



Between Fear and Hope
Child Soldiers as Refugees in Germany

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terre des hommes
Help for Children in Distress
Ruppenkampstr. 11 a
49084 Osnabrück
Germany

Phone + 49 (0) 5 41/71 01-0
Fax + 49 (0) 5 41/70 72 33
E-Mail info@tdh.de
www.tdh.de

Donations account
Volksbank Osnabrück eG
BIC: GENODEF1OSV
IBAN: DE20 2659 0025 0700 8007 00

Federal Association for
Unaccompanied Refugee Minors
Zwinglstr. 4A
10555 Berlin
Germany

Phone +49 (0)30/39 83 69 69
Fax +49 (0)30/39 83 69 70
E-Mail info@b-umf.de
www.b-umf.de

Donations account
Bank für Sozialwirtschaft München
BIC: BFSWDE33MUE
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Editors

Thomas Berthold, Andreas Meißner, Ralf Willinger

Editorial Assistant

Cornelia Dernbach

Design and layout

Athanasios Melissis

Cover photo

Sebastian Bolesch

Translation

Ann Lorschiedter, Anne Thomas, Josephine Wragge

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About the author

Dima Zito is a social worker, systemic therapist and trauma therapist for children and young people. She works at the Psychosocial Centre for Refugees in Düsseldorf. She is currently conducting a PhD study entitled on Child Soldiers as Refugees in Germany.

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Editors' preface

The situation of child soldiers is gradually receiving more attention among the general public. Many people in Europe are exposed to the sad situation of these children and young people through campaigns such as Red Hand Day. The attention centres on life in the countries of origin of child soldiers, their involvement in armed conflicts or their reintegration into their local community.

The present study is particularly relevant because of its focus on young people who were able to escape to Germany to avoid persecution at home. For many who risk their lives by leaving armed groups, getting to Germany is considered a real opportunity. Former child soldiers can continue to be persecuted even after a peace deal has been signed; escape might be impossible because of physical and psychological damage, and reaching Europe might only be possible thanks to a great deal of support and effort. Few young people attempt the escape in the first place and even fewer make it in the end.

The social worker, therapist and researcher Dima Zito was able to interview 15 former child soldiers. This meant 15 individual experiences, 15 calls for perseverance and active involvement towards a commitment to end the use of child soldiers. These 15 examples remind us that the regulations regarding immigration and asylum in Germany are often far from adequate.

The study suggests that a child soldier's life is not necessarily made easier by the fact that s/he escapes from an armed group but that the burden often remains. The interviews also give an insight into the problems the children and young people encounter in Germany. They also give examples of the prospects former child soldiers have when they receive adequate care, therapy and education.

A previous study on former child soldiers in Germany was conducted in 2003 by Michaela Ludwig¹ and published by terre des hommes and the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, like the present study. It focused on the need to establish specific procedures within the asylum process for traumatised refugees such as former child soldiers. It also called for acknowledgement of their experience as a reason to grant asylum.

The results of the present study compel us to acknowledge that despite some progress many former child soldiers seeking asylum in Germany are still faced with serious problems.

terre des hommes and the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors propose five crucial criteria for improving the situation:

- The identification of traumatised refugees (such as former child soldiers) and their age should be determining factors in the reception procedure. To guarantee this, only qualified and neutral experts who are trained in psychology and child rights should be employed. This should be done in a three to six-month clearing procedure which should include an assessment of the needs of the children and young people, including therapeutic support.
- The reception of former child soldiers has to be adapted to their needs. For example, those under 18 must have access to youth welfare institutions, as well as appropriate accommodation (not in quarters for adults), freedom of movement (no residence obligation), therapeutic care and education (inclusion in the regular school system, training, German classes etc.).

- Hearings during the asylum process should exclusively be conducted by explicitly trained staff if there is an indication of past experience as a child soldier. Also, specific criteria for the verification of the asylum demand should be established, considering that some of the young refugees might be traumatised. A child soldier biography should generally "qualify" someone for refugee status – and furthermore, all traumatised persons should be granted long-term residency.

- Deportation, imprisonment on remand and remand pending deportation are incompatible with children's rights and should not be applied to minors at all.

- Considering their experiences, former child soldiers who are above the age of 18 must also be admitted and given adequate accommodation by the state.

We thank Dima Zito for conducting this study and in particular the 15 young refugees who spoke about their lives and by becoming involved in this study allowed us to participate in their experiences. Their courage and willingness to face their past once more should be an additional encouragement for us to continue advocating for the end of the use of child soldiers, and to continue advocating for their humane welcome and treatment in Germany.

