



Canadian International
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CIDA

Global Citizenship in

ACTION

Canadians reaching out to the world

**“I was a child soldier”:
Paska’s story**

**Fleeing the chaos
of Somalia**

**Growing up too fast:
Rwanda’s orphans**

**Roger LeMoyné:
eyewitness for the
world’s children**

Canada

**SPECIAL EDITION
War-Affected Children**



From the Minister

The majority of the world's 2 billion children are in danger, exposed to possible harm from such threats as disease, poverty, violence, and war. The statistics are numbing—more than a quarter of a billion are child workers, and at least 50,000 of these children work in hazardous situations; tens of millions live on the streets; and unknown millions are physically or sexually abused. Perhaps most disturbing of all, over half a billion children around the world—one in every four—are affected by conflict or the threat of conflict.

For Canadians, this is an abomination. It is also a tragic breach of trust. Nearly every country on earth has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees to all children their survival, development, protection, and participation in decisions affecting their lives. But the risks to the well-being of society's most vulnerable members show us that we still have a long way to go to live up to these commitments. Protection of children at risk—especially children who work and children who are affected by war—is a priority for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

This magazine shows that while children are the first victims of war, they can also be agents of change and peace builders in their communities. Within its pages, we see how children are affected by conflicts and what Canadians are doing to help, with CIDA's support. We also hear from war-affected children themselves, through their words and their art.

There is a special game used as therapy to help children traumatized by war. In this game, children close their eyes and other children take their hands and lead them around. It's an exercise designed to build trust. I invite all Canadians to read this issue of *Global Citizenship in Action*, and to join us in the hope that children the world over will be able to trust again and build peace for the generations to come.

Maria Minna
Minister for International Cooperation



Cover photo:
Roger LeMoyné/CIDA
Crowded refugee camp
in Rwanda.

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Global Citizenship in Special Edition

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The Children of War

What everyone should know



“One boy tried to escape, but he was caught. His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. So we had to kill him, and they made us smear his blood on our arms. They said we had to do this so we would not fear death and so we would not try to escape. I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed.”

Susan, a 16-year-old abductee
of the Lord’s Resistance Army, Uganda

This is a true story. And there are many more, not only in the killing fields of Africa, but also in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. They are stories of young soldiers, refugees, land-mine victims, the orphaned, the lost, the traumatized—the children of war. They are stories of complete social breakdown, of the collapse of community values and standards, and of chilling brutality and cynicism on the part of the adults who victimize them.

These are not new stories. Launching campaigns of terror, targeting civilians, stirring up ethnic hatred, even using child soldiers, have all been part of war for centuries. What is new is how widespread this type of conflict has become.

A new kind of war

War at the dawn of the 21st century is overwhelmingly internal. Today, of the 50 conflicts raging worldwide, only a half dozen are between sovereign states. The roots of war—poverty, oppression, competition for resources—persist. But new factors, like globalization, environmental deterioration, and rapid technological change, are creating stress fractures in many societies. Age-old ethnic rivalries are resurfacing, while

the easy availability of small weapons is creating a culture of violence and fuelling confrontation.

The result is a particularly vicious brand of civil war that is ripping societies apart and setting the course of development back by at least a generation.

It is no coincidence that this is happening in some of the world’s poorest and most marginalized countries. Nor is it a coincidence that it is affecting all members of society.

In just under a century, the proportion of civilians in war zones that become victims has grown from 5 percent to 90 percent—and more than half are children.

War’s most vulnerable victims

Modern warfare has an especially detrimental impact on children. Their growing bodies, their evolving social and intellectual development, and their psychological well-being are uniquely vulnerable to the environment around them:

- The interruption of food and medical supplies, clean water, and sanitation creates an ideal breeding ground for disease, especially in refugee camps. Children are usually the first to succumb to the major killers—malnutrition, cholera, respiratory infections, and diarrhea.
- Schools, clinics and hospitals, crops, village markets, and other community structures are common targets. The loss of familiar landmarks and the disruption of everyday routines during the chaos and uncertainty of conflict is deeply distressing to children.
- As victims of attacks in their communities, as child soldiers, and as refugees, children are witnessing and taking part in atrocities at an unprecedented rate. Children suffer profound psychological damage from these experiences.

- Unaccompanied or unsupervised children are extremely vulnerable to predatory adults during wartime. As child soldiers, their risk of death and injury increases enormously. In addition, sexual violence, particularly against women and girls, is more and more common. Not only does this expose them to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS, it is extremely damaging emotionally and often makes them outcasts in their own communities.
- Warring factions use the media to create distrust and hostility among the population. Impressionable children are often confused by messages against friends and neighbours. Many are swayed by them, becoming callous and untrusting.

As horrific and tragic as these things are to individuals and families, they are even more costly to the community in the long run. Children raised in violence resort to violence. Children taught to hate will hate. Children brutalized and numbed by abuse and trauma will eventually come face to face with their demons, and no one can predict the outcome.

Breaking the cycle of war

As these trends have gathered speed and momentum over the past decade, so has the world's reaction to them. In 1996, Graça Machel, a leading activist for war-affected children and the wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela, authored a landmark report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, which galvanized the international community. The United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, appointed a Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu. Otunnu has continued to focus on this issue, working with governments, aid organizations, and opposition movements to end the use of child soldiers and improve conditions for young war victims.

