



A Life Without Childhood

Football and play are both important tools used in the rehabilitation of Liberia's child soldiers

By Kirsten Harkjær Larsen

Appearing at the Play the game with a moving tale of hope from Liberia, Joe Hena plays two video clips to the assembled audience. They are vastly different, but both feature a group of children wearing distinctive yellow T-shirts. The first is a clip from a lively local football game between two junior teams, played in front of a sizable crowd of spectators. The second features the so-called Jungle Lions – child soldiers – standing with hand-painted letters on their breasts. Their body language is aggressive, almost threatening. They are in the 12-14-age range, and all are armed. Although taken from Liberia's last civil war, this second clip could just as well have been

filmed today. War has again flared up in the West African state – and child soldiers remain an integral part of the ranks.

It is estimated that between 14,000 and 20,000 child soldiers bore arms for the National Patriotic Front of Liberia during the civil war of 1990-1997. The fact that Liberia has signed the UN Charter on Children's Rights, which forbids soldiers under the age of 18, seemingly had little effect.

As a visiting coordinator for the Catholic children's charity Don Bosco Homes, Joe Hena cannot prevent children and former child soldiers re-enlisting in the army. However, his work with these young people is an important step in the rehabilitation of a ge-



Countless numbers of children soldiers need sport and other forms of rehabilitation, Joe Hena told

neration which during seven years of civil war, lost most of its childhood and all of its school years on the battlefield

Football, drama and play have all shown themselves to be constructive tools in the work of rehabilitation.

Local engagement

»They are small adults, who are used to others obeying orders, says Joe Hena. 'Some of them have had sexual relations with women old enough to be their mothers. This fact especially will give them problems when they start to be treated like children again.«

Like others working for Don Bosco Homes, Joe Hena has seen how ball games and play can reduce stress amongst the former soldiers. The approach is first to hold meetings in which the children talk about the problems experienced in their daily lives. Afterwards, these discussions are acted out in role-playing sessions, later to be performed for the children's parents in the form of a drama. Each session ends with a football game.

He adds that many former child soldiers appear wise beyond their years. 'We are seeing children under the age of 15 questioning the justice of a system in which, while others have big cars and villas, their parents do not receive wages for up to ten months' he says. »We are also seeing more and more former child soldiers engaging themselves in the local community.«

Let the children play

Under the motto 'Let the Children Play' Don Bosco Homes is moving into the camps housing homeless soldiers – both adults and children. Most recently the organisation started a campaign against the recruitment of child soldiers in the current conflict. The campaign, which uses football as a starting point, is active at five different locations in the capital city, Monrovia. In a parade through the city before the final of a recent football tournament organised by Don Bosco Homes, the charity appealed to the government to recognise the UN Convention on Children's Rights. Joe Hena used Play the game to bring this appeal to a broader audience. Support in the form of money or footballs, he says, will be received with thanks by Don Bosco Homes.