Thomas Berthold, Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

Ralf Willinger, terre des hommes

¹ See Michaela Ludwig: "Former Child Soldiers as refugees in Germany". The study can be downloaded at www.quino.org/geneva/pdf/TdHQUNO.pdf

Preface of a former child soldier

“Daddy, why were we born here?”

I am 22 years old and I was born in South Sudan, during the war. I had to witness killings, arson and all kinds of destruction.

I remember waking up after a terrible night and seeing my father in front of our house. I saw the despair in his eyes, and the agony of the past night made my heart beat fast. Full of fear, I asked my father: “Daddy, why do we live here? Why did you let us be born here?” My father broke out in tears and said: “My son, no child can choose his parents or place of birth. I am sorry!”

My father was always there for us. He promised a better education for me and my sister after the war. He had studied abroad himself, and he wanted us to do the same. But some years later, when I was about 10 years old, my father was killed right in front of us. When I was about 13, my childhood came to an end. I was forced to go to war. My life and the lives of other children were put on the line. We didn’t have parents anymore; instead, the AK 47 rifle was destined to be my companion.

When I was 15, I survived on my own for two days in a destroyed village filled with dead bodies. I saw how government troops killed my friends, and my heart sank into my boots. I sat on a tree with an AK 47 in my hands, not knowing what I should do. I will never forget that day. It’s the day I lost contact with my family. A day that made the uncertain future even worse. It’s a miracle that I survived this day.

God sent me guardian angels. My angels were the staff of an organisation which found out about the destroyed village. They told me that my life as child soldier would end on that day. They also told me that a new life without the AK 47 would begin on the same day.

Some weeks after my rescue, they offered me a “surprise trip” to a new and unknown homeland. They promised that I would be able to fulfil my father’s promise in my new home – an education and a better future. When the journey ended in Germany, I realised how difficult it is to live in an unfamiliar place without parents or other family members.

The beginning in Germany was very tough, and especially the proceedings for getting a residence permit (“Aufenthaltserlaubnis”) status were real emotional torture. I was in a new homeland with a language I couldn’t speak. In the worst moments, I felt deep grief for my lost childhood, my uncertain future and especially the stress of processing the application for asylum.

After one year, I heard about the Psychosocial Centre for Refugees. I had a chance to receive therapeutic services and I had contact with society. And finally, I could go to school. When I had problems with the asylum procedures, I always got support. Today, I am studying, and I owe everything that I have to the support I received.

When I think about the words of my father and about my lost childhood, I think about the right of every child to be a child. But child soldiers lose their childhood. Their childhood is replaced by the AK 47. This is an unforgivable abuse. Let us all work against the abuse of children as killing machines. Children are not soldiers.

I appeal to lawmakers to improve the lives of unaccompanied minor refugees and child soldiers. These children need a guaranteed residency so that they can start living a new life. The hearing for the asylum application should not be done without psychological support, because the suffering during these sessions is immense.

Many minors and young adults in

Germany do not have a residence permit status; they only have an “exceptional leave to remain” (“Duldung”). This is only one step away from deportation. Many people in Germany are living in these conditions, and they cannot change it. It is a nightmare to wake up every day with this thought.

If refugees are to be integrated into society, access to education is key. Access to education is hardly possible with the “exceptional leave to remain”. It is even more difficult to get a work permit with this status. And to find a job without knowing the language is worse.

Pre-conditions for integration are knowledge about German culture and history, a secure income and good language skills. But one cannot participate in an integration course during the procedure for granting the right of asylum, or if one only has “exceptional leave to remain”. I always wonder how integration can work when the people concerned have no residence permit status? I wonder if there is no solidarity in Germany?

I don’t like to talk about my life. When I do so, I am overwhelmed with memories that are very painful. I participated in the interviews despite this. There are some things I can still not talk about today but I have talked about lots of other things because I think it is important that people in Germany find out what it means when children are abused as soldiers. And because I hope that the German government will understand that young refugees need security and support so that they can start a new life. I set my heart on this piece of work to contribute towards this goal.

This interview was conducted with Peter D., 22, a former child soldier from Sudan. He has been living in Germany for seven years and has been studying for two years.

1. Child soldiers as refugees

1.1 Introduction

Approximately 250,000 child soldiers are used in armies and rebel groups worldwide – their activity ranges from small chores to active involvement in armed confrontations or violent acts against civilian populations. These children and young people are often exposed to traumatic events and experience extreme violence as victims, witnesses and perpetrators.