New international agreements have been signed or drafted to strengthen the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the existing Geneva conventions on protecting civilians in times of war. They include:

- a draft Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which places an 18-year minimum for recruitment by both armies and opposition groups;
- the convention on the worst forms of child labour, which covers military service, passed by the International Labour Organization;
- the International Criminal Court, which designates as war crimes the recruitment of children under 15, the attacking of hospitals and schools, sexual exploitation, and violence; and,
- UN Security Council Resolution 1261, which stipulates that children's interests must be incorporated into the peace process, calls for the end of recruitment of children and the demobilization of child soldiers, and specifies that personnel involved in peace operations must be trained in children's issues.

Making these conventions and agreements enforceable will go a long way to removing the most terrible impacts of war on children. Meanwhile, children are becoming increasingly involved in keeping their communities together and helping to build the peace.

Since they make up an increasingly large proportion of the population in war-affected countries, children often head their orphaned families, grow food, earn income, and work with organizations like CIDA and its partners to provide emergency assistance and to help heal and rebuild their communities.

Children are also playing an unexpected role in helping adults work towards peace. Even in the most bitterly contested conflicts, the soldiers—most of them parents themselves—have been willing to stop military operations temporarily so that children could be immunized or emergency relief supplies could be delivered. There are many who believe that these “zones of tranquility” can be built upon. In the end, the best hope for peace may lie in the universal desire of parents to build a better world for their children. ■



CIDA photo: Roger LeMoigne

Children like this girl in the streets of Sarajevo, Bosnia, often suffer from nightmares as a result of the horrors they have witnessed.

Building peace—one child at a time

After almost a decade of conflict in Sierra Leone, three Canadian organizations are trying to reunite families that have been torn apart.

Since hostilities began, Sierra Leone has sunk to the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index. It has become the poorest, most deprived country in the world. Half its population of 5 million people have been driven from their homes, 10,000 children have been separated from their families, and almost 3,000 children between the ages of 7 and 14 have been forced to serve as soldiers, child labourers, or sex slaves, mostly for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel army.

Shortly after the signing of a peace accord in July 1999, the Canadian government, through CIDA, established a \$500,000 child-protection program to help reunite former child combatants with their families, to support other child-protection initiatives, and to foster forgiveness and reconciliation in communities traumatized by years of slaughter, amputations, and other atrocities. World Vision Canada, Save The Children, and CAUSE Canada (Christian Aid for Under-Assisted Societies Everywhere) are leading the effort to trace scattered families and sensitize communities.

Progress has been slow. Sierra Leone has practically no communications or transportation infrastructure. Much of the country is still under the control of RUF factions that refuse to surrender their arms. Many child soldiers are still held by these rebel bands, and have not been informed about the reunification option.

By the end of December 1999, World Vision reported that 151 former child soldiers had managed to make their way to refugee camps, and that 55 percent of them had been reunited with their families or



Photo: CAUSE Canada

African playwright, Carmara Gbessay (right), and Paul Carrick of CAUSE Canada develop a play to be produced by former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Theatre is used to promote reconciliation and peace building.

home villages. CAUSE Canada is working with former child soldiers and other children who have been physically or psychologically handicapped to help them reintegrate into their communities. Children in refugee camps are learning how to make wheelchairs, crutches, farm tools, and household items that other civilian victims can use.

One of the challenges of this program is to sensitize communities to the needs of war-affected children. Not surprisingly, some people are hesitant to welcome back former child soldiers who were involved in terrible atrocities. Community leaders and affected children are encouraging the public to discuss children's rights and reconciliation issues through radio programs, community theatre, T-shirts, and village discussions.

As Paul Carrick, executive director of CAUSE Canada explains, forgiveness is very difficult for people who have lived through such vicious conflict. "There are some simple things you can do to put people in the mood to forgive, such as giving them the practical tools they need to rebuild their homes and farms. CIDA has been very helpful in providing these resources."

The children of Sierra Leone have been horribly wounded, and their recovery will be slow. But as Maria Minna, Minister for International Cooperation, explains, "These children will grow up to lead their country in a few years. Our efforts to support them now are a crucial investment toward a future of peace." ■





Back home after seven years

When Baindu Sami was 6 years old, she and her mother were abducted from their home in Sierra Leone by a Revolutionary United Front (RUF) raiding party. They spent two years cooking, cleaning, and carrying gear for the armed men who were constantly on the move.

When Baindu was 8, her mother disappeared in a battle between the RUF and government forces.

“I wept bitterly when I could not find my mother,” she explains. “I wanted to hide and go in search of my mother, but was intimidated by the killing or wounding of those who attempted to escape and were caught. I lived in perpetual fear and distress.”

When she was 12, she managed to escape from the rebel camp and attach herself to another militia group that favoured the government. The commander of this unit decided to take her as a wife. “I did not like this man. But he always threatened to kill me if I did not accept his proposals or tried to escape to go to my parents.”

Meanwhile, Baindu’s mother, Maseray Sama, had become part of a women’s group called Niawama Women’s Development Organization. Supported by World Vision, the group helps trace lost children and provides foster care for children in transit. In her own village just a few miles away, Baindu began making inquiries about finding her mother. In July 1999, the RUF commander agreed to let the 13-year-old return to the family she had lost seven years earlier.

“I have never been so happy in my life as on the day I saw my mother,” Baindu said. “I had thought she was dead. I am now very happy.” ■

Munda George, senior commando

Revolutionary United Front forces abducted 10-year-old Munda George while they were raiding his village of Kpatobu in the southern province of Sierra Leone.

