

**Statement by His Excellency Ambassador Lewis Garseedah Brown, II
Permanent Representative of Liberia to the United Nations
At a Workshop on the Reintegration of Child Soldiers
June 6, 2018**

Excellencies, dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the Under-Secretary General Ms. Virginia Gamba for organizing and inviting me to this workshop on the Reintegration of Child Soldiers. As you all know, this is not an issue unfamiliar to Liberia, particularly, after experiencing a fourteen-year long civil upheaval.

Statistics has shown that child soldiers account for at least forty percent of the world's armed forces; and the most vulnerable and poor ones who have little or no access to education have greater chances of being conscripted. Majority, if not all of them are left wounded, disabled, traumatized, or deranged after participating in armed conflict. Their innocence as children are stolen, childhood lost, and normal growth processes, undermined! And the sad fact is--in most post-conflict Countries, ex-child soldiers lack basic survival skills and proper rehabilitation support; making them easy targets to be recruited again. The consequences of using children as weapons and soldiers of war are certainly appalling. Hence, the need for proper rehabilitation and reintegration is of utmost importance if ex-child soldiers should have shot at living not just normal lives but living again.

Let me share with you, the Liberian story.

As many of you in this room may be aware, thousands of children were used to perpetrate outrageous atrocities during the Liberian Civil conflict, often under the

influence of drugs. By the cessation of hostilities in 2003, up to 21, 000 ex child soldiers needed to be demobilized, rehabilitated and reintegrated into the society.

The process got off to a rocky start due to the lack of preparedness and capacity. However, one positive aspect of the start of the process was the eagerness of child soldiers to be disarmed. They trooped in their numbers even before the formal start of the process in December 2003.

Coordinated by UNICEF, the process then integrated a diverse range of stakeholders including NGOs, Community based organizations, faith based organizations, the government and the private sector. It was a deliberate strategy to use all available capacities to achieve the objective of the process.

The reintegration process included disarmament, certification and rehabilitation. The ex-child soldiers received skills training, psychosocial support and guidance as well as educational support. The participants were provided options to take advantage of vocational skills including agriculture and construction or formal education. This was meant to prepare them to have a means for self-sustainability ahead of reuniting with their families.

While the process was successful on a large scale, it faced criticisms for low allowances, short duration (3 months for skills training and 3 years for formal education inspite of the level at which a child was starting) and post process follow-up. The process was also challenged by limited funding from donors.

Excellencies,

As I conclude, I want to stressed that while reintegration is a good process to help ex-child soldiers regain a sense of normality, our primary objective should first focus on innovative ways to mitigate the recruitment of children into armed conflicts. This

should be our social and moral responsibility. We cannot afford to despise them. They are not responsible for what they were turned into. We must see them for what they truly are: innocent victims.

I would also like to applaud the initiatives of UNICEF which works in close collaboration with governments and communities to protect and rehabilitate children affected by armed conflicts. We should endeavor to ensure that the conventions and treaties concerning child's rights are fully upheld and implemented.

Finally, there are not short cuts to rehabilitation and reintegration. It requires a long term strategy. It require resources, sadly, that the affected country does not have. For post-conflict countries, rehabilitation and reintegration is an important way to sustain their peace and avoid a return to conflict.

I thank you for your kind attention.