Those who come to Germany as refugees often undergo months and years of structural exclusion and uncertainty. Many of them depend on support from social workers and therapists to settle down, overcome the uncertain period of the asylum procedure and to cope with their experiences.

1.2 Child soldiers – a brief overview

“Child soldiers” or “children associated with armed forces or armed groups” are defined in international treaties as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”² This definition is used by the United Nations and human rights organisations.

The use of child soldiers is neither a new nor a culturally specific problem. At almost all times of history and in many cultures, children and young people have been involved in armed

² Source: Paris Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups, UNICEF, February 2007.

conflict (see Honwana 2006). They fought in the “Volkssturm” for the defence of Nazi Germany and with opposition partisan movements, they have fought for liberation and guerrilla movements on all continents as well as for regular armies, which often recruited them by force.

In the 1990s, however, the use of child soldiers reached new dimensions (Machel 1996). Rebel movements in Mozambique and Sierra Leone, for instance, abducted thousands of children and young people and used them to carry out massive human rights violations. The former UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu has estimated that from 1990 to 2000, two million children were killed by war, and over six million were seriously injured or disabled. More than a million children were orphaned during this decade and an additional 10 million suffer from psychological trauma.

In 2012, the number of armed conflicts in which children were directly involved in was at least 18. This is stated in the UN Secretary-General’s Annual Report on Children and armed conflict of April 2012.³ According to this report, the situation of children living in conflict areas who were either in danger of recruitment or had already been recruited, had not improved essentially in the last years.

The number of child soldiers worldwide is still estimated at 250,000.⁴ Children and young people are often recruited forcibly by armed

³ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/320/85/PDF/N1232083.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ Estimates of Unicef. It is impossible to know the exact number of child soldiers actually used since armies and rebel groups do not have statistics about them and act in areas in which international organisations only have limited access.

groups and armies. They sometimes also volunteer for political reasons, or to protect themselves or their families, to earn an income, to take revenge, or out of a desire for adventure⁵. Currently, the majority of child soldiers are recruited in Africa and Asia, but children are also abused as fighters in Latin America and in the Middle East⁶. Approximately 40 % of child soldiers are female (see UNICEF 2007). Some of them have to fulfil domestic duties, others also participate in conflicts. Women and girls in war settings and within armed groups are often affected by rape and sexual violence (see Alfredson 2007, Honwana 2006).

1.3 International treaties against the use of children as soldiers

Increased international attention and lobbying have led to the proscription of the use of child soldiers through a number of treaties: The International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted the Child Labour Convention in June 1999, listing “the worst forms of child labour” and explicitly condemning the use of child soldiers. According to the Rome Statute, the recruitment of children under 15 is punishable as a war crime by the International Criminal Court. The first charges for this offence have already been issued and there are ongoing trials against the former Congolese militia leader Germain Katanga, former Liberian President

⁵ See Rachel Brett, Irma Specht (eds): “Young soldiers: why they choose to fight“.

⁶ The highest number of child soldiers is found in Myanmar – tens of thousands according to estimates of human rights organisations. In Columbia, thousands of minors are fighting in non-state armed groups while the military is using children as spies and informants (see terre des hommes, www.tdh.de/?id=539).

Charles Taylor and others. Others are wanted by warrant of arrest for this offence, like the Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir or the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony.

A central reference is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁷, which defines every person below the age of 18 years as a child. In this convention, minors are granted particular protections, such as from the death sentence for example, as well as from life-long imprisonment and “dangerous work”. However, the minimum age for military recruitment and engagement of children was set at 15 years in article 38 of the convention.⁸

After lengthy negotiations and intensive advocacy through international organisations, the recruitment and engagement in wars of children and youth below the age of 18 years was condemned. On May 25, 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict⁹, opening it for signature and ratification. It came into force on February 12, 2002. Till today, 151 countries are parties of the Optional Protocol.

7 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. It entered into force September 2, 1990. In Germany, it entered into force on 5 April 1992.

8 The age limits comply with clauses of the international humanitarian law in the additional protocols of the year 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of the year 1949.

9 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11-b&chapter=4&lang=en

In recent years, the UN Security Council has passed a number of resolutions, condemning the use of child soldiers and suggesting measures to put an end to the recruitment of children.¹⁰

The “Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups“ are the result of a global evaluation of experiences from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. They also recommend guidelines on how children can be protected from recruitment and how former child soldiers can effectively be supported. The Paris Principles were signed by 66 countries in 2007, including Germany.