“We were trained to use guns, to lay in ambush, and to attack,” he explains. “In no time, I found myself manning checkpoints, attacking villages, and being ordered to kill people.” By the age of 12, Munda had been promoted to senior commando, responsible for all village patrols in his region.

Within months, however, he fell into enemy hands when his group lost a battle to pro-government forces. While most of his comrades were executed, he was spared. The chief of the unit took him into his home as a servant.

“As time passed, to my great surprise, I was gradually absorbed into the family, and I was no longer looked at as a rebel.”

Eventually he was sent to live with another army family in a village where World Vision’s Child Protection Program (CPP) was active.

Through the program, Munda’s mother and grandmother were found—but they were afraid to take Munda back because of the bad things that people knew he and his father had done during the war.

“My family was afraid to accept me for fear of community reprisal,” says Munda.

After some negotiation, Munda, now 14, was reunited with his family and grandmother. Munda is currently attending school in his community.

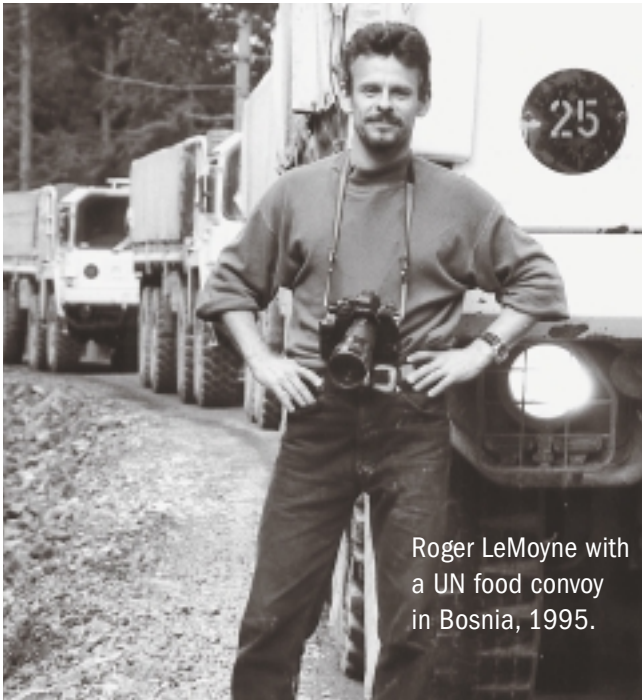
“Other children have been brought back to our village, and those children tell me they felt confident to return after I finally returned home. I am looking forward to doing many things in the future for my village.” ■

Roger LeMoyne

Eyewitness for the world's children

By Pierre Cayouette

Photographs by Roger LeMoyne



Roger LeMoyne with a UN food convoy in Bosnia, 1995.

International photojournalists are a breed apart. Numbering about a hundred or so, they are a unique group of people who are passionate about photography and whose work involves witnessing the misery of war and famine. Montrealer Roger LeMoyne is among them—and, in the eyes of his peers and those familiar with his work, he is one of the best.

While photojournalists meet a need in society, people tend to dismiss them as voyeurs or kamikaze journalists. Roger LeMoyne is nothing of the sort—he is thoughtful and clearheaded. His goal is to show the world the terrible things that warfare does to children and their families.

Since 1995, he has spent at least six months of every year touring the world's trouble spots, camera in hand. He has followed Hutu refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Taliban in Kabul. He has experienced the hell of Kosovo.

Often commissioned by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and UNICEF, his photographs are distributed by New York's Liaison Agency. Whether in Cambodia, Somalia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Rwanda, or Bosnia, he has the same keen eye and one desire: to bear witness to the lives of these suffering people and to share their tragedies and perseverance with readers.

"Knowing that my photos will be seen by a wide audience really motivates me," he says. His work has been published in more than 50 of the world's leading newspapers and magazines, including *Time*, *Life*, *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel observateur*, *L'actualité*, and *Der Spiegel*.

He stubbornly clings to his freedom as a freelancer. There is no question of his settling down and agreeing to work for a daily or a magazine. Assigning him to a press conference would be like sentencing him to death!

After a decade of photojournalism, Roger LeMoyne has no illusions about his profession. "Don't kid yourself about the power of the press," he says, "but don't underestimate its impact."

When on assignment, he explains, he does not see himself as being on a humanitarian mission. However, that doesn't mean he is insensitive to the horror he sees. On the contrary, he is deeply moved. His photos are ample proof of that.

"When I take pictures, I think mainly about my work. Of course, if people reach out to me to save their lives, I will, but that's very rare. First and foremost, I am a journalist. My primary goal is to report what I see." Nevertheless, in 1997, while taking photos at a refugee camp in what was then Zaire, LeMoyne was so appalled by the terrible living conditions, that he volunteered with UNICEF. He was promptly assigned to dig latrines.

Even though he has developed a thick skin over the years, LeMoyne has painful memories that have left deep scars. He is still moved when he recalls a man who came up to him at the border between Kosovo and Macedonia, and whispered in his ear, "They killed my children while I watched," and then quietly went on his way. He was especially touched by the man's restrained, dignified manner. "He didn't ask for anything. He just wanted me to know."

How does he feel deep down about his unusual line of work? Isn't there something absurd about turning people's suffering into art?

