to] study.
- And what else?* To sell things, which [were] made by my aunt.
- How many years did you go to school?* In Class 5 I left, in 1994.
- What is the first thing you remember from the war?* First, when Kenema was attacked, I went to my brother in K.
- When was the place attacked, at night or in the morning?* In the daytime.
- What did they do when they entered?* When the rebels entered they say that they [will] help the civilians.
- Did they kill people?* They killed four civilians.
- Did they also kill soldiers?* Yes, but I cannot remember how many.
- Were you afraid?* Yes.
- Did you go together with your aunt to your brother?* No.
- How did you manage to go alone?* I lost my aunt, I don't know about her. I went to my brother.
- Did you go on foot or by motor car?* By motor car.
- Someone took you?* Yes.
- How long were you with your brother?* Five years—no, I mean five months—and then my mama took me.
- Why?* He was a soldier. My mother took me because it was not safe.
- You stayed in the headquarters?* Yes.
- Were you a soldier with your brother?* No, but he took me as his bodyguard.
- You had gun?* Yes.
- What kind of gun?* AK47.
- You know how to fire?* Yes.
- When your brother went out fighting the rebels, you joined him?* Yes. I carried [the] ammunition box.
- You stayed always with your brother?* Yes.
- Did you fire on the rebels yourself or did you only carry the ammunition?* I filled the magazines under attack.
- Did you like it with your brother?* Yes.
- What did you like?* I liked the soldier work.
- Where did your mother take you to?* To J.
- How long did you stay there?* Nine months. We have cassava, we planted away from town. When we planted the rebels came and caught me.
- Was your mother also with you?* Yes.
- And other people?* Yes.
- So the rebels took you and other people?* Twelve were taken by the rebels. At that moment five were killed.
- Executed or killed in the fight?* They cut their throats.
- You saw the slaughter?* Yes.
- And the others were taken with them?* Yes.
- Your mother also?* No.
- Was she killed?* No, she escaped.

*And the other six, were they young people or old people?* Male and female, my age group.

*And what did they want to do with you?* They told me that they will kill me.

*How long did you stay with the rebels?* Two months.

*What did you do when you were with the rebels?* I learned nothing.

*When were your legs wounded?* When I was attacked. Someone told them that I was the brother of a lieutenant. So I thought that they wanted to kill me. But they chopped my feet.

*Could you walk with your feet?* When I was captured I was taken to a base. The next morning my feet were chopped.

*Did you have to stay in a house in the bush base?* No, I was walking around.

*Was it a big place?* Yes.

*Were there also boys, children?* Yes.

*And girls?* Yes.

*And the time you were there, did you make any friends with the rebel children?* Yes.

*Did they give you good food?* Yes.

*They treated you well?* They never took care of my feet.

*How did you manage to escape?* When they told me to find wood, I hid.

*You were alone?* Yes.

*Did you hear that the rebels were looking for you?* No, I escaped to the village. There were soldiers.

*And then?* The soldiers captured me. They thought I was a spy [cf. Amnesty International, 1992, 1993]. They took me first to the headquarters in Bo.

*There they questioned you?* Yes. I was no spy.

*Your problem with talking—was it with you from birth or did it come when you were captured by the rebels?* When I was born.

*In the future what kind of work do you want to do?* Carpentry.

*Do your feet give you a lot of pain?* Yes.

*Is it slowly getting better?* At the moment the wound has opened again.

*How did they do it?* With a knife, they wanted to amputate it. It was a deep wound.

*That is all I wanted to ask. Is there something you want to say?* Yes. I want you to help me with the training in carpentry.

*I am not a carpenter. But I hope I will be able to help you in some other way. A final question: if you had three wishes what would you wish?* I want to learn for carpentry so I can rebuild my home. My village is burnt down. After that I want to go to school. Then I want to do business.

*You like it here?* I want to be here first and then go back.

*Why?* It is safe here. There is war now in my place.

### *7 Male youth ex-combatant, self-demobilised from the RUF/SL*

This young man, now about 20, was captured and forcibly inducted by the RUF/SL in a raid into north-western Sierra Leone in January 1995. Although he completed guerrilla training and served on operations he never gained any promotion in the movement, remaining ambivalent about the struggle. He is frank that his lack of conviction was more a question of the hardship than of any political objection. He found that the RUF's ideological teaching about the state of Sierra Leone made sense. When interviewed in October 1996 he had managed to escape four weeks previously, after nearly two years, and had been re-accepted in his home community, a town not badly affected by

the war. Interviewed in a quiet domestic setting, and no longer under the pressure of local suspicion, he provides a remarkable account of RUF/SL aims and operations, and of life in one of the guerrilla camps. In some respects the account supports the picture the movement paints in its own propaganda document (RUFSL, 1995). The Gurkhas referred to in the account were a mercenary force of ex-Gurkhas led by a Canadian Vietnam veteran [Colonel Robert Mackenzie] hired by the NPRC government. Mackenzie was killed, and the survivors were withdrawn shortly afterwards, to be replaced by the South African private security firm Executive Outcomes.