1.4 Former child soldiers as refugees in Germany

Few former child soldiers manage to escape to other countries, and even fewer make it to Germany. Those who manage are usually older than 14, with those who are younger failing to survive the long and dangerous path. There are no statistics that document the number of former child soldiers among young refugees. The Catholic Youth Social Work (Katholisches Jugendsozialwerk) estimated in 2009¹¹ that 3.5 % of the unaccompanied

10 All conflict parties are called upon to immediately demobilise children. If recruitment of children should continue and children will be used further in armies, targeted measures such as embargo of weapons, travel restrictions or freezing accounts may be consequences. The UN Security Council resolution 1612 of the year 2005 is important as well, as it requested the UN General Secretary to implement a monitoring and reporting mechanism regarding the use of child soldiers.

11 The estimate of the Catholic Youth Social Work was based on own figures, coming from the practical work with refugees.

minor refugees¹² in Germany were former child soldiers. According to these estimates, there would be around 150 former child soldiers arriving per year.

Additionally, a significant number of children and youth come to Germany to avoid forced recruitment by armed groups in their home country. The number of unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers who claim to be threatened of forced recruitment is not documented.

The estimated number of around 150 former child soldiers per year does not reflect the much larger number of former child soldiers above 18 who are still affected and possibly in need of support.

The number of unaccompanied minor refugees coming to Germany has increased from 2009 till 2011. According to the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (B-UMF), in 2011 more than 3,700 unaccompanied minor refugees were taken into care, in 2010 more than 4,200 and in 2009 more than 3,000.¹³ Former child soldiers often immigrate as unaccompanied minor refugees. Although they should be offered accommodation and care in child and youth welfare institutions, the young people’s situation is in many cases precarious. These are outlined below.

1.4.1 Seeking asylum and a residence permit

Article 16a of the German Constitutional Law (Grundgesetz) states that refugees who are politically

12 In Germany the term unaccompanied minor refugees is used in the professional debate, this includes all separated children, regardless of their residence status.

13 <http://b-umf.de/images/inobhutnahmen-2011-b-umf.pdf>

persecuted have a right to asylum.¹⁴ A number of restrictions however make it difficult to be granted asylum according to the Constitutional Law or to be recognized as a Refugee in context of the Geneva Convention.¹⁵

In order to be accepted as a person in need of protection, refugees have to explain their background of persecution and their escape route in a credible manner at a hearing at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF).¹⁶ In 2012,

14 In the mid 1990s, the number of initial asylum applications in Germany per year was above 100,000. Due to the growingly effective sealing-off of the European external borders, less and less refugees managed to enter; the number of the applications since the year 2000 reached historical lows. The bottom was in the year 2007, with only 19,164 applications for asylum. Since then, the number increased again. In the year 2012, applications for asylum were issued by 64,539 people. www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Statistik/statistik-anlage-teil-4-aktuelle-zahlen-zu-asyl.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

15 Several regulations (such as the one of “non-persecuting countries” and “safe third countries”) within the so-called asylum compromise from the year 1993 restricted the basic right to asylum. In 2012, 1.2 % of the applicants were accepted for asylum according to article 16a of the German Constitutional Law, compared to 1.6 % in the year 2009 (source: Document of the German Parliament, BT-Drs.: 17/12234, <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/122/1712234.pdf>)

16 They have to manage to describe their reasons to escape out of their own initiative in a comprehensive, detailed, pursuable and unambiguous manner. The Asylum Procedure Act explicitly states: “The foreigner him-/herself has to present the facts giving reason for his/her fear of political persecution, and has to provide the necessary information”. This stipulation of a general obligation to make a statement on the side of the applicant results in practices of the hearing that often, no questions are asked which would aim at supporting a comprehensive clarification of the persecution. This often causes fragmentary explanations of the persecution history and of the reasons for the migration since

however, it took an average of 9.9 months in cases of unaccompanied minors¹⁷ to decide the demands for asylum that had been registered¹⁸ As they wait for a decision – a period of unknown duration and consequences –, refugees are affected by a number of measures that exclude them. They are described in the following paragraphs.

Refugees who travelled through a “safe third country” before reaching Germany are always excluded from recognition according to article 16a of the German Constitutional Law. This affects all persons who travelled by land¹⁹. Someone who cannot prove

many applicants are used to only answer particular questions. In many societies, youth are supposed to show respect to elders which also implies not to talk without being asked to do so. On the basis of the hearing protocols, so-called “asylum clerks” (sometimes these are not the persons who were present in the hearing) take a decision about the application for asylum.