"No. My priority isn't taking 'pretty pictures.' I aim for a balance between form and content. I have tremendous respect for my subjects. One way to show that is to take a picture that will cut straight to the heart of their situation, just as a news reporter looks for just the right word. Also, in the past four or five years, my work has tended to be cleaner, starker. It's been a natural development."

Pierre Cayouette writes for L'Actualité magazine.

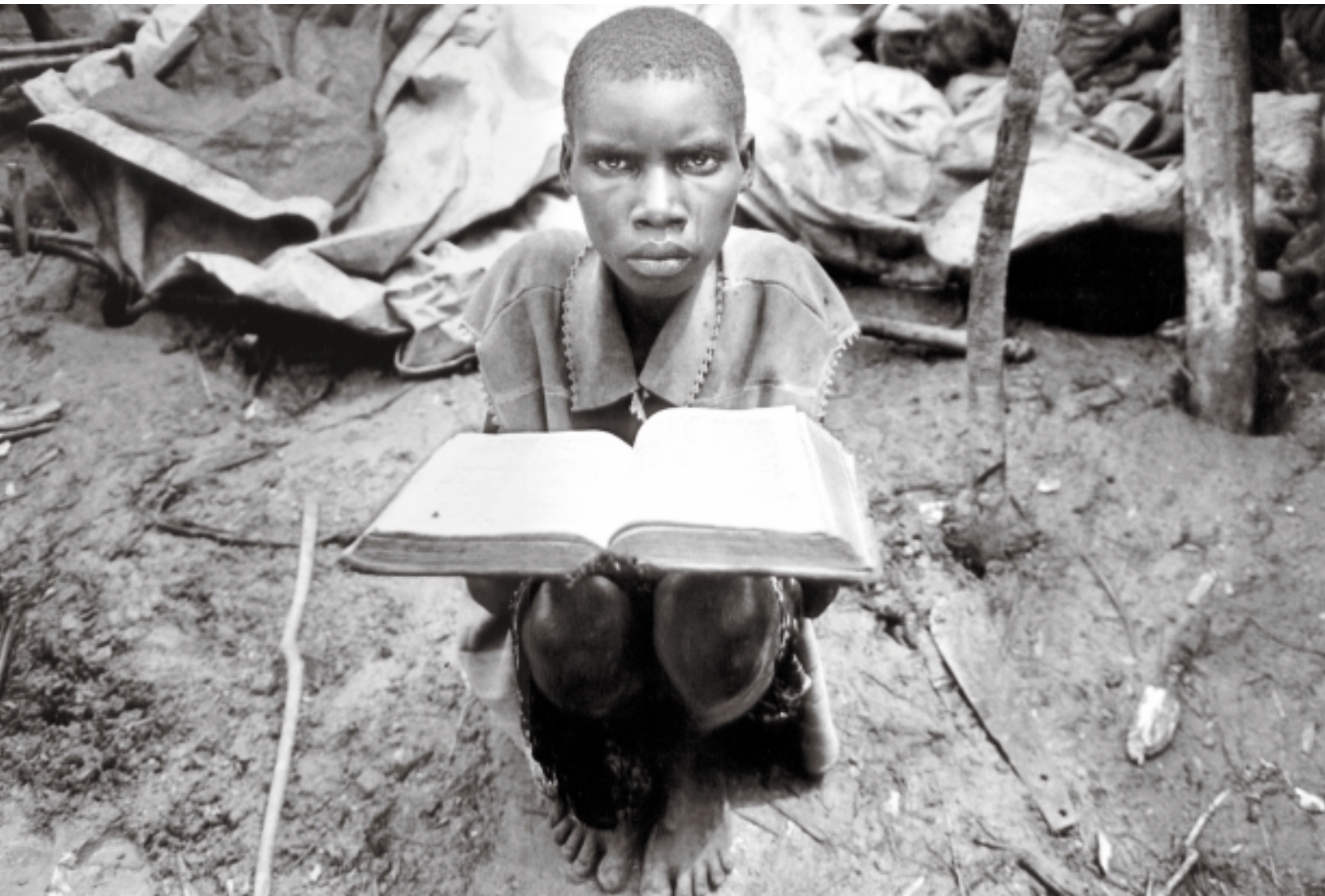


Afghanistan, 1996 ▲

Girls dig for charcoal in the foundation of a shelled building in the capital, Kabul. Years of warfare have deprived these children of an education, and a future.

Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo, 1997 ▼

Traumatized by the unspeakable violence she has seen, a 12-year-old girl who survived a massacre finds refuge in her Bible.



Roger LeMoynes graduated from Concordia University's film program in 1984. He worked in several fields before devoting himself to photojournalism. He made a brief foray into cinema, was a composer, and did some commercial photography.

But in photojournalism, he has found his niche, and he plans to stay there. He will continue to go where the action is. His next challenge? To show a different side of Africa.

"I don't want to be known as a photographer who captures only the misery of Africa. Some Africans live relatively comfortable, happy lives. They may not be rich, but they are happy."

Roger LeMoynes remains humble despite the many honours he has received. In 1999, a photo story on Kosovo won him second prize in the World Press Foundation's "People in the News Stories" category. The previous year, he had received another prestigious award from the National Press Photographers in the United States. His work has been exhibited regularly in Canada and in the United States, and at the Perpignan annual photojournalism festival in southern France.

But the Montréal photojournalist is reluctant to do the gallery circuit. "For instance, Perpignan is frequented by my peers and those in the know. I don't work for them. I want the general public to see my photos," he explains.