*Tell me about how you were captured.* It was early morning. They came down the road as I was going to work. They pulled me and loaded properties on my head. They threatened to spray me with the gun if I didn't go. We walked day and night, with only snatches of sleep. We made food for them.

*Where did you go?* We walked for seven days. Any town we reached, we would get food from the people. After eight days we reached the Malal Hills . . . on top of the hill.

*What happened then?* We rested for one day, then they called us to a lecture. They said, 'If we write about bad things in the country nothing will happen, so we have brought you inside the revolution to act to make bad things stop.' They showed us plenty of things that had to happen . . . They said there is no freedom, no medical attention, no better roads . . . The system is rotten.

*And after that—what?* They came to scrape [shave] our heads. We were sent to base camp for training in the Malal hills.

*How long did that last?* Three months, for basic training. Then they were training us to fight. After three months government forces attacked us, so we had to evacuate the camp. The place is a long hill. The camp was shifted to the other end. So we had to advance to the other part. Then we completed training.

*What sort of training?* We were trained in all kinds of war tactics.

*Who were the people being trained?* All of us were Sierra Leonean boys [Salong bobo dem] . . . from all tribes . . . Temne, Mandingo, Kailahun [Up-Mende].

*What did you do after training?* We advanced to Western Area, around Mile 38 [on the Freetown road]. We reached Waterloo [twenty miles from Freetown].

*Did you really want to join them, since the RUF captured you?* I saw that what they were saying about the country was true, but I did not really want to join, mainly because of the strain . . . one, the loads we had to carry; two, the walking; three, the hunger . . . We did not have good supplies, it was always a problem to get food . . . and we were under rain day and night.

*What about the fighting?* I did not feel happy about the killing and looting.

*Some say the RUF is just different gangs with no overall leader. Can you comment about Foday Sankoh?* It is true that there are plenty in our group who have taken over a year in the movement without seeing Foday Sankoh. But he communicates commands to us by radio message, regularly. If a week goes by without getting radio messages, then our commanders go to visit Sankoh. They use bypass [footpaths in the bush], through the swamps and bolilands.

*Did you ever see Sankoh?* Yes . . . I went with the commanders to take leave of Sankoh before he went to Ivory Coast [for the peace negotiations, January 1996].

*What route did you use?* We left the Waterloo area and went through Yonibana and Moyamba. It took us four or five days [on foot] to reach Sankoh's camp [the Zogoda]. His base camp is on flat ground in thick forest.

*What happened after Sankoh had left?* I joined another group to return to the Moyamba area. I was now assigned to a new 'forward defence' [camp]. I was there for six months after the cease-fire.

*But then you ran away?* I was sent with a written message for another 'forward defence' [in our sector]. But I did not meet anyone in their camp. They had gone to look for food. Then I saw two people coming to check on me. I somersaulted into the bush [as trained] to hide. They passed by. I wondered what to do. Then I said to myself, 'If I meet them again I will give them the letter, but if I do not meet them, then I will give up [the struggle].' That is what happened. I kept the letter.

*How did you manage?* I reached a civilian zone behind our [RUF] line. I did nothing to them. I did not explain I was escaping. [Civilians in RUF 'ideology zones' were under strict orders to detain and return camp runaways.] I just explained that I had a problem. I made up the story that I had [accidentally] shot my friend in the foot. Otherwise they would have held me. One civilian said he would help me. I begged long trousers from him and a polo-neck [sweater], so that I looked decent. Then I said, 'You and I have made "society" [secret arrangement]. If anyone asks, don't say anything.'

*How did you get back home?* I travelled as far as Sanda [chiefdom], sleeping in the bush at night. It was four days and nights before I met the road. I would sneak inside the empty farm huts at night to look for scraps of food. I did not dare approach anyone on the farms to ask directions. But when I reached the road a driver helped me. I made it to [. . .], and reached the checkpoint after midnight. I knocked on the window [shutter] of my stepmother's room, but she was afraid [to open it]. My dad was brave enough to peep out, and I called his name. Still, he could not believe, at first, it was me. I came with nothing, barefoot. It was September [the previous month].