17 Document of German Parliament, BT-Drs.: 17/12234, <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/122/1712234.pdf>

18 According to information of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the average duration of procedures for granting the right of asylum which were concluded in the year 2011 was 12.2 months. www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Broschueren/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2011.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

19 On top of this, since 2007 more than 25% of the persons applying for asylum are affected by the European jurisdiction regulation - in short called Dublin II (http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_freedom_security/free_movement_of_persons_asylum_immigration/l33153_en.htm). If it is established that the person seeking for asylum has been living for a continuous period of at least five months in a EU member state before lodging his/her asylum application in another member state (which can be cross-checked by taking finger prints, by information on visa etc.), the first mentioned member state becomes responsible for examining the application. The applicants usually only get short notice of the initiation of the Dublin procedure before they are transferred to the country where they have been before. Minors are

having entered Germany directly by sea or by air, but who manages to make his/her persecution credible to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, can be granted refugee-protection, as per the Geneva Convention on Refugees (§ 60.1 Residence Act (Aufenthaltsgesetz AufenthG). This immigration law²⁰, which came into force in 2005, basically assimilates the status of these persons with those who have the right to asylum according to article 16a of the German Constitutional Law. Moreover, while until 2005, only the persecution through state actors was relevant for the asylum procedure, the fulfilment of EU guidelines now requires that non-state and gender based persecution are also considered as reasons to grant asylum. This can be particularly relevant for former child soldiers who have escaped from rebel groups.

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees can also grant protection from deportation on humanitarian grounds (§ 60.2, 3, 5 or 7 of the Residence Act), for example when a person seeking asylum has a life-threatening disease that cannot be treated in the country of origin. If the deportation of a traumatised refugee will probably lead to a retraumatisation with suicidal consequences, protection from deportation can also be granted. This regulation is relevant for former child soldiers as well.

The number of minors who are entitled

also affected by such transfers and have almost no chances for legal protection in these cases.

20 The Immigration Act (“Act to control and limit immigration and to regulate the residence and integration of citizens of the European Union and foreigners”) changes several existing Acts in 15 articles. The Foreigner’s Act was re-named as Residence Act, and several residence titles were changed. More information are available on the homepage of the Federal Ministry of the Interior www.zuwanderung.de/ctn_156/ZUW/DE/Home/home_node.html

to one of the mentioned status varies between 35% and 45% during the last years.²¹ Only a few of them are recognised as refugees in the sense of the Geneva Convention. It is important to note that (forced) recruitment as a child soldier does not automatically result in recognition as a refugee.²²

Refugees whose application for asylum is declined can appeal against this decision by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in an Administrative Court within a period of two weeks (and within one week if the application is rejected for being “obviously unfounded”). A large proportion of applicants follow this path. Refugees whose application for asylum is declined and who do not get a residence permit but de facto also cannot be deported, for example because they don’t have a passport, are granted “exceptional leave to remain”. Although regulations on the right to stay in Germany were introduced during the last years, more than 22,000 minors in Germany still have this status of “exceptional leave to remain”.²³ ²⁴

²¹ www.b-umf.de

²² After having received a rejection of the application for asylum, the aggrieved party often has to claim for years in order to obtain protection from deportation. It is unknown how many former child soldiers are deported because they do not get professional support and are overstrained with filing a suit for humanitarian protection before the law.

²³ Source: Central Foreigners Registry (Ausländerzentralregister)

²⁴ Before this regulation was passed, an estimated 200,000 people were living in Germany with the status of “exceptional leave to remain”, 140,000 of those since more than five years and 50,000 since more than 10 years. In the context of the Residence Act, 30,000 people got a limited residence permit valid until the end of the year 2009. Many of them have lost their residence status again because in times of economic crisis and after years of forced unemployment, they were not be able to claim public support for their subsistence. (www.aktion-bleiberecht.de)

If the application for asylum is rejected or if the applicant has lost his/her right of residence in a different way, s/he is summoned to leave by a set deadline (usually within one month). If the person in question does not comply with the summons, s/he can be deported.²⁵ Refugees often experience the deportation of their friends, relatives or neighbours in the asylum centres. “Deportations at dawn” are not an exception: staff of the Foreign Resident Authority wake up refugees in the night or in the early morning hours and bring them to the airport, supported by police members (sometimes special police force units in combat fatigues and with dogs), at times also accompanied by medical staff. Again and again, people in such situations collapse or try to commit suicide. The permanent presence of the topic “deportation” results in a climate of fear among many refugees.