In any case, he adds, he doesn't feel right about commercializing human misery, the main subject matter of his superb photographs.

Now in his mid-forties, Roger LeMoynes still has plans for many more photo stories. Is it any wonder? Documenting the dark side of the human condition is a demanding job that keeps LeMoynes, and about a hundred other international photojournalists who have made this their life's work, very busy. Their images are disturbing. But as long as others turn a blind eye to injustice and violence, we need photojournalists to tell the world about the plight of children in regions of conflict. ■

Kosovo, October 1998 ▶

Shafts of sunlight pierce the smoky interior of a mosque in Chirez where ethnic Albanian families were forced to take shelter after their homes were burned. This is one of a series of photos that earned LeMoynes a World Press Award in 1999, one of the most prestigious prizes in photojournalism.

Eritrea, 2000 ▼

With just a few possessions on their backs, mothers and children flee fighting which has overtaken their village during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. With night approaching, they are forced to sleep out in the open on a rocky hillside.







Photo: Joyce Davis

Paska in front of her Canadian family's house in Scarborough, Ontario.

“I was a child soldier”

Paska was just 14 years old when she was recruited to fight in Uganda's civil war. Now she is working to forge an end to the conflict.

Behind her winning smile, Paska Achieng Otto harbours a secret that's deeper and darker than you would ever guess.

Articulate, intelligent, and highly motivated, Paska is a year shy of earning her Master's degree in Rural Extension Studies at the University of Guelph. Now 28, she was born and raised in Uganda but has lived in Canada since 1989. She has a bright, shining future ahead of her.

However, she trails a ghostly past, haunted by restless spirits and by the silent legions of her country's dead.

“A lot of my friends are shocked,” she says, “to find out that I was a child soldier.”

Yet that is exactly what she was—an involuntary killer in a little-known civil war, a war that continues, more than a decade later, to gnaw at the throat of her native land. Early in 1986, her school—the Y. Y. Okot Memorial College—was twice invaded by government troops in search of rebel sympathizers. Although not a

rebel at the time, Paska soon found herself compelled to join their ranks.

For 18 months, from July 1986 until Christmas 1987, war became the central constant of her life. For most of that time, she was a sub-commander in the Holy Spirit Movement, one of a welter of armed rebel groups that roamed the forests and savannahs of northern Uganda. Mainly composed of members of the minority Acholi tribe, they fought against government troops and, almost as often, against each other. When forced to take up arms, Paska was just fourteen years old.

Led by an eccentric visionary named Alice Lakwena—who claimed to divine the future in a calabash of water and who commanded her followers according to the spirit voices that spoke in her head—the movement temporarily enjoyed considerable battlefield success but finally broke up amid internal wrangling and bloodshed.

By that time, Paska had not only witnessed more horror than most people could ever imagine—she had

waded right through it, shooting at phantoms, ducking bullets, striding among the dead. She herself was singled out for execution once, imprisoned twice, threatened with rape more times than she can remember, and thrust into one roaring, chaotic battle after another.

“There were so many rebel groups,” she says. “Everybody was defending their villages and clans. It was war within war.”

For her baptism by fire, Paska and some 300 others—all untrained recruits like herself—were thrown into an attack against government forces and amazed themselves by somehow driving their opponents off.

“The shooting started—boom!” she says, recounting that first taste of combat. “People were dropping like fish. My major thing was just to try to get the (wounded) people out.”

Pleased with the victory, Lakwena chose 10 of the combatants, almost at random, and made them officers. Paska was one of them and suddenly found herself, at the age of 14, with approximately 1,000 troops under her command.

Later, at a place called Corner Kilak—a trading centre converted into a government barracks—the Holy Spirit Movement won its greatest victory, but four days later government reinforcements poured in and routed the rebels after eight hours of harrowing combat.

“That was the first battle that I fought as a commander,” Paska recalls. “It was terrible. I didn’t know what was happening. I looked at the dead everywhere, and I thought, ‘How can you all die?’ ”

Outnumbered and outgunned, the rebels withdrew. Lakwena herself had been wounded by an exploding grenade, and Paska nursed her back to health.

The war continued, but the movement’s fortunes gradually deteriorated, as Lakwena lost the confidence of her mostly male officers. The organization finally dissolved amid acrimony and shocking bloodshed.

Paska escaped with a small force of rebels. They finally staggered across the border into Kenya, hungry, covered with scabies, and dressed in rags, to be captured by

Kenyan troops and imprisoned there. That was around Christmas 1987. Two years later, with the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Canadian government, Paska was granted political asylum in Canada and has lived here since.

Last year, she was finally able to travel back to Uganda. She met her mother for the first time in 13 years, as well as several of her eight siblings. Her father, a former policeman, had passed away. Paska wants to tell her story now to show that child soldiers



are not necessarily ruined as human beings following their experience of war.

“I’m not a bad person,” she says. “Things happen to people, and you have to learn to live with it. I’ve come through this, and I’m contributing to Canada already.”

When she looks to the future, however, she turns towards Uganda, where fighting continues between northern rebels and government troops. She is determined to do what she can to bring the various sides together and to forge a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

“My priority right now is to get an education and to see what I can do for my people,” she says. “If all of us work together, the war will be over.” ■



Growing up too fast: Rwanda's orphans

David Collins, Executive Director of Canadian Food for the Hungry with orphans from Rwanda.

