

Ishmeal Alfred Charles

I was born in Freetown but spent almost all holiday times in Kono District of Sierra Leone. Ours was a peaceful life until in 1994 when the rebel soldiers came through Sierra Leone and were aiming to attack Freetown. My mother had sent me from Freetown, which is clear across the country on the coast, to Koidu Town, the capital of the Kono District, where my father lived. She thought I would be safer there. Instead, rebels attacked Kono two weeks after I arrived. They tried to force me to fight for them, but I pretended to be too confused to understand the workings of a gun. So, they made me a laborer (carrying looted goods on my head) instead.

I was forced to carry heavy loads of stolen loot from town to town. I may have been spared the experience of committing atrocity, but not from witnessing it. You'd see them in groups, take a girl and go into the room and they come back out, three men, all sweating, and you heard the girl crying and shouting. Sometimes you just hear a gunshot, like *bam.*" Clearly the desire was to recruit us all into the fighting forces. Part of their method for getting children to do what they wanted to do was to force us to take drugs. Those few of us who pretended we didn't understand guns and how to use them, they used as laborers, but the others had to do terrible things: the rebels instructed children to kill, burn houses, loot and cause other mayhem. You can never unsee these atrocities.

I managed to escape once, running into the bush in a moment when the fighters were distracted. I joined up with a small band of fellow refugees walking north toward the safety of the Guinea border. But as the group passed through a town along the way, a new troop of rebels appeared and recaptured us. This time, the rebels lined me up with the other Internally Displaced persons and prospective refugees in a single-file row. "*You want the long sleeve or the short sleeve?*" they asked. That was when they started cutting off the hands of people. Cutting off peoples' limbs - in most cases their hands - was one of the brutal strategies used by members of the Revolutionary United Front to terrify people into joining and supporting them. Over 27,000 Sierra Leoneans are estimated to have had one or more of their limbs amputated by the rebels during the 10-year civil war.

Because I was very young, I was spared that fate, but I continued to have to work like a slave the second time I fell in their hands. They used us as cooks, looters, collectors of loot in the towns as they were breaking into shops. Some of the people were mining diamonds when the rebels advanced. And when they captured a new town, they forced boys from that town to mine for them and they used the diamonds and other minerals to fuel the civil war. This is why our conflict is sometimes called a Blood Diamond conflict.

Because parts of Sierra Leone were more of a jungle where the primary desire is to survive, many joined without coercion - some to protect properties of their families, some to loot others and enrich themselves, and some others simply out of revenge for a hurtful feeling they had against a neighbor, a teacher, state institution or a family member. The majority of children they recruited were boys and they were forced to become child soldiers, but they also captured girls. Some were forced to fight but they were mainly used as "bush wives."

Eventually I was able to escape a second time. I was captured once more by local militias before being released. Kids who were child soldiers were suspected by everyone. I was almost killed by the militia when I came home, because they saw a scar on my finger which was the result of a bottle that broke in my hand. But the militia thought this was a scar from shooting with the rebels. It has been one of the war's enduring tragedies that not every former child soldier was welcomed home. Even though they had been forced into the war, they were punished by their own communities when they returned. They mostly ended up taking drugs, being very violent, dropping out of school. Without education, those children grew up and went into low level work such as commercial motorbike riding or poda poda (mini-bus) drivers. Others became part of the new security forces for the government or went into private security companies. Some were so damaged by the child soldiering that they turned to illegal activities such as selling drugs, smuggling, and pimping. When I returned home, my mother embraced me. She told me that none of what had happened to me was my fault, and sent me back to school. My mother was the closest friend I've ever had.

After I graduated from secondary school, I went on to university in 2009. There I met people from a youth intervention project, working to help children and youth recover from the civil war. It immediately appealed to me. I said, 'Oh thank God, this is exactly something that I want to work with. We always say we've disarmed the people in this country who were using guns, but we are using education to disarm (change) the minds of the people.'

Since I began this work, I led a team of almost 50 that provided aid and managed a camp setting at Susan's Bay where over 7,000 individuals were left displaced by a major fire.

I also co-founded and lead the 'The Sick Pikin Project' to raise funds to help children with critical medical conditions. To date, I have helped over 2,058 children who needed medical assistance. We have even sent some to India for treatments we could not provide here. I continue to help helpless, sick and impoverished children and babies. The NGO I work for is housed in a small complex of concrete buildings painted dark green and bright turquoise, located not far from Freetown's famous Cotton Tree where, it is said, the freed slaves who helped found the city in the eighteenth century rested upon their arrival.