With the Transposition Act of 26th November 2012 the Article 10 of the EU-Return-Directive came into force. § 58 1a Residence Act states that an unaccompanied minor refugee can only be returned if there is the possibility to return to parents, a guardian or specialised care. This child-friendly regulation has quite negative consequences, because of a disputed interpretation by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF). The Federal Office argues, that because of the new paragraph, national subsidiary protection based on specific risks related to minor age will not be granted any more.²⁶ Because of this the number of children being entitled to protection according to Residence

²⁵ In 2009, 7,289 persons were deported by air. (<http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/006/1700644.pdf>)

²⁶ The Federal Administrative Court will decide about a pending case and this practice in general in spring 2013.

Act § 60 paragraph, 7 sentence 1 is declining.²⁷

1.4.2 The situation of refugees

As soon as a refugee registers in Germany, s/he is allocated to a state, following a quota system. S/he has to live for up to three months in a so-called “first reception” institution, until s/he is allocated to a community. The refugees themselves have no influence on the choice of community.²⁸ In some states, refugees have to remain in a central institution for the whole period of their asylum procedure, for example in Bramsche in Lower Saxony.

People who seek asylum in Germany fall under the special legislation of the “residential obligation” (Residenzpflicht): they have to remain in their assigned district permanently.²⁹

²⁷ More detailed: Bundesfachverband UMF / Pro Asyl: Unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge schutzlos gestellt Regarding the interpretation of the new § 58 Abs. 1a Residence Act by the Federal Office and the evolving protection gaps, see http://b-umf.de/images/pro%20asyl_bundesfachverband%20umf_stellungnahme_%2058%20abs.%201a%20aufenthg_august2012.pdf

²⁸ Only married couples who can prove evidence of a state-approved marriage (certificate of marriage) as well as parents and their minor children have a right to live in the same place. The allocation procedure does not take into account friends or relatives such as siblings, adult children, uncles or aunts who are already living in Germany.

²⁹ If they want to leave the „area of the physical restriction“, they have to apply for it in due time at the Foreign Resident Authority, giving specific details on the destination address and the reasons for the journey. The decision on the approval depends on the judgement of the Foreign Resident Authority who decides if the application is in line with “urgent public need or compulsory, or if the rejection of the approval would be an inequitable hardship” (§ 58 Subsection 1 of the Asylum Procedure Act).

After years of criticism by human rights organisations, most of the German States have revised their policy, e.g. asylum-seekers have now the possibility to travel without permission inside the particular state.³⁰ Before, the residential obligation frequently lead to the isolation of people; for example, it often prevented them from participating in German lessons or events, or visiting friends or relatives. Until now there are still restrictions.³¹

Asylum seekers in Germany are obliged to live in common quarters. The conditions are often extremely bad – they might live in containers or former barracks. Refugees who are single are usually accommodated in shared rooms, with people who are strangers and who come from different backgrounds. In most cases, a refugee has a personal space of 4.5 to 6 square metres.

In these common quarters, the refugees often have neither their own bathroom nor their own kitchen. The common rooms are usually very poorly equipped and in poor hygienic conditions (see Pieper 2008).

Since people live together in a small space, in bad circumstances, there is a high potential for conflicts. In some places, police raids are common especially at night, when drug dealers or illegal residents are sought. These poor conditions often have a serious impact on people who are already traumatised.

In the first year, persons seeking asylum and those with an “exceptional leave to remain” are generally prohibited from employment. According to the Asylum Seekers Benefit Act (Asylbew-

erberleistungsgesetz, AsylbLG), they have to live from “basic benefits” which are “granted mainly as non-cash benefits”. The refugees either get shopping vouchers which can only be used in selected shops, or they get food parcels.³² The German Constitutional Court declares the amount of money which was paid to the applicant as not in line with the Constitution.³³ Until then the benefits have not been raised since the introduction of the Asylum Seekers Benefit Act in 1993, and they amount to 35 % less than unemployment benefits: the heads of the household get 224.97 euros per month and they receive 199.40 euros for each minor, even sometimes when they live alone. In some states, unaccompanied minor refugees are treated in the same way as other young people and receive support according to the Social Code, Book VIII (Sozialgesetzbuch, SGB VIII). Backdated to January 2012 the persons concerned can claim for a higher rate.

Refugees with unsecured residence are not beneficiaries of state health insurance. In the first four years, medical care is reduced to the treatment of “acute illness and states of pain” (Asylum Seekers Benefit Act § 4). Medical care is financed by the Social Welfare Office, upon request but the interpretation of the term “acute” can differ. It is generally difficult to get approval for psychotherapy.

