

L'Armée Populaire pour la restauration de la république et la démocratie (APRD)

Protective measures

The first measure undertaken by APRD at a general level was to prohibit the direct participation of children in combat. For us a child is someone who is completely dependent on his parents to be fed, to be cared for, to be dressed and housed, and has not yet reached the age of 18. Since children follow their parents, there is no question of determining the age of the children; their parents know how old they are. Participating in warfare is an activity restricted to adults. Children do not participate in preparatory meetings nor in any activity directly linked to combat. They are however sometimes used as lookouts, but since they do not participate in combat, they are neither trained nor do they carry arms.

The APRD bases are not like other bases of movements in rebellion. The combatants live with their families, so the children are with their parents. There are no written rules that prohibit the participation of children in combat. The particularity of the struggle which APRD is leading consists in protecting a territory. It is not a struggle to conquer power or territory. There is no offensive which would lead us to use children.

On the other hand, makeshift schools were rapidly set up in the brush and the children have been able to go to school sometimes with combatants as teachers. These makeshift schools exist wherever there are internally displaced people in the areas controlled by APRD. There may be about 50 of these schools. Children of both sexes (girls and boys) aged 6-12 years go to primary schools, and children aged 12 to 20 are organized in different levels for the middle and high schools. The teachers are often parents. They are remunerated by APRD and sometimes directly through contributions in kind by the parents, such as bags of manioc, of rice, etc. UNICEF, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) support the schools.

The challenges

Children are often very curious creatures. They get together in order to take part in combat without even the knowledge of the chiefs. They want to distinguish themselves during clashes in order to prove their usefulness and to justify their presence. They have no fear and do not realize they can be affected. They can be very happy during combat, but then afterwards will be very sad when they realize that they have lost friends or when they have to confront wounded comrades. The children become very perturbed and no longer react like children. Their faces are often sad. They spend their time reliving the different events in their heads. Protecting these children is often very difficult. They must be kept away from every kind of narcotic, and even alcohol and cigarettes. We have never had experiences of this kind.

In order to avoid this, the planning of combat is done in absolute secrecy. Even the women are often kept in the dark and the children even more. Those who manage to participate do so with their parents' complicity, and we then take measures against the parents. But it has become difficult; as you know, APRD is made up of families which are mostly autonomous and only unite in case of danger. The rest of the time, the combatants stay at home.

The international rules and processes

In our tradition protecting children is the obligation of every adult. APRD's leadership, especially its president, is very conversant with the international rules and processes concerning children in armed conflict.

There are no regular training sessions. But each time the APRD leadership visits a base and sees combatants under the age of 18, they are made to leave the ranks and their parents are visited and informed of the dangers of using child soldiers.

When we have the opportunity to meet combatants, we inform them of the consequences of accepting children in their ranks for the leaders individually and for the movement as a whole. This is why you will no longer find any child soldiers among the APRD's ranks.

The comprehensive knowledge by APRD's leadership of international humanitarian law has eased relations with different international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially UNICEF, to set up a special programme aimed at demobilizing child soldiers in the APRD. And yet the demobilization and the reinsertion of such children are not sufficient. A programme should be put into place with the following points:

A general information campaign to be repeated at regular intervals in the areas affected by the conflict and in the larger towns, in schools and in other places where children gather. This campaign should be supported by videos which show the detrimental consequences of children participating in conflicts.

Another campaign should be directed at adults over the radio and via television explaining the possible legal consequences of using children in conflicts. Former combat leaders may be useful in these campaigns. And finally there should be a plan for psychological follow-up and reinsertion of all children who participated directly in the conflict. They should be seen at least once or twice a year to monitor their integration into society. One of the goals of this plan should be to check whether demobilized children maintain contact with their former comrades and their chiefs and to break those contacts.

Cooperation

The APRD cooperates well with a number of NGOs and principally with UNICEF on the subject of the demobilization of child soldiers. Our movement is about to cease its activities in a few months and we are at the stage of disarmament and demobilization. UNICEF has chosen a specialized NGO with whom we have been working for several months. They built

a camp and collected all the children there. They have been giving them training and give them a kit before they are sent back to join their families. To our knowledge there is no mechanism in place that measures the children's reinsertion.

The UN List

It was while we were reading the reports of the Secretary-General of the UN that we realized that we no longer had children in our ranks. We don't have an action plan and neither have we signed a convention with UNICEF to be withdrawn from the list of movements that use child soldiers. We were disagreeably surprised to learn that APRD was on the list, because APRD has never recruited children. On the contrary, we took measures to protect these children who are our own children. It is because the war was brought to us that the children suffered the consequences. Unfortunately, we have not yet written to UNICEF and we do not know to whom we should address this correspondence.

Can you help us to sign this action plan?¹

¹ As per this request, Geneva Call forwarded the contact details of the SRSG-CAAC to Jean Damafouth, President of APRD.