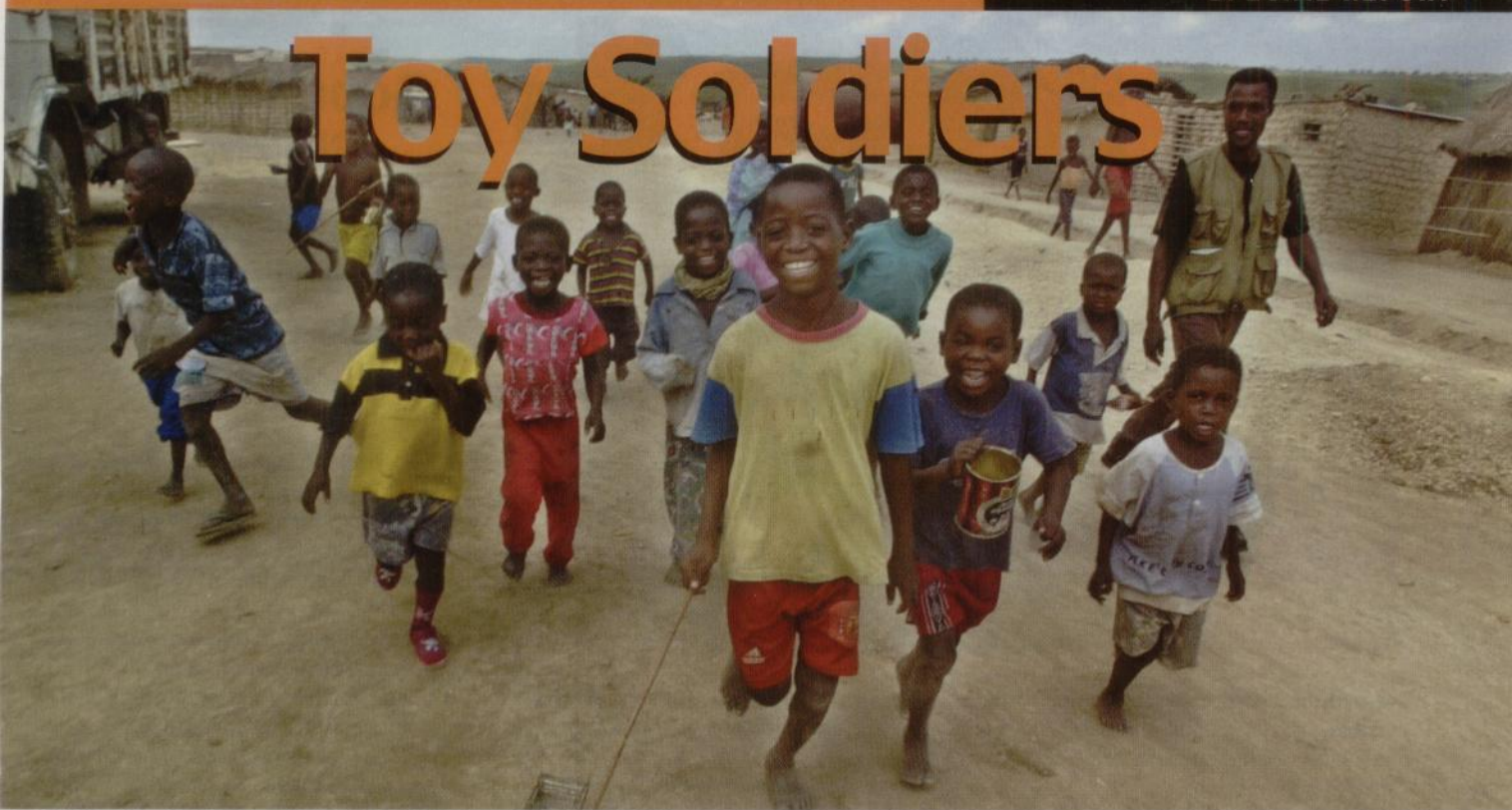


Toy Soldiers



Olara Otunnu, the United Nations Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict has seen things first hand that most of us could not even imagine in our worst nightmares. As Kofi Annan's special envoy, he has travelled the world championing the rights of children who have become the innocent and most gravely affected victims of war in many of the world's longest running conflicts.

In Africa, in particular, where 42 of the continent's 53 countries are at war, children are bearing the brunt of adult disputes. War, coupled with disease and abject poverty, are leaving their scars on future generations who have known nothing but conflict. Over the past decade, two million children were killed, six million seriously injured, one million orphaned and twenty million displaced through wars around the world.