After one year, asylum seekers can apply for a concrete job or training with the immigration authorities. But before the immigration authorities can grant a work permit, the local employment agency carries out a “priority check” (that takes

approximately six weeks) to see whether there is a German, EU citizen or a privileged member of a third country eligible for the position first.

When refugees are recognised according to article 16a of the German Constitutional Law or according to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, they are entitled to social benefits and a general work permit.

1.4.3 Unaccompanied minor refugees

In Germany, unaccompanied minor refugees are entitled to accommodation and care in child and youth welfare institutions.

Refugees are regarded as “asylmündig” or capable of acting in the asylum-procedure from the age of 16, i.e. they can apply for asylum even though they are minors. Unaccompanied minor refugees can receive support by special case workers.³⁴ Until 2005, unaccompanied minors aged 16 and 17 were usually treated as adults on the basis of their “capability for asylum”: they were neither granted special accommodation or educational care. The Act on the Further Development of Child and Youth Services (KICK) came into effect on 1 October 2005. It states explicitly that unaccompanied youths aged 16 and 17 have to be taken care of by the youth welfare office.³⁵ Since that time, this age group has been

³⁴ The BAMF endeavours to provide specifically trained staff for the hearings of unaccompanied minor refugees as well as to improve the hearing situation, in order to meet their needs.

³⁵ The unaccompanied entry is stipulated as an independent criterion for custodial care, according to § 42 Subsection 1, Clause 1 Nr. 3 of the Child and Youth Services Act, codified in the Eighth Book of Social Law SGB III.

³⁰ www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/fm-dam/q_PUBLIKATIONEN/2013/Residenzpflicht_-_Bundesweite_Synopse_-_Stand_Januar_2013.pdf

³¹ www.stoppt-racial-profiling.de/presspiegel/

³² Since non-cash benefits are more cost-intensive for communities and due to discrimination by shopping with vouchers, in many places cash benefits are granted.

³³ Bundesverfassungsgericht (Constitutional Court): 1 BvL 2/11

absorbed by youth welfare institutions, but the law is not implemented everywhere.

The discrimination of former child soldiers due to their age is connected to many aspects of this study - regarding the nature of their reception in Germany for example, their access to resources, the availability of social support services (Eighth Book of the Social Code (SGB VIII) or Asylum Seekers Benefit Act) or access to education. Since there is no standard on how to treat people affected, the situation for the interview partners in this study varies.

Some Federal States have introduced special clarification phase in specialised homes, where newly arrived minors are absorbed during the first phase in the country, in order to clarify their needs and to understand which measures are possible and reasonable. In other states, minors are placed in common reception centres where no special support for unaccompanied is provided. There are still cases in which minors are also placed in reception centres together with adult persons.

If former child soldiers are already adult, access to qualified pedagogical care often is not granted, and nor is language acquisition or education. In many places, there is a general lack of qualified and independent counselling that could help youths take the best decisions within the elaborate asylum and residence system. A good advisory service regarding asylum and residence is essential, especially because an unpromising application for asylum can be rejected as “clearly unfounded” (following § 30 Subsection 3 of the Asylum Procedure Act (Asylverfahrensgesetz)), which in turn makes it impossible to get other

residence permits (according to § 10 Subsection 3 of the Residence Act).³⁶

Since the enforcement of the KICK law, for all unaccompanied minors, including those minors who are “capable of acting”, an application to establish a guardian must be claimed. The age assessment is an additional challenge. From the part of the administration, the assumed age can be defined after a visual inspection or a controversial medical examination, e.g. of a hand’s carpal bones. This practice also varies from state to state. On average, the amount of young refugees being rated older than they declare themselves is significant.

1.4.4 Education and training

Many young refugees are highly motivated to learn German and to get a German school certificate. Due to the circumstances in their countries of origin, they were often only able to go to school with difficulty if at all and irregularly. In contrast to the specialised homes during the clarification phase where youths have access to education, the „initial reception centres“ (Erstaufnahmeeinrichtung) do not provide such services.

The access to the education system depends on the laws of the respective state. Compulsory education and the right to education, usually up to the age of 16, exists in all states and also applies to refugees. Because of the federal structure there are different approaches in Germany. In some states minors can only go to school until the age of 16, in others they can attend classes until 25.

³⁶ Residence permits can only be issued in case a claim for conferral is on hand. It is true though that most residence permits “can” or “should” be granted, which does not constitute a right related to § 10 Subsection 3.

