
Conference - ENFANTS, PAS SOLDATS
(children, not soldiers)

University of Laval,
Amnesty International, Faculty of Law, CIRAM, CRCJIPDH

This conference took place on 22 November 2016 at the University of Laval. It was organized by Amnesty International and was sponsored by the Faculty of Law, the *Chaire de recherche du Canada sur la justice internationale et les droits fondamentaux* (CRCJIPDH) and the *centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur l'Afrique et le Moyen-Orient* (CIRAM).

Two panelists were invited at this conference: Ferdinand Djayerombe Vaweke, an independent consultant in matters regarding African conflicts who is the current President of the NGO Pax Christi (Montreal) and Junior Nzita Nsuami, a former child soldier and the President of the NGO Paix pour l'enfance - A happy family. He is also the United Nations' good will ambassador on the prevention of child soldier recruitment in DRC.

The conference was organized in two parts. In the first part, Mr. Vaweke laid out the historical and political context in African Great Lakes countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, DRC and Uganda. He highlighted some major but localized conflicts spread outside the borders of those countries through the proximity and the porousness of borders to become regional conflicts. He highlighted that the conflict in Eastern DRC used to involve more than 10 countries and was called the first African World War. Mr. Vaweke also emphasized that various exchanges persisted between those countries even in period of conflicts and political tensions. Those exchanges included goods, people, weapons and even armed groups.

The second part of the conference consisted of a personal testimony of Mr. Nsuami about his experience as a former child soldier. He indicated that he was abducted with other students from his boarding school when he was twelve years old by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL). Then, he was sent to a centre for training as a soldier. However, he highlighted that he was not taught about humanitarian principles of war, he was only taught about how to kill and to destroy. Mr. Nsuami spent ten years in various armed groups and he lost many friends. The only thing that helped him was his faith and his vibrant hope to go back to school one day. In 2006, he finally convinced his superior commander that he wanted to go back to school and he was issued a document proving that he no longer belonged to an armed group. Few years later, Mr. Nsuami created an NGO called Paix sur l'enfance – A happy Family- to offer to orphan children a second chance in life by funding children's education. This NGO currently takes care of 140 children.

Contributions and knowledge from this conference

This conference was beneficial for my personal understanding of the dynamics of armed conflicts in the African Great Lakes Regions.

Moreover, this conference emphasized the complex realities and positions of child soldiers during armed conflicts. As a matter of fact, this conference highlighted some often overlooked major factors that may also explain the development of child soldiering such as poverty and questions of power. Finally, this conference highlighted some flaws in process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration for child soldiers and especially girl soldiers.