But hope in the form of a pragmatic drive to protect and enshrine the rights of children caught up in war situations is gaining momentum and has already yielded results. In the last few months there has been much activity in United Nations and diplomatic circles to highlight the plight of the world's children affected by war.

In February, an historic declaration pledging the eradication of the use of child soldiers was signed by an unprecedented number of conflict-ridden states. In May, the United Nations held a 'Spe-

Poverty, disease and war makes Africa one of the worst places for a child to grow up. After hostilities end, there begins the process of rebuilding the future generation.

By
Sylvia Arthur,
London

cial Session on Children' in New York to discuss and agree on a plan to improve the lives of young people, especially those affected by conflict and disease. The outcome of the three-day session was a pledge to reduce mortality rates of children under five and mothers after childbirth by at least a third by 2010. Just a few days after the end of the conference, Otunnu headed off to Angola on a seven-day fact-finding mission.

Angola's problems are well documented. The length of its protracted and

African children are the innocent victims of war and rarely have access to essential social services

bloody civil war is comparable only to that of Columbia in South America. Following a turbulent pre- and post-colonial history characterised by almost half a century of war, the prospect of peace is now firmly on the horizon after the April 4 ceasefire agreement that followed the death of Jonas Savimbi, the UNITA rebel leader.

Civilians, including international donor agencies and world governments, have condemned the country's leadership for ignoring and exacerbating the plight of its citizens. Despite oil revenues of \$3bn, the government has failed to invest in the ailing public sector.

A mere 5.7 percent of the 2001 budget was given over to health and sanitation while just 5.8 percent was invested in education. More people have died from malnutrition, disease and poor water and sanitation than from direct conflict. It is hoped that now the war has come to an end, more money will be directed at social services as opposed to the vast sums that were given over to defence spending at the height of hostilities.

Angola's humanitarian record during the course of the civil war is a shameful catalogue of neglect and despair. Angola has been dubbed one of the worst places for children to grow up in the world. It ►



earned the unenviable epithet due to the visible and devastating impact the war has had on its citizens. The statistics speak for themselves.

One in three Angolan children die before the age of five, children under five face a greater risk of poor health than anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa and up to 70 percent are not registered, making access to health and other social services difficult.

According to a group of NGO's whose collective experiences have been collated into a statement known as the 'Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict,' the country has amongst the worst basic indicators in the world. The Watchlist, which has profiled some of the worst war-torn countries to date including Afghanistan and Burundi, reports that one mother in every 50 dies while giving birth and that infant mortality is estimated to be as high as 172 deaths per 1000 births.

Forty-two percent of Angolan children are underweight and the rate of immunisation is among the lowest in the world. Malaria is responsible for the death of 50 percent of children under five. Adult literacy, which stands at a mere 35 percent, is well below the continent's average of 56 percent.

But the effects of the war are not just physical. The psychological scars are equally destructive. Although the long-term behavioral and social impact is yet to be revealed, the immediate effects - trauma symptoms like fright, insecurity and disturbed sleep - are exhibited by a generation of children who have never known peace. It is known that previous exposure to violence puts youngsters at a

An historic UN declaration to end the use of child soldiers was a landmark

greater risk of future involvement in violence and estimates say that up to 3 000 children are in the ranks of the national army, despite the minimum age of recruitment being 20. Rebel UNITA forces have also actively recruited child soldiers.

Otunnu warns that Angola is on the brink of a massive humanitarian crisis which, if not averted, could result in a national disaster. Malnutrition and internally displaced persons are a major obstacle to the new peace. Those emerging from previous UNITA stronghold areas are the worst affected. Reconciliation and rehabilitation are the key words in the country's reconstruction. ●

Angolan children – the facts

- 4 000 000 displaced people, half of these are children.
- More than 100 000 children remain separated from their families, between 50 000 and 100 000 children are orphans, the exact number of those who are street kids is unknown.
- Thousands of children were used as child soldiers during the war.
- Of the victims of landmines, some 70 000 maimed persons, more than half are children.
- More than 60 percent of children are unable to attend school.
- 5 000 schools and 60 percent of hospitals and health centres have been destroyed during the war.

Good news for Children

Olara Otunnu says the end of war in Angola will save the children

NewsAfrica: What do you assess the needs of Angolan children to be in the wake of 26 years of civil war and the peace accord?