In the spring of 1994, there was no safe place for the children of Rwanda. For 100 brutal, terrifying days, the long-simmering ethnic rivalry between Hutus and Tutsis erupted into unspeakable horror. When it was over, as many as 800,000 people lay dead, 2 million had become refugees, and 2 million were internally displaced. Unknown thousands had been raped, tortured, mutilated, and terrorized, and an estimated 90 percent of the surviving children had witnessed atrocities that no child's eyes should ever see.

No one knows how many children were orphaned by the civil war. Over the next two or three years, most went back to their villages to live with their brothers and sisters. Their homes still bore the signs of war: missing roofs, crumbling walls, interiors overgrown with weeds, household items smashed. During the day, they would forage for food. At night, they would huddle together under old grain sacks or banana leaves to keep out the rain and the evening cold.

Boys and girls as young as 14 found themselves heads of families, responsible for the health and welfare of up to five or six others. Seven-year-olds were cultivating fields and preparing meals. None of them had the skills or the tools to take care of themselves. Few had the comfort of adult guidance or protection; some had returned to neighbourhoods where tensions still festered, and many were struggling with the terrible trauma of the recent past.

What they needed was the acceptance and support of the community, and the skills and resources to meet their basic needs. Canadian Food for the Hungry (CFH), an Abbotsford, B.C.-based development organization, which was already involved in emergency assistance in Rwanda, decided to help the households headed by children in Mugina, Nyamabuye, and Kigoma communes.

Working with local authorities, CFH developed a two-year training and social-support program. With

support from CIDA, this program enabled the children to grow their own food, take care of their health, run their households, attend school, and earn an income. Each family chose an adult from the community to mentor them and each joined a support group with four or five other families. The children were trained and given materials and help to build their own latrines, repair their homes, plant vegetables, beans, sweet potatoes, and bananas, and raise goats.

All of the children (there are over 800 of them) in these communities have gone back to school, and those who returned to find their family homes occupied by others have gotten their homes back. Some have even started up businesses as beekeepers, rabbit-breeders, farmers, and bicycle taxis. They are now self-sufficient and well-integrated into their communities. Their mentors are now their advocates and their friends.

Dave Ellis, CFH Team Coordinator, tells the story of Clarisse, a 17-year-old who lives with her four sisters. "Both parents died on the way back from the Congo in 1996," he says. "When the girls reached home on their own, they found that the roof of their house had collapsed." Clarisse was determined to repair her house, so she "... went around and asked all her neighbours for help. They all willingly gave her enough wood, and they helped her to repair her roof... As she still needed some tiles and doors for her home, we were also able to help her with these," says Dave. "We are so thankful that Munyinya Sector demonstrated their love and support for Clarisse and her sisters."

The war is not over for these children. Many are still haunted by their memories, but now they have the protection and support of their communities. They have found the confidence and the strength to help others. Many are now training other orphaned families, independent of the CFH project. In their own way, they are helping themselves and other war victims to recover and build peace in this beautiful yet troubled land. ■

Deadly child's play

A new film shows how Canadians are helping the people of Laos deal with the legacy of the Vietnam War

The monsoons have come early to this lush green valley in northeastern Laos. Members of the Bounthavi family are preparing their flooded rice fields for planting, wading through the mud and digging trenches for the tender shoots that will become this year's crop. It may look like a scene from the fabled place where time has stood still, but for development worker Betty Kasdorf and filmmaker Jack Silberman, it is a scene that is as terrifying as it is heartbreaking.

The fields, forests, and even schoolyards of this part of Laos are riddled with live bombs, a deadly legacy of a war that ended more than 25 years ago. During the Vietnam War, the United States dropped tons of tennis-ball-sized cluster bombs, called "bombies," on Laos. Millions of these bombs failed to explode, and remain a terrible threat to this day.

Betty Kasdorf, who grew up on a farm outside Niverville, Manitoba, appreciates the importance of land to these Laotian villagers. What could be more devastating for a farmer than to see his children go hungry? But as the representative for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) program in Laos, she also knows that too many people, often children, are hurt or killed in situations like this. Just recently, after spiking a stake into the ground to tether his water buffalo, a boy hit a bombie and lost a limb.

"Even after villages are cleared of bombs," says Betty, "they continue to surface. When farmers dig or bring water from the mountainside, there is always the potential of unexploded bombs." The Bounthavi family has already found dozens of bombies in their rice paddy. But if they want to eat, they must farm.

Betty is here to show B.C. filmmaker Jack Silberman about the MCC's rural programs, which since 1975 have supported efforts to clear the land of bombies and to educate children about their danger. "Children here, like children all over the world, are attracted to small



Photo: Jack Silberman

MCC's Betty Kasdorf with Laotian visitors.

objects, things they can play with. And a lot of the bombies are just the right size to use as a small ball. So just picking one up, tossing it around... it puts them in danger."

As she leads the film crew to the village school, it becomes clear that bombie education is just as important as anything else these children learn. Charts identify a constellation of deadly antipersonnel weapons. Crayon-coloured posters warn of hidden dangers in the ground. The film crew would later tape a demolition team clearing explosives from a schoolyard where over 300 bombies had already been found. A teacher leads the class in the "bombie song" which has been introduced into schools throughout the country in local dialects. Villagers gladly tell and even sing their stories to the camera, hopeful that their message will be heard around the world. They want to help the film do its job: to warn everyone of the devastation of cluster bombs. The villagers know that, when their land is cleared, and the village is safe, the children will be able to play safely again.