*What has happened to the other young people captured with you?* All the [. . .] people are still in the camp behind Moyamba, except for the Form 2 and 3 girls. They have gone to Foday Sankoh's base camp to resume their schooling.

*Were you accepted when you reached home?* When I had arrived my big brother took me to the commanding officer to report. Later I went to the chief, and he called the people to say it was me, one of the young people seized in January 1995. Crowds then came to our house to ask about their children [seized with me].

*How are the other captives doing?* The load-carrying brings some to the point of death. It is complete slavery. But plenty of others have turned to *agba* [become leaders] in the movement. The RUF promotes by ability, so some have really joined. But most now want peace, and to see their families.

*Some say there is a drug problem in the camps. Is it true?* There are no drugs in camp. The penalty for *jamba* [marijuana] smoking and rape is execution. There is no cocaine. Even for smoking a cigarette they beat you. If I had a headache they would give me aspirin from medicine they looted.

*What else can you say about the camps?* There is a church and a mosque. You are free to be Muslim or Christian, but if you do not pray they punish you. In Malal hills it is hard to get water. Every day we had to fetch water. You go at 5.00 a.m. It is one mile to climb back. There is a rope. Sometimes you go three or four times. The water is dirty, and sometimes you slip and drop the bucket before you reach. You do not return to camp before midday. Small boys can be promoted above you. Some were my juniors at school. A small boy can order you, 'Fuck you, go get water for me.' He is your superior.

*But what about the atrocities, like amputation?* They cut hands in revenge for the attacks by the Kamajo [hunters' militia].

*What will the ones who have really joined want to do if the war ends?* What they really want is work. Some will want to learn a trade, like carpentry. Even my

own boss will want some as apprentices. But others will want to be in the army.

*Will the combatants forget? Will there be tribal war?* The RUF people will forget. What has happened has happened. There is no tribalism. It is an armed struggle, but there is no pay. Many would change to national service in the army. Many want the war to end. They pray for it to end, but they do not yet have the chance to escape. Many want education—to go back to school. But they are afraid of the army—that the army will kill them. So they wait, for Foday Sankoh's last orders, to come out and lay down their arms. They are very well disciplined.

*What about looting?* They take things [only] when villagers run away.

*What can you tell me about some of the attacks? For example, the one on Rf. . .]* [in February 1996]. I wanted to take part in that attack, in case I got a chance to escape. But that was why they would not let me go. They brought others, not from this district.

*Some people say some government soldiers join RUF attacks?* I never saw any government soldier in our camp. Maybe the big men have some arrangement. What I know is that there are a lot of captured government soldiers with Foday Sankoh. He holds them. Some fight for him. He says he won't kill them. They will accept him when they know what he is trying to do.

*What about the attack at Magbosi [on a convoy, August 1995]?* That was the RUF. They know how to train for manoeuvres.

*Do you know about the fight with the Gurkhas?* Yes. It was morning time. We were listening to a radio message, to announce promotions. Then we were called out of the base, and then ordered back in. Two jets came to bombard. But we knew the air raid was not the thing, that ground forces would come, so we were ready. They told us they [Gurkhas] are coming. We began to fight seriously. It was not an ambush.

*Did you see the Gurkha commander [Colonel Mackenzie]?* There was one white man. He had a compass, camera, gun. He was hit, and then killed. We dragged his body back to camp. We saw he had a tattoo on his arm. They cut the arm off, to show the tattoo to identify the person, to prove to the government that he had been killed. We buried Tarawali [RSLMF major, aide-de-camp to the NPRC chairman, Valentine Strasser]. After that attack the commanders decided to move the camp. After a week the jets came to bombard but we had left the camp site by then.

*Did you listen to [broadcast] radio in camp?* They listen to FM and [BBC] 'Focus on Africa' . . . but don't blast this over FM or the ones who have been left behind will feel the pain. They know that some of us who escape talk.

*Is there any training in camp [other than for combat]?* They have 'Dr Blood' [field medical orderlies]. They teach some of the women they have captured. They have some captured dispensers, who give them the ideas. Women 'with sense' [intelligent] learn the work. Some are now very skilled in treating wounds.