Otunnu: The ending of the civil war itself is the biggest and most important good news for the children of Angola. If you think that the war's gone on for 30 years and for ten years before that there was the war of independence, that is almost forty years non-stop of war. There are several measures that need to be put in place to benefit children. The most immediate and pressing is the humanitarian crisis. Children, who constitute the majority of the population, are emerging from the previously UNITA controlled areas. I met a number of them in hospitals, in camps for the displaced and in transit sites and they are terribly and severely malnourished. They are suffering from all manner of diseases; malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia, measles, skin conditions. So, the most urgent need is how to mobilise food, medicine and water to provide relief to those children and save lives. The worst conditions are in the wardering and family areas, as they are called. They're expecting 55 ex-military personnel from UNITA and 350 000 minors in these areas and right now, their condition is the worst and requires immediate action. Beyond the immediate, I see two stages of response that will bring relief and rehabilitation. Rehabilitating schools and hospitals is crucial. Five thousand schools have been destroyed in the course of the war and more than 60 percent of school-going age children in Angola have no access to school. The rehabilitation of health centres and hospitals, especially in the rural areas, is very important. Again, 60 percent of medical centres and hospitals in the country were destroyed in the war. So, it's little wonder that children are dying from preventable diseases. And, then, mobilising resources for nutrition, whether getting food from outside or beginning to produce locally is

also vital. These three things are most important following the emergency response to the present crisis.

Do you consider the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Angola to be a short or long term proposition?

It's a long-term proposition. That is why the most fundamental and crucial stage of rehabilitation is the third stage, which is the rebuilding, reconstruction and healing of the country. In any programme of post-conflict rebuilding, it is crucial that the concerns, interests and needs of children are absolutely central. This means, in part, that the government and the international community should make a conscious choice to invest in the children and youth – their education, vocational training, things that give them a future and engage them. It means, in part, actually designating significant resources and money. During the war, Angola, understandably, spent a significant proportion of national resources on conflict and ensuring security. But now, with the war over, one of the absolute peace dividends for young people will be the redirection of that part of national expenditure to the social sector. This means schooling, health and nutrition.

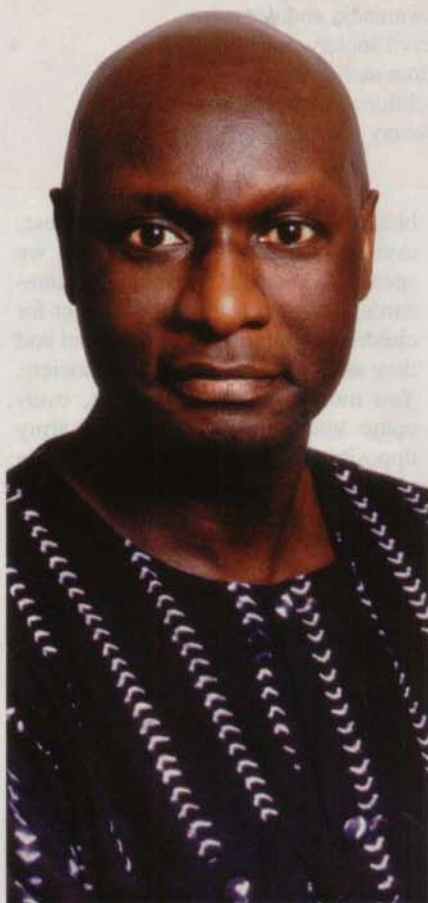
How much will this effort involve the international community and how much will it be a local initiative?

The spearheading of the effort has to be Angolan, by the government, the people, civil society, churches, NGOs. Angola is not a poor country. It's well endowed and earning significant resources from oil. The national allocation of budgetary expenditure should favour and privilege children and the youth and their rehabilitation and recuperation because they've paid the highest price in this war. Giving them hope and a future is one of the best ways Angola can guarantee the new-found peace. So, it must come from the leadership but it doesn't mean the international community washes its hands of Angolan children. I met with the donors when I was in Luanda and made a direct appeal to them. They have a very important role to play in the immediate emergency situation and an equally important role in the long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction, supporting the government and supplementing the resources being deployed by the Angolans, not taking its place, but sup-

plementing it.

What commitments have you had from international organisations?

As far as helping with mobilising food and medicine for the immediate emergency, the answer was 'yes' and it was



Olara Otunnu was recently awarded the German Africa Prize for his work

an unequivocal 'yes'. They are ready and they see why this is so important.

How about international governments?

Yes, this will be mainly donor countries like the Nordic countries, the UK, the USA, countries that traditionally provide international aid. These were the ambassadors that we discussed the issue with.

Has there been any difference in opinion between Angolans and the international community?

A: There has been no divergence of view. I think everybody welcomes the fact that, on this occasion, the end of

the war has been an intra-Angolan affair. The Angolans themselves acted as the protagonists, worked it out and decided to take the step to end the war.