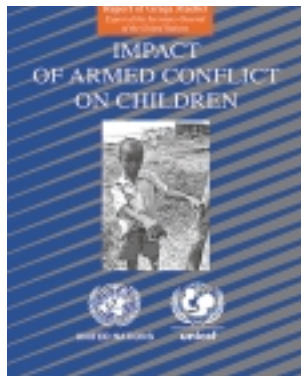
The film on Betty Kasdorf's work in Laos is called, *Bombies*, and is being produced by Lumiere Productions Inc., with support from the Canadian International Development Agency, the Independent Television Service, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Rogers Documentary Fund. It will be completed in December 2000. ■



Leading international action on child protection:

An interview with Theo Sowa, co-author of UNICEF's groundbreaking report

Born in Ghana, Theo Sowa is an independent consultant specializing in conflict resolution, children's issues, and communications. She has worked on four continents for a range of international organizations, including UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme, and Save the Children Fund. In 1996, Sowa co-authored UNICEF's report on *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. The report was produced under the



leadership of Graça Machel, a leading activist for war-affected children and the wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela. Sowa and Machel are now updating the UNICEF report. Canadian journalist Oakland Ross recently spoke to Theo Sowa about her work.

Oakland Ross: It's one thing to recognize the terrible effects of war on children; quite another to prevent them. What can be done in order to generate a more effective international response to such conflicts?

Theo Sowa: We must generate the political will to tackle these issues, but sometimes key parts of the international community seem to lack that will. At times, it has almost seemed that those who are most responsible for human-rights violations are rewarded rather than punished. The whole ethos of impunity must be broken down. There also needs to be more emphasis on preventing conflicts before they begin. We need to promote good anti-poverty, pro-equity, child-focused development programs. We need reliable and flexible early-warning systems. We need to

give local and regional organizations the technical and political skills and resources to intervene in many different ways before the outbreak of conflict.

Oakland Ross: In recent years, in many different countries at war, international agencies have successfully arranged "corridors of peace" or "days of tranquility" in order to allow aid agencies to carry out humanitarian projects such as children's vaccination programs. Can these achievements be used as models for more sustained initiatives that would help insulate children from the worst effects of war?

Theo Sowa: Yes and no. These initiatives are heartening because they allow us to protect children from some effects of conflict, and because they show the power that children have in people's hearts and minds. Long-standing enemies have been prepared to compromise when it comes to children. But these initiatives can only be fall-back positions when humanitarian access to children has been impossible—when we have failed to protect children adequately. We mustn't use "days of tranquility" as a way of saying, "These four days a year mean we've dealt with the issues." Children should be protected 365 days a year.

Oakland Ross: The report you co-authored details various ways in which sexual violence is used as an instrument of war, but it also provides evidence of a reluctance on the part of international authorities to prosecute such offences as war crimes. The report also calls on belligerent parties to refrain from recruiting children as soldiers, for example, but there seem to be few ways of backing this up except through moral suasion. What practical measures exist to encourage humane conduct in time of war?

Theo Sowa: People have to believe that if they break laws there will be consequences. We have witnessed some promising signs in the recent international tribunals for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, where there have been indictments for rape and gender-based



South Africa — Partnership Launch

Graça Machel addresses the gathering of children, local and national South African leaders, international media and others at the launch of the global partnership for children at the Afrika Cultural Centre in Johannesburg.

crimes. The laws have always been there, but now there are indictments and also convictions. I also strongly believe in finding ways to assist governments or warring factions to implement the commitments they have made to children, through training and other methods. But you also need the stick, the possibility of prosecution.

“Children are both our reason to struggle to eliminate the worst aspects of warfare, and our best hope for succeeding at it.”

– Graça Machel

Oakland Ross: What in your opinion has been the most important positive result that has so far flowed from the publication of the Machel report? What has been your greatest disappointment?

Theo Sowa: The most important aspect of the report was Graça Machel’s ability to initiate a truly consultative process, involving governments, UN agencies, civil-society groups, and children themselves. Other concrete accomplishments include the establishment of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, and the development and adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, establishing 18 as the minimum age for sending young people into combat. There has also been the Ottawa

Landmines Convention, UN Security Council Resolution 1261 on the protection of children in armed conflict, and the appointment of child-protection advisors as part of peacekeeping missions. These are just a few examples of positive change. My biggest disappointment is that children continue to be targeted, to be mutilated, raped, abducted, and killed in conflicts throughout the world. This continuing horror is inexcusable.

Oakland Ross: What do you see on the horizon?

Theo Sowa: I’m really worried about the combined impact of armed conflict and HIV/AIDS on children. All the factors that escalate the transmission of HIV are writ large in conflict situations, while the destructive impact of HIV/AIDS on social and medical services has real potential for fueling conflicts. I fear that this is going to devastate countries in many parts of the world. ■

In the summer of 1988, seven-year-old Kdija (not her real name) of Hargeisa, Somalia, went to visit her grandmother in a nearby town. It was a summer like any other—long days playing with the neighbourhood children, and special times with her beloved grandmother.

But Kdija’s vacation came to a sudden end one day when gunshots in the distance told them that something was very wrong. Neighbours were running from house to house, warning everyone that war had broken out.



“I did not understand the politics or the reasoning behind all the destruction and anguish,” Kdija remembers. “But I felt the fear and doom surround me.”