### *8 Male youth captive, escaped from the RUF/SL without becoming a combatant*

This and the final interview are appendices to the above account, from abductees captured in the same raid who later escaped (in the first case after only a few days). Both are important in emphasising the difficulties faced even by those not tainted with RUF violence in going back home. It is this wartime suspicion and hostility on the part of both civilians and military towards any dishevelled 'bush creature' that explains why the RUF/SL strategy of abducting young Sierra Leoneans and turning them into combatants by force was so surprisingly effective. Once caught, most

young people soon realised they had nowhere to run—that they risked death at the hands of government soldiers and civilians (Amnesty International, 1992, 1993; Richards, 1996). Most settled down to try and survive.

*Tell me what happened after you were caught by the RUF.* I was only with them for one week and then escaped. [A friend intervenes to joke that he only went along only 'to show face', i.e. put in an appearance] . . . We had just reached the Malal hills . . . I escaped when we were washing at the waterside. It was the last camp before the main [Malal] camp. I told Braima Conteh [the guard] that I wanted to wash before we climbed the hill. I was in school uniform. It was 6.00 a.m. The guard went with me, even to the toilet. There was thick bush along the river. I loosened my trousers, as if to ease. Then I ran off and hid in the bush. I was two days in the bush before I escaped.

*How did you get out of the bush?* At first I followed the river, then I saw a canoe and crossed. Then I said, 'Today I am free.' I walked in the bush until I reached the Makeni road. I came across an abandoned village. I picked some oranges, but was afraid. I thought, the road is not safe. I met people hiding in the bush. I met one Abu Sesay, a schoolboy from Makeni. His mother cooked for me. Next day I planned to try and reach Makeni.

*How did you manage the travel?* I went into the bush to sleep. When dawn broke I went back to the Lunsar–Makeni highway. I stopped a vehicle but they were afraid to take me, my clothes were so dirty. They held me at Fadugu checkpoint because I had no identity card. They said, 'Wait for the boss.' When the lieutenant came I explained that I had lost my ID. He accepted my story and gave me a letter 'to whom it may concern', saying I was a fifth-former from K[. . .] School.

*How did you get home?* The lieutenant stopped a vehicle and sent me down to Port Loko. There I sent a message to my mother. People came from [. . .] to collect me. But one military man stopped me, stripped me naked and said I was a rebel spy, threatening to kill me. Once you have become a 'bush creature' people run away from you.

### *9 Middle-aged male farmer, abducted by the RUF/SL and used as a labourer*

In RUF/SL raids the main focus was on abducting young people with some schooling as potential recruits. The remainder of the civilian population were encouraged to flee. At times, however, rebel groups cornered civilian groups by accident. Sometimes the result was a massacre, the rebels being fearful that civilians might otherwise report the whereabouts and route of raiding parties to government troops. But at other times 'unwanted' civilians were drafted as slave labour, particularly to carry loads. The final account in this set comes from an older man who narrowly escaped being burnt alive by the RUF/SL. Drafted as a carrier, he was of little interest to the rebels on account of his age and lack of schooling. Later there was some discussion about whether to train him as a fighter, but his health had deteriorated during forced marches through the bolilands. He escaped in the confusion of a raid that went wrong on the university college campus at Njala.

*How were you captured by the rebels?* After the attack on [. . .] they passed the night at [the interviewee's home village] . . . but not in the town . . . They slept in

the bush somewhere. Then they just burst in upon us. They locked a lot of us up in one room [of a house] and discussed what to do. Some wanted to kill us all by burning the house. Others said, 'No, it will be hard for us to carry all the loads,' so they took us. They took me and I had to leave my wife behind. I never knew that they had burnt my house.

*So they took you along. What happened next?* We walked for six days, with the Sisters [expatriate nuns held hostage in the raid] until we reached the Malal hills. We were three months there. Then we left the Sisters there. We went next [with a group of rebels] to Makondu . . . It is in the Yonibana area, inside the bolilands. How we struggled with the loads . . . They would beat us repeatedly.

*What was this place like?* It was a small place for training, inside the grassland. Then, once [the trainees] had learnt, they would go round and attack [various places]. I did not follow them [on operations] but remained in the camp. I was thinking about my wife. Some of my [abducted] brothers tried to escape.

*Did they succeed?* At times the rebels would tell us, 'Your companion has escaped', but really they were putting them at the front of the attack [to spring any ambushes] and the Sierra Leone soldiers killed them in fighting.