How stable is the ceasefire?

The big good news is the fact that every Angolan of all political persuasions affirms with complete confidence their conviction that, on this occasion, the ending of the war is definitive. They anticipate difficulties in the process but they do not anticipate a return to war. For a country that's been at bitter civil war for thirty years and had many false starts before, this is an earth shaking development. We've started a new chapter. This is a new era, war is behind us. And, alongside that, I was very impressed by how much the tissues of national union and cohesion has survived the pressures of the war after thirty years. Angolans of all shades of opinion seem confident that they can achieve reconciliation and can reach out to each other. Those who were impressing upon me the distress and the terrible conditions of those who have just emerged from the UNITA controlled areas were not UNITA people but people who have lived in the government-controlled zone, most likely they're supporters of the government. But they were unanimous in saying, 'We can't allow a tragedy to occur. We can't allow these people to die. We can't allow the children to starve. Something must be done to provide food and medicine for them right way.' I was very impressed by this.

How much of a problem is the massive displacement that has taken place both internally and into neighbouring countries?

It is a big problem. Angola has one of the largest displaced populations. Within the country it's four million. It's got about 800 000 people who are refugees outside. But, Angola is a very big country. It can absorb all these people in no time at all. The difficulties are, one, the question of landmines. Landmines have extensively contaminated the countryside so identifying the landmine areas, isolating them and then demining in order to have free areas where people can settle, will be important. De-mining itself will take a long time and so will getting the agricultural areas to be opened up and providing seeds to people so that those who come back can

Otunnu's blueprint

- The rehabilitation of schools and health centres;
- An increase in spending in the social sector, particularly health, education and nutrition;
- The protection of children, in particular the ratification by the Government of Angola of international treaties prohibiting the use of child soldiers and banning the use of landmines;
- An expedited process for the identification, rehabilitation and reintegration of former child combatants;
- Programs for landmine awareness and demining;
- Strengthening the role of civil society in advocating and protecting children and youth;
- Placing the concerns of children at the centre of post-conflict programs for recovery and reconstruction.

begin to produce their own food. One of the very unfortunate things in Angola today is the fact that almost all the food that the country consumes has to be imported. There's no reason for this but for the war because Angola's a very rich country, agriculturally speaking. The land is very rich, it's big, it's fertile, and it's criss-crossed by water. There's no reason why the Angolans can't produce food for themselves.

What do you define as 'the rights, needs and protection' of children?

It is the following things: First, that war does not mean a free for all. In every society the conduct of war had boundaries. There were things that were allowed and things that were for-

bidden. The most important of these, even in traditional society before we speak of modern international standards, is the protection and respect for children because they are innocent and they assure the future of every society. You mobilise yourself to face, overcome and disable the enemy army opposite you, not the women and the children. Today that has been radically undermined although we have international norms that provide for the protection of children and women in times of war. We need to ensure that in situations of ongoing war schools are not attacked, hospitals are not invaded

'Children want to be children. The most important thing is peace.'



and burned down, children are not recruited and used as child soldiers, landmines are not laid on the way to schools and the wells where children will step. These are protective measures in the midst of war. How to ensure the rehabilitation of schools, hospitals and psychological health is another central aspect to the overall rehabilitation of society that is emerging from war. We must ensure that children and youth participate in the shaping of policies and programs and plans that affect their lives and their future. This is part of their right.

What have you learnt from listening to the first hand experiences of children in Angola?

I met many categories of children. Street children, children suffering from malnutrition, children in the displaced camps, and I asked them, 'What do you think? What do you say?' They all want peace, definitive peace. They want food, medication and recreation. Children want to be children. They ask for toys, soccer balls, and crayons to do drawings. They ask for landmines to be removed. But, the most important thing for children is peace.

Moving away from Angola, what are your hopes for the future of children in Africa in general?

There are countries in Africa that are at peace who remain relatively united and are progressing and moving forward. Regrettably, there are too many countries where this is not the case, where you have a process of disintegration because of war. It's a catastrophe to have so many countries imploding. Most of these have faced decades of war. So, in some countries, especially those caught up in the midst of protracted civil conflict, we're witnessing a process of self-destruction. The kids I encounter elsewhere in the world are in the classroom, they're playing on the soccer field, learning to use the computer and surf the information highway. Where are Africa's children? Those in situations of conflict are in refugee camps and malnutrition centres. They're in the battlefield learning to use guns, to kill and to be killed. This is a process of self-destruction. That is why one cannot underscore sufficiently the imperative of waking up to this reality and stopping this process. ●