Her grandmother quickly decided it was time to flee. They left with the clothes on their backs—including her grandmother’s garbasar, or shawl, and money to bribe the soldiers in whose hands their lives would rest.

Kdija doesn’t remember much of their flight—walking long distances, riding in a van, crossing the Red Sea—but they finally arrived in Şanaá’, Yemen, and stayed with Kdija’s aunt.

It all seemed so temporary. “I was the only member of my family who could leave with my grandmother,” says Kdija. “In my heart, I truly believed that my parents and siblings would be joining me at any moment, and that we would eventually return to our normal routine.”

She missed her family—three brothers, her father (a textile merchant), and her mother. “I constantly badgered my grandma with questions about my family and their whereabouts. She would always respond in the same way—assuring me that they were fine, and that we would reunite soon enough.”

To help put her mind at ease, Kdija’s grandmother would take her to the port to see if her family members were among the groups of people who arrived almost weekly.

“But time passed, and it was soon two years since I had last seen or heard from my family,” she says. “I began to believe they were all dead, much to my grandma’s dismay.”

It was now 1990. Somalia was to descend into terrible chaos and civil war, and more than 300,000 children would lose their lives. More than 1.5 million people would leave Somalia as refugees, and eventually the United Nations would come in to try to restore order. For Kdija, exiled in Yemen, the next eight years were lonely ones.

“I received very little in the way of education—what little I received was from a neighbour who was a teacher. At the time, it was said that my parents were alive, but I suspected otherwise.”

In 1998, she immigrated to Canada and settled down with another aunt. Right now, there’s no going back home for Kdija. Somalia is suffering a severe drought, hostilities continue to erupt between factions, and she is sure that she has lost her family forever.

But she has found a new purpose in Canada. She has joined War Child Canada, an organization that works on behalf of war-affected children and is supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). As a member of the Youth Advisory Board, she uses her own experience to raise awareness among young Canadians and to help them get involved in helping children around the world.

“Many people don’t understand that the opportunities I received once I came here are a precious gift, and not just a commodity,” she says. “Now that I am part of the War Child organization, I hope to help other children who have gone through the pain and anguish that I have suffered over the past 12 years. I hope that, in time, the world will realize what a great distress it is to live through this horror—day in, day out—without an end in sight.” ■

Photo: Robin Walsh



“What’s school like in Canada?”

Using the welfare of children as a barometer of how well a society is doing, Maria Minna, the Minister for International Cooperation, always finds time to stop and chat with young people. The day she met the 12-year-old girl who asked her what school is like in Canada, Ms. Minna was touring Kosovo to see Canadian aid dollars in action.

It had been roughly nine months since the cease-fire and the return of nearly 800,000 Kosovar refugees. Schools, clinics, local markets, homes, and mosques had been destroyed during the civil war that pitted neighbour against neighbour and took a terrible toll on civilian lives, including children. And, despite the presence of peacekeepers, children were still at risk: landmines had been planted in homes, roads, bridges, local markets, fields, and around schools. The situation was tense, and isolated incidents of violence continued to occur.

At the Faik Konica School in Pristina, Kosovo, which Canadian peacekeepers had repaired, Minister Minna stopped to meet a Grade 6 class. The students had performed a play and drawn some posters for her. The pictures were a reflection of their daily lives—military vehicles, weapons, and soldiers—but there were also images of hope. There were posters of country scenes, children playing, portraits.

That’s when the question about school in Canada came up. For this little girl and her classmates, school before the war was underground. Ethnic Albanians were not allowed to attend the state schools, so children got their education from members of the Albanian community—in basements, kitchens and living rooms,

anywhere classes could be organized. But now, thanks to the soldiers who repaired this aging building and the Canadian-sponsored rehabilitation program that is helping them resume normal life, these children can exercise the right to education their government guaranteed them when it signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Getting an education is important to the students of Faik Konica School—to prepare them for the working world of the 21st century. Although its political future is not yet secure, Kosovo, along with its multi-ethnic neighbours, is working for a future of peace, democracy, and respect for diversity. And that respect for diversity begins in childhood.

Minister Minna, originally from Italy, used her experience working with Canada’s immigrant community to connect with the students in Faik Konica School. She talked about the Canadian dream—of how our community’s identity strengthens us, how our differences with other communities enrich us.

This is the message she brought to the children of Kosovo—the same message that Canada’s aid program reinforces and builds on, by providing assistance to schools, health programs and community centres, local administration, peacekeeping, and demining.

“The three Rs, yes,” said Minister Minna, “but also peace, democracy, and respect. ■



Photo: Robin Walsh

Minister Minna greeted warmly by Kosovar school children.

Just the facts



War and armed conflict have left
1 million children orphaned
and about **12 million** homeless.

Worldwide military spending was
roughly **US\$740 billion** in **1997**.

In the past **10** years, about **2** million children
have been killed and more than **6** million have been
disabled as a result of armed conflicts.

Most child soldiers are between the ages of **15** and **18**,
but it is common for children as young as
10 to be actively recruited.

Existing international law, dating back to the end
of World War II, sets **15** as the minimum age
for military recruitment.

About **300,000** children under **18**
are currently taking part in
hostilities around the world.

About **800** landmines killed or
maimed every month.

The number of child refugees
increases by about **5,000** per day.

Of the **24 million** refugees worldwide,
50 percent are children.

