
CONGO, Republic of

Republic of Congo

Population: 4.0 million (2.2 million under 18)

Government armed forces: 10,000

Compulsory recruitment age: no conscription

Voluntary recruitment age: 18

Voting age: 18

Optional Protocol: not signed

Other treaties ratified (see glossary):

CRC, GC AP I and II, ICC, ILO 138, ILO 182, ACRWC

There were no reports of under-18s in the armed forces. An unknown number of child soldiers and former child soldiers were thought to remain with an armed group.

Context

Implementation of the March 2003 peace agreement between the government and the National Resistance Council (Conseil national de résistance, CNR) (known as the Ninjas) was repeatedly delayed. The situation in the Pool region in south-eastern Congo, the stronghold of the Ninjas, remained particularly difficult. By March 2007 security appeared to have improved, but the fragility of the improvement was underlined by the failure fully to implement disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs or to control the spread of small arms.¹ In January 2007 CNR leader Frédéric Bitsangou, alias Pasteur Ntoumi, announced that the CNR had applied to be registered as a political party and committed itself to disarmament.² In May Frédéric Bitsangou was appointed by presidential decree as general delegate in charge of promotion of peace and post-conflict reconstruction, but failed to take up his post as expected in September after a dispute with the government.³

Former CNR child soldiers, not always under the control of their former leaders, were reported to be a major factor in the insecurity in the Pool region through their involvement in armed robbery. UNICEF expressed concern that the presence of armed elements increased the threat of sexual violence.⁴

Government

National recruitment legislation and practice

There had been no conscription since 1969. Enlistment in the armed forces was voluntary with a minimum recruitment age of 18.⁵

Armed groups

No recent information was available on the recruitment of child soldiers by the CNR. The vast majority of former child soldiers who had fought with the CNR during the conflict were by 2007 believed to be over 18. However, child soldiers were reported as guarding the railway in the Pool region, suggesting that recruitment in some form may have been continuing.⁶ Estimates dating from 2003 were that some 1,500–1,800 former child soldiers required demobilization, but the reliability of these figures had not been established.⁷

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

The governmental commission for the reintegration of former combatants, Haut Commissariat à la Réinsertion des Ex-combattants, estimated that over 4,600 child soldiers took part in Congo's conflicts between 1993 and 2002.⁸

Between February 2002 and December 2004, 965 former child soldiers, most of whom were by then over 18, were among 9,000 former combatants taking part in an Emergency Demobilization and Reintegration Program (Projet d'Urgence de Démobilisation et de Réinsertion, PDR).⁹

After significant delays due in part to the difficulty in establishing the number of beneficiaries and a financial management system, a National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion Program (Programme national de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion, PNDDR), partially funded by the Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP),¹⁰ received its first disbursement in October 2006. It was expected that by July 2007 reintegration support would have been delivered to some 1,000 former combatants who had self-demobilized.¹¹ Up to 30,000 former combatants, including 19,000 from the 1998–9 conflict, were expected to benefit from the PNDDR.¹²

Of former child soldiers to have been provisionally identified, 517 were girls and 1,261 boys.¹³

Building on the lessons of other MDRP-supported DDR programs in the region, the PNDDR explicitly recognized the necessity of addressing the particular needs of former child soldiers, recruited as children but demobilized as young adults. It proposed that particular attention be paid to psychosocial counselling and support, life skills, independent living skills, employment orientation and guidance for former child soldiers up to the age of 21 in the case of males and 25 in the case of females.¹⁴ The PNDDR also recognized the special attention required to address the needs of former girl child soldiers, including en-

couraging participation in the program, adapting psychosocial support to female trauma profiles and conflict experiences, providing appropriate apprenticeships and training, and sensitizing spouses and families.¹⁵

A project on Prevention and Reintegration of Children involved in Armed Conflict was implemented between 2004 and 2007 by the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) of the International Labour Organization (ILO). It focused on socio-economic reintegration support and preventing recruitment of children by armed groups. Approximately 200 former child soldiers, more than 70 of them girls, received professional training or work placements, while over 650 vulnerable children, including more than 200 girls, participated in the anti-recruitment program.¹⁶

In 2006 an estimated 34,000 weapons were illegally held in Congo by members of former armed groups as well as by the civilian population. In September 2005, 507 firearms and over 3,600 pieces of ammunition were destroyed, and weapons collected between December 2005 and March 2006 from 800 civilians and former soldiers were destroyed in March 2006 through an internationally funded weapons collection program.¹⁷

The CNR received an unknown sum of money from the Congolese government to disarm its combatants in the Pool region. Progress was not clear, and in May 2007 a first symbolic burning of collected weapons was postponed.¹⁸

Developments

In 2006 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern that despite international support for a DDR process, the physical and psychological recovery needs of many former child soldiers had not been met. It recommended that particular attention be paid to the specific needs of girls and to the reintegration of former child soldiers into the education system.¹⁹

At a February 2007 ministerial meeting in Paris, the Republic of Congo and 58 other states endorsed the Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups and the Paris Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups. The documents reaffirmed international standards and operational principles for protecting and assisting child soldiers and followed a wide-ranging global consultation jointly sponsored by the French government and UNICEF.

International standards

The Republic of Congo ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in May

2004 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in September 2006.

- 1 UNICEF Humanitarian Action Report 2007: Republic of Congo, www.unicef.org/haro7.
- 2 “Congo: Govt, agencies welcome decision to make rebel group political party”, IRIN, 1 February 2007, www.irinnews.org.
- 3 “Congo: Ntoumi ‘problem’ is solved, says president”, IRIN, 5 October 2007.
- 4 UNICEF, above note 1.
- 5 Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*, Rädde Barnen (Save the Children–Sweden), Stockholm, 1998; Guy S. Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, *Child Soldiers*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994.
- 6 Information from Haut Commissariat à la Réinsertion des Ex-combattants, May 2007.
- 7 Information from Lead Specialist, World Bank, April 2007.
- 8 Haut Commissariat, above note 6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) supports demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants in the greater Great Lakes region of central Africa (Angola, Burundi Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda). It is financed by the World Bank, 12 donor governments and the European Commission, and involves governments in the region, the UN and its agencies, and regional organizations. See www.mdrp.org.
- 11 World Bank, above note 7.
- 12 MDRP, Republic of Congo Activities at a Glance, www.mdrp.org, updated March 2007.
- 13 Haut commissariat, above note 6.
- 14 World Bank Document, *Technical Annex for a Program of US\$17 million from the MDRP multi-donor trust fund to the Republic of Congo for an emergency reintegration program*, Report No. 33787, 14 December 2005, www.mdrp.org.
- 15 World Bank, above note 7.
- 16 Le projet BIT/IPEC fait le bilan de ses activités, www.congo-site.com.
- 17 “Congo: small arms continue to threaten political transition and stability”, IRIN, 9 May 2006.
- 18 Haut commissariat, above note 6.
- 19 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Consideration of report submitted by the Republic of Congo, Concluding observations, UN Doc. CRC/C/COG/CO/1, 20 October 2006.