

Statement of Kabba Williams

Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Forces

Wednesday 6 June 2018

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Mission of Poland to the United Nations for the invitation to be here today. I also want to thank my own country, the Government of Sierra Leone and greet our Ambassador His Excellency Adikalie Foday Sumah, as well as UNICEF and Child Soldiers International.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, my name is Kabba Williams. I am from Sierra Leone. When I was a child soldier I was a witness, victim and perpetrator at one and at the same time. Even though child soldiers are, perpetrators, we committed acts of violence against our wishes, because during the brutal civil armed conflict in our country many of us were targeted, because we were powerless, easy to manipulate, cheap, vulnerable, easy to feed and we did not care if we lived or died. We were forcefully taken away from our homes and families.

I was 7 years old when I was abducted by the RUF and forced to fight. We could not escape, they put us always on the front lines. Then in 1993, I was in the first UNICEF programme to release children from armed groups in the Sierra Leone civil war. It was a 6 month programme. I remember when they took the gun from me and they took the gun from all of us. But the war was still going on and we were all re-recruited by government forces. A year later I was released a second time, again with UNICEF. This time I was able to return to school.

We were forced to fight in a war that we did not understand and we did nothing to cause, but we suffered terribly because of it. We had no choice, but to do what we were ordered to do. If we

refused, we would have been brutally killed like many of my friends. Our parents and teachers were powerless to protect us, as a child at that time I witnessed some of the worst episodes of man's ruthlessness and barbarism in history.

When I was a child, I never went to school. My mother had never been to school so she didn't think it was important for me to go either. Given that my father was dead and we were very poor, school was a luxury she decided I couldn't afford. Education is the key: it can take a person anywhere.

The first exposure to any education I received was the kind of education no child should ever have to receive – it was a war education. When I was kidnapped by rebels and forced to fight, the only schooling I got was some basic training on how to use a gun and how to attack and defend myself. Instead of using books and paper I was given a gun and taught how to run and hide while carrying it. Later, after I escaped, I was forced to become a soldier with the regular army, partly because I had no education or training and no family to support me.

Education was vitally important in helping me overcome the terrible violence I had been exposed to as a child. Slowly, I began reading everything that was around me. I still remember how I would put my finger under each word as if I was counting and how slow it was to get to the end of the line. I also began helping the younger boys around me as a way of helping myself remember. I hardly had the time to think about guns and war. The war gradually became a distant memory. I became strong and able to deal with the past. Without the support of my friends and teachers I would never have been able to heal myself from the psychological trauma of war.

Going to school helped me a lot, not just in academics, but also it cemented my religious beliefs. It provided me with some opportunity to get counselling and I was able to let go of my anger and fear.

UNICEF estimates that over 7,000 children fought in the three principal armed groups in the civil conflicts in Sierra Leone. Each of these children has a painful story to tell. Those stories must not be ignored. If children don't have a shoulder to cry on, where do they go? The International community should give them their ears and helping hands.

The reintegration process in Sierra Leone was not a total failure, but it was not a complete success either. Former child soldiers (now young adults) were not properly reintegrated into the communities. Some were entrusted to family members who knew little or nothing about former child soldiers. Staffers or members of the reintegration team paid no regular visits to family members and the former child soldiers under their auspices, therefore, those child soldiers were left at the mercy of the family members with whom they stayed.

In my case, the demobilization process was the beginning. Reintegration means return to normal life. But my life was not normal after reintegration. We were provided with shelter, food, some health care and counselling and informal education. The programme lasted 6 months. It was not long enough for a child exposed to the degree of atrocities that took place during the war.

Girls were often reluctant to identify themselves as fighters, or as being associated with the fighting forces out of fear of stigmatization, which plays a much greater role for girls than boys. Many child soldiers especially girls, fear victimization from their male counterparts and stigmatization, and were discouraged from taking part in the reintegration process. Instead, they tried to do self-reintegration into different communities within the country. Support and assistance were no longer available after the whole process ended and the poor family members were left to cater for those former child soldiers entrusted to them. The child soldiers' wounds were psychological as well as physical.

Children are not war tools or objects and the like, but partners for development. A successful post-conflict reconstruction depends on the successful reintegration of former child soldiers (now young adults). The challenge of their reintegration into peaceful society must be addressed for these young people to play an important and positive role as agents of peace during the period of post-conflict reconstruction.

I believe for most children who have been through the hell of war, if the international community responds adequately with the right tools, it is possible to win them back, give back to them their lives, and for many of them to give back to them if not their childhood, then their youth. The wounds are psychological as well as physical. Child soldiers need long-time support, whether they are treated as Ex-combatants, or children who have lost their childhood.

When I look back on my experience, I must say that I am still struggling. It is a life long struggle. I feel lucky to have all the help I have received but there are so many challenges I still face every day.

I am peacefully appealing to government in Africa, as well as to the United Nations, the international community and non-government organizations which are dealing with former child soldiers that they re-examine their policies on the reintegration of former child soldiers into society, and provide such things as sustainable educational support, training, housing, and health and livelihood programs for them.

What we expect and demand is that former child soldiers should be part and parcel of dialogue, the policy making, planning and implementing of policies that lead to access to education. He who feels it knows it. I know only too well the pain and suffering of children caught in the cross fire or armed conflict – and the healing power of education in aiding children affected by conflict to build back their lives and enrich their communities.