

International

DR Congo ex-child fighters trapped in a twilight zone

Unrest claims more than 3,380 lives

KANANGA: Hundreds of former child fighters in Democratic Republic of Congo's volatile Kasai region face an uncertain future, spurned by their families and their dreams brutally shattered. Antho Panu, a 17-year-old, remembers the day when Kamwina Nsapu militia came to her village to recruit fighters to battle government soldiers.

"After the war, we will build a house for your parents. You will have a better life when we win the war," one of them told her. "I wanted to make my parents happy so I accepted," Panu told AFP. "We went to enroll-me, my brother and a friend. There were some initiation rites and then we became Kamwina Nsapu fighters," the smiling and plump adolescent said, speaking in Tshiluba, the main language in Kasai. The vast Kasai region plunged into violence in September 2016, a month after government troops killed an influential local chieftain, Kamwina Nsapu, who was opposed to the government in Kinshasa.

The militia, which also goes by the same name, took in children as fighters. The unrest has claimed more than 3,380 lives and displaced at least 1.4 million people, according to the Catholic church. The escalating crisis has spurred efforts to raise funds for humanitarian aid for DR Congo, a mineral-rich yet deeply poor and chronically unstable country. Donors meeting in Geneva on Friday pledged \$528 million (428 million euros) a major step, but still less than a quarter of the \$2.2 billion that the UN says is needed to help people in the DRC and hundreds of thousands of refugees abroad.



At least 1.4 million people displaced

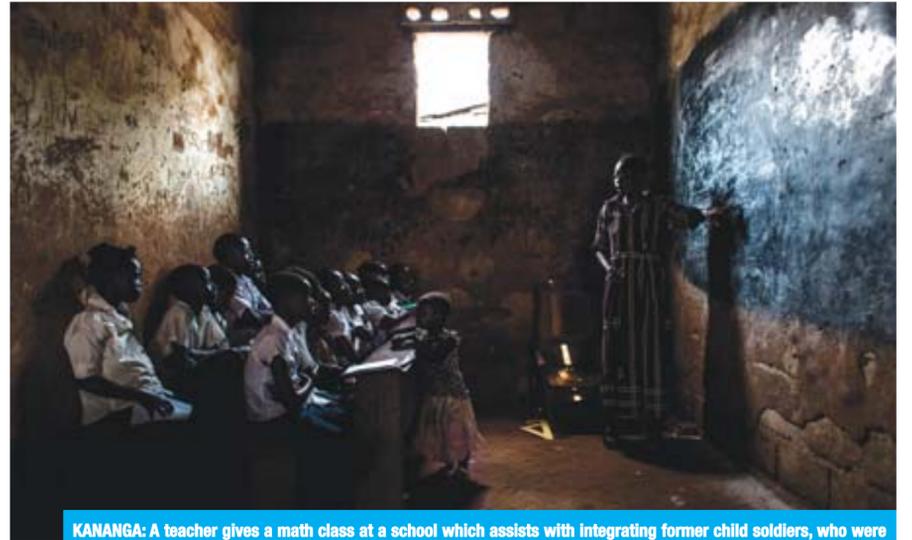
Ordeal by fire

Panu's parents didn't want her to go but eventually gave in. Like many other girls, she was sent to the front line. "The first time we went to fight the soldiers, several of us were killed," Panu said. Panu said she and her peers wore traditional magic fetishes that they believed would protect them. "We served as shields for the fighters. I was never hit by a bullet because

I respected the taboos: I did not eat meat or certain vegetables and I also shunned oil that had been used for frying," she said. But she left their ranks when she learned that army soldiers were rounding up children who were fighting alongside militiamen. Panu returned to her family. A sister took her in and then made her go to a priest who stripped off her magic charms. She dreams of joining a music school and "becoming a big artist." "This time around, I want to earn my living properly and not harm anyone. I want to please my parents," she said.

'Just want to be normal'

But Angele, also 17, whose full name was withheld, was not so lucky. A soldier's daughter, she left the militia last year and went to live with her uncle and aunt. "My aunt always regarded me as a criminal. She always said she didn't want a fighter in the house," Angele said. "I just want to become the normal girl I used to be," she said in a quavering voice. "I want people to see me as just a girl and love me like they used to." About 500 child soldiers - 93 of them girls - have left the militia since April last year and registered with the UNICEF-supported National Catholic Child Association (BNCE) in Kananga, a major city in



KANANGA: A teacher gives a math class at a school which assists with integrating former child soldiers, who were affiliated with the local anti-government militia. —AFP

Kasai. Housed at the centre, many children show signs of trauma and have behavioral problems including aggression, panic attacks, insomnia and bouts of crying, said Rebecca, a woman working at the centre.

"We provide therapy on a case-by-case basis," she said. Some children are still being tracked by the authorities, according to the BNCE. Kasai prosecutors for instance want to jail 11 ex-child fighters who had

been released from custody, it said. Djikenga Ilungu said he had been recruited by force and escaped when he learnt that "NGOs were asking children to leave" the Kamwina Nsapu.

"We've done and seen horrible things-killed people, seen others die. It was really very difficult. I now hope to learn tailoring and want a normal life and to be accepted by others," the 17-year-old said.—AFP

Syria airstrikes punitive but not game-changing

BEIRUT: Western powers have carried out their biggest attack yet against the Syrian regime but analysts say the strikes were a mostly "punitive" measure that will not change the course of the conflict. Exactly a week after a suspected chemical attack that medics say killed dozens of civilians in the rebel town of Douma, the United States, France and Britain acted on their retaliation threats. Warships, fighters jets and cruise missiles were used in the coordinated operation that struck military infrastructure and sites allegedly used to develop and manufacture chemical weapons.