*But you yourself escaped. How come?* When God wanted to help us the group was engaged in attacking Njala [December 1995]. It was there we escaped. [The group] was trying to change its base location [in the Njala area] and some of the group moved up towards the Sierra Rutile mining area. The ones left behind ran into an ambush of government soldiers around Njala. [Three of us] had been left behind in camp [sick]. That was when we were able to escape. We were ten days in the bush [on the run], and then on day 11 we came out at Lunsar. [Government soldiers] held us and interviewed us. They gave us a letter [of safe conduct] and found transport for us to go home.

*What happened when you returned home?* That was around the time the rebels came back [to this area] to attack Rokupr. I reported to the police chief, who took my statement. The people filled up the garage [in . . .] to try and see me, but I had to go and hide because I was unable to talk.

*Did anyone help you resettle at home?* Nobody offered any help, except for the letter that [RSLMF] Lieutenant Bangura wrote for me at Lunsar; he also found me a pair of trousers. There was nothing left at home when I returned. Formerly my wife had gone up and down with groundnuts [for sale] but now there was nothing because the rebels had burnt all our property. I was ill [from the load-carrying and constant beatings] and really wanted to rest and get well. But I have no help now [the wife has gone] so there is nothing for it but to try and do some light farm work. I have constant chest pain from where they beat me.

*Did you understand anything about why the rebels were fighting?* When they trained them they didn't tell them much except that they were fighting for the right to control the country.

*Did you ever meet Foday Sankoh?* No, never.

*Did you ever want to join the rebel movement?* When I was first ill from the beating I had on the march some said they should kill me, but others said, no, it would be better if they trained me. But the sickness came back and I was not able to fight. So they left me in the camp. That is why I was able to escape, along with two others, when the attack on Njala failed.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Only abductees with education were taken for guerrilla training. Other captives were used by the movement as slave labour.

<sup>2</sup> Had proper attention been paid to this fact international observers would have been less surprised than Hecht (1997) claims by the alliance of segments of the RSLMF with RUF/SL forces after the *coup* of 25 May 1997.

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## ABSTRACT

Young people are the major participants in most wars. In the African civil wars of the

last twenty years combatants have become increasingly youthful. Some forces are made up largely of young teenagers; combatants may sometimes be as young as 8 or 10, and girl fighters are increasingly common. The trend to more youthful combatants also reflects the discovery that children—their social support disrupted by war—make brave and loyal fighters; the company of comrades in arms becomes a family substitute. There are two main adult reactions. The first is to stigmatise youth combatants as evil ('bandits', 'vermin'). The other (regularly espoused by agencies working with children) is to see young fighters as victims, as tools of undemocratic military regimes or brutally unscrupulous 'warlords'. But many under-age combatants choose with their eyes open to fight, and defend their choice, sometimes proudly. Set against a background of destroyed families and failed educational systems, militia activity offers young people a chance to make their way in the world. The purpose of this article is to let young combatants explain themselves. The reader is left to decide whether they are the dupes and demons sometimes supposed.

#### RÉSUMÉ

La plupart des guerres impliquent majoritairement des jeunes. Les guerres civiles africaines de ces vingt dernières années ont vu l'âge des combattants diminuer progressivement. Certaines armées sont composées en grande partie d'adolescents ; les combattants n'ont parfois que huit ou dix ans, et la participation des filles au combat s'accroît. La tendance marquée par l'âge décroissant des combattants reflète aussi la prise de conscience que les enfants, dont la base de soutien social a été perturbée par la guerre, se révèlent être des combattants courageux et loyaux. Les compagnons d'armes se substituent à la famille. La réaction des adultes est double. La première consiste à stigmatiser les jeunes combattants en les diabolisant (en les qualifiant de "bandits" et de "vermine"). L'autre réaction, régulièrement adoptée par les organismes de protection de l'enfance, est de considérer les jeunes combattants comme des victimes ou des outils aux mains de régimes militaires antidémocratiques ou de "seigneurs de guerre" brutaux et sans scrupules. De nombreux combattants mineurs choisissent cependant de combattre en pleine connaissance de cause et défendent leur choix, parfois avec fierté. Sur fond de familles détruites et de systèmes d'éducation défailants, l'activisme milicien offre aux jeunes une chance de se faire un chemin dans la vie. Cet article vise à donner la parole aux jeunes combattants. Il s'appuie principalement sur des entretiens menés à Freetown en 1996 avec d'anciens combattants mineurs en cours de réadaptation (dans deux différents programmes), ainsi que des entretiens recueillis à l'intérieur du pays auprès de conscrits du RUF/SL qui se sont eux-mêmes démobilisés récemment. Le soin est laissé au lecteur de décider si ces jeunes sont les dupes et les démons que l'on suppose parfois.