

have both included an unknown though probably not insubstantial number of under 18s in their ranks.' This is not acceptable!

Child combatants do not fall from heaven. It is our societies that create them. Men, who are mismanaging our economies, our political systems, after creating the necessary conditions for war or violence, turn around to recruit children into irregular and regular forces. Government or rebel leaders do not recruit their own children into the forces. They do not provide their own children with drugs. Rather, they recruit the children of the poor, who could not attend schools for no fault of their own, or who drop out of school due to school fees they cannot pay. This is not acceptable!

The systematic abuse of children in situations of armed conflict demands a collective, well-resourced response if this barbaric and genocidal tendency is to be wiped out. But, first, let us sincerely admit that this phenomenon is new and can be traced to the militarisation of politics and the weakening of the African economies from the early 1970s. As stated earlier, children do not create the conditions for war, it is men in politics and uniform. So, how can civil society help stop this systematic abuse?

Creating the conditions for inclusive politics at national, district and community levels is one method of dealing with the conditions that give rise to child soldiers. Here, civil society can continue to put pressure on governments to broaden the democratic space. Civil society can help create the conditions that make it impossible for tyrants such as Iddi Amin and Sani Abacha to take power again. The heroic resistance of civil society after the May 25 coup in Sierra Leone is a source of courage. Civil society refused to service the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council Junta. In the immediate past, Africans supported military governments.

With the exception of Sierra Leone, Liberia and parts of Guinea (where rebel activity is in action), the phenomenon of child soldiers is not widespread. So speaking about Prevention, let me add the universally acceptable notion of good governance. It is a necessity in the ECOWAS region to prevent the spread of child soldiers.

Governments should and must implement the national, regional and international legislation or conventions on children. Let governments begin to take education seriously and then we will be seeing less child soldiering. The current situation of having fewer children in school is unacceptable. With good governance we should be in positions to provide more funds to education rather than security. This is part of the task of civil society.

### **Reintegration**

Demobilisation and reintegration is a slow process which demands consistent government and donor support and commitment. West Africa needs to learn from the lessons of