US President Donald Trump hailed the operation as "perfectly executed" but analysts stressed its scope was limited and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's military strength remained virtually intact. "This is punitive, a disciplinary measure. The message carried by the strikes is more political than military," said Sasha al-Alou, a Syria expert at the Turkey-based Omran think tank. Paris said that Moscow, the main ally of Damascus, had been warned of the strikes.

And the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the targeted sites had been evacuated before the missiles struck before dawn on Saturday. "The goal was mainly political: it was to bring back deterrence and show the Syrian regime it no longer had impunity," said Bruno Tertrais, from the Foundation for Strategic Research, a French think tank.

A year ago, 59 US cruise missiles had been fired at a regime base in northern Syria in response to a sarin gas attack that had killed more than 80 civilians. "The balance of power remains unchanged," said Karim Bitar, from the



NAJAF: Iraqi men hold their national flag as they attend a demonstration against the western bombings of Syria yesterday in Najaf. —AFP

Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Affairs. "All Russian sites were carefully avoided. The West wanted to avert an escalation and all-out conflict," he added.

The Western strikes will do little to slow the military reconquest which, with backing from Russia and Iran, has seen Assad reclaim more than half of Syrian territory. The use of chemical weapons, such as chlorine, sparks international indignation but is far from being the most lethal weapon in the regime's arsenal. "What is the benefit of such an action by the West if it does not yield the immediate halting of all violence and crimes against the Syrian people," said Raphael Pitti, a French doctor and activist.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 1,700 civilians were killed in a two-month, Russian-backed assault to retake Eastern Ghouta, an area that stayed a rebel-held enclave on Assad's doorstep for five years. Only a fraction of the victims are thought to have been killed by chemical weapons. Most of them died under a rain of conventional bombs and missiles, as well as crude improvised munitions known as barrel bombs. The main town in Eastern Ghouta, and the last to have escaped government control, is Douma, the site of the alleged chemical attack on April 7 that prompted the unprecedented Western reaction.—AFP

Syrian army hails full recapture of Ghouta's enclave

DAMASCUS: The Syrian army has declared that all anti-regime forces have left Eastern Ghouta, after a blistering two month offensive on the rebel enclave on the outskirts of the capital. The announcement, which represents a key strategic victory for President Bashar Al-Assad, came just hours after US-led strikes pounded Syrian government targets in response to a suspected chemical attack on the enclave's main town of Douma.

"All terrorists have left Douma, the last of their hold-outs in Eastern Ghouta," state news agency SANA quoted an army spokesman as saying Saturday, using the regime's usual term for rebels. "Areas of Eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus have been fully cleansed of terrorism," an army spokesman also said in a statement delivered on state television. At the start of the year Eastern Ghouta was a sprawling semi-rural area just east of Damascus, home to almost 400,000 inhabitants, which had already endured several years under a government siege that slashed access to food, medicine and other goods.

The Syrian government and allied forces launched a massive assault on February 18 to retake the enclave, which had been out of regime control since 2012. The intense bombardment killed some 1,700 civilians according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, and pulverized the area, reducing many neighborhoods to rubble. Damascus has been accused of carrying out an April 7 chemical weapons attack on Douma, the final part of the enclave where rebels were balking at a Russian-brokered deal to evacuate them to northern Syria.

The United States, France and Britain responded

Saturday with pre-dawn strikes on alleged regime chemical weapons sites. The allies have since signaled their resolve to return to diplomacy, launching a new bid at the United Nations to investigate chemical weapons attacks in the country. A team of experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is in Damascus and expected to investigate the site of the suspected chemical attack.

Strategic target

Assad had made the reconquest of Eastern Ghouta a strategic goal. The Islamist group Jaish al-Islam rebel group, which was in control of Douma, has said it only agreed to leave because of the Syrian government's purported use of toxic chemicals on Douma, which medics said killed more than 40 people. The group has slammed the Western strikes as insufficient, as Assad maintains his grip on the war-ravaged country. "Punishing the instrument of the crime while keeping the criminal-a farce," wrote Mohammad Alloush, a key member of Jaish al-Islam. Syria and Russia have both denied using chemical weapons and said the claims were fabrications used to justify Western military action.

Mine clearing

The two-month assault on Eastern Ghouta sparked an international outcry, with the head of the United Nations describing the conditions endured by civilians there as "hell on Earth". Few convoys of humanitarian aid were allowed in while rights groups and aid organizations also condemned the targeting of medical facilities across the besieged territory.

Dozens of civilians in government-controlled central Damascus were also killed by rockets and mortar rounds fired from Eastern Ghouta by the rebel groups that held it. On Saturday Syria's internal security forces entered Douma, after the last convoy of buses transporting members of Jaish Al-Islam and their relatives left the town. The Syrian army said a clean up operation was under way in the battered enclave. "Engineering units are starting to clear the mines and explosives



DOUMA: People walk down a street in the Eastern Ghouta town of Douma after Syrian government forces entered the last rebel bastion. —AFP

sewn by the terrorists in the town to allow the rest of the units to secure the liberated areas and prepare them for the return of civilians to their homes," the army spokesman said.

Thousands of civilians who fled the offensive have already returned to areas previously retaken by the army and allied forces. A large number of Eastern

Ghouta residents were bussed to the northern province of Idlib, which is largely outside government control and hosts several jihadist and other rebel groups.

The civil war started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests. Assad has managed to cling on to power, retaking swathes of territory with the help of ally Russia.—AFP