

Below-age children are also being forcibly recruited and manipulated by adults. Hence the urgent need to place priority on demobilizing them and to introduce specific reintegration activities centred on education and vocational training in order to give them the best possible chance of rebuilding their future.

The IOM's interventions in demobilization and reintegration programs and in providing assistance for displaced persons and refugees in Mozambique, Angola, Rwanda and more recently, in the context of preparations for similar programs for Guinea-Bissau and the Republic of the Congo have taken, and continue to take, consideration of the effort required to assist minors.

To cite only two examples in Angola, in the context of the demobilization of UNITA's billeted troops and the surplus troops of the Angolan Armed Forces (AAF), the IOM participated in the demobilization of below-age soldiers and provided assistance to help them return to and reintegrate with their communities of origin. Their demobilization started even before the general demobilization process, because these were vulnerable, at-risk groups concerning whom there was no dispute over the eligibility criteria. In all, 360 minors from the Angolan Armed Forces and 4,734 minors from UNITA were assisted with their families, when necessary. A data base was sketched out and handed over to the authorities at the end of the operation.

In Rwanda, a large number of minor children who had been evacuated to Italy during the crisis period were repatriated by the IOM in the family reunification context, with all the research and readjustment follow-up entailed in this.

At the present time, in West Africa, Liberia and Sierra Leone are the big problem areas.

In these countries, thousands of children are victims of civil wars that have dragged on for many years now ; they are living under the difficult conditions of internally displaced persons or as refugees in camps in the border countries ; others are being used as soldiers in a fighting capacity. The difficulties with financing our activities have necessitated a pause in our activities, but we are in the process of negotiating our return. According to the UN's March report on the humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone, 2 300 children are still in captivity there, primarily in the Northern Province. However, UNICEF and various NGOs have already taken charge of 703 children, 80% of whom are former combattants.

By way of the organizations concerned (ECOWAS, international organizations and NGOs) the international community has since the onset of the hostilities constantly been alerting public opinion to the need for international mobilization to end the suffering of civilian populations, especially women and children, who are the main victims of the daily violence being perpetrated in these countries.