

Child soldiering as genocide: The case of Sierra Leone



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Introduction

The Sierra Leonean civil war was an eleven-year conflict that claimed roughly 50,000 lives and displaced approximately two million Sierra Leonean citizens. The conflict began in 1991 with the formation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The organization's actions created nationwide instability that led to the complete overthrow of the government and the seizure of the country's many diamond mines. The Revolutionary United Front utilized genocidal tactics to gain control of Sierra Leone and oppose both the government and international forces that attempted to demilitarize them. I will be focusing on RUF's forcible recruitment and use of children in combat and as sexual slaves. Children were taken from their homes and subjected to a decade of brainwashing to become loyal subordinates to the Revolutionary United Front, with many children spending over half of their lives with the organization by the time they were demilitarized in 2002.

UN Definition

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such;

- a) Killing members of the group.
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.
- d) in part.
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

(United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 1948)

- The UN definition of genocide is meant to be applied in a wider manner than we currently use it.
- Though children are not included as a targeted group in the definition, they are implicitly acknowledged by the clauses.

Applicable Clauses

b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.

Child soldiers were forced to take drugs that would turn them into fearless soldiers.

Girls captured by the Revolutionary United Front were held in the camps to serve officers and male combatants sexually. Many girl soldiers became pregnant by RUF commanders.

Boy soldiers were victims just as much as they were perpetrators of violence (killings, participation in forced rape of girl soldiers).

Carvings were made in child combatant's skin to mark them as RUF property.

c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole.

RUF killed doctors and burned medical centers, making access to post-war medical and psychiatric services nearly impossible.

The group knew that by mentally harming the child and destroying chances of rehabilitation, they would be able to successfully make Sierra Leone a failed nation with children being isolated and unwelcome to return to normal society.

e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

RUF mass-kidnapped children and enlisted them into their army, often making them kill their families before departing to cut ties to their homes.

Conclusion

The connection needs to be made between the use of children in warfare in Sierra Leone during the civil war and the definition of genocide. There was clear intent by the Revolutionary United Front to destroy the future of Sierra Leone by brainwashing the nation's youth to become combatants and sex slaves raised on practices of violence, leaving them unable to form meaningful relationships or reestablish family dynamics to carry on the future of their nation.

References

United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. (1948). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

Richard Maclure & Myriam Denov (2006) "I Didn't Want to Die So I Joined Them": Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18:1, 119-135, DOI: 10.1080/09546550500384801