The regulation on employment procedure Beschäftigungsverfahrensverordnung BeschVerfV) came into effect on January 1, 2009 and thus improved the young refugees’ training chances. According to § 10 Subsection 2, they can get a work permit for a recognised job that requires training, without going through a priority check, once they have been in Germany for over a year. If they qualify and can earn a living they can get a residence permit if they fulfil the conditions of §18a of the Residence Act and do not obstruct measures that could terminate their residency.

1.4.5 Particularly vulnerable refugees

The care for particularly vulnerable refugees is defined by EU guidelines. Part of the groups defined as particularly vulnerable are (unaccompanied) minors, disabled people, pregnant women, single parents with minors and people who have suffered from torture, rape or other severe forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence. Even if former child soldiers are not named explicitly, according to this definition they belong to this group of particularly vulnerable refugees, since they have been victims of extreme violence and often also because of their young age.

The guidelines allow for the specific circumstances of particularly vulnerable refugees to be taken into account when decisions regarding medical care and material support are taken. Although the guidelines were issued in 2003, Germany has not yet established proceedings which would allow for the definition of the particular need to protect refugees according to the EU guidelines, and of the basis on which the required support can be granted.³⁷

³⁷ The “Report from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament

1.5 Trauma and therapy for former child soldiers

Generally, a large proportion of refugees are traumatised. The Psychological Research and Outpatient Clinic for Refugees at the University of Konstanz found that approximately 40 % of asylum seekers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.³⁸ It can be assumed that, among former child soldiers, this percentage is even higher because of their specific experiences.

According to the World Health Organisation's "International Classification of Diseases" (ICD 10), trauma "arises as a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (of either brief or long duration) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone". (ICD 10, F 43.1: <http://apps.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/>)

The impact of traumatic events depends on their type and duration. One-off or short traumatic events (Type I trauma) can be better dealt with than those which are repeated or last for a long time (Type II trauma). Trauma

on the application of Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers" expounds problems of inadequate implementation in Germany and declares that the "identification of vulnerable asylum seekers is a core element without which the provisions of the Directive aimed at special treatment of these persons will lose any meaning" (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52007DC0745:EN:NOT>).

38 Gäbel, U. et al., Psychologische Forschungs- und Modellambulanz für Flüchtlinge, University of Konstanz (2006) Prävalenz der Posttraumatischen Belastungsstörung (PTSD) und Möglichkeiten der Ermittlung in der Asylverfahrenspraxis. In: Zeitschrift für klinische Psychologie und Psychotherapie, Göttingen: Horgrefe Verlag.

caused by man-made disasters such as war, torture or rape have more serious consequences than natural disasters for example, because they fundamentally undermine the trust in human relationships.

Often, child soldiers are exposed to experiences of extreme violence for a long period and without protection. Many of them witness the violation, mutilation and assassination of other human beings, sometimes even their own relatives. Most former child soldiers have personally experienced kidnapping, abuse, torture and rape. And many of them have been forced to become perpetrators, which can also have traumatising effects: apart from the burdensome memories, the children and youths often suffer from massive feelings of guilt and shame.

Not everyone develops long-lasting symptoms of psychological stress when exposed to stressful events. Circumstances, risk and protection factors come together and can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder but this does not have to be the case.

The events can influence the gravity and extent of trauma. According to Maier, "the experiences of victims of torture and war differ in two main points from normal trauma: first, in quality – that is the intensity, gravity and brutality, therefore in the repetition, frequency and long duration of the threat. These two factors are decisive for the development of post traumatic disorders and other persistent symptoms. When experiencing war and torture, life, physical and mental integrity are fundamentally threatened, and furthermore, the material, social and cultural foundations are destroyed" (Maier 2007, p. 40).

The event factor also includes the extent of which a traumatic event can be expected and controlled. Children who

have been kidnapped and forcefully recruited are particularly vulnerable to the experience of feeling totally at the mercy of someone.

The risk factors include initial levels of stress arising from previous stressful experiences or already existing psychological disorders, but they also include the present living circumstances of a person. Child soldiers often grew up in war zones and already have a predisposition to stress because of previous war experiences.

An essential factor for protection is the social support experienced after a traumatic event. Usually, armed units do not provide space for children to process stressful experiences and feelings. Staffs in youth welfare institutions and therapists therefore have an important role to play, when a child soldier manages to escape. Other protecting factors are the skills, resources and positive experiences someone has acquired or made in his or her life.

In general, children and youth are at higher risk of trauma after stressful events because their possibilities and abilities to cope are limited by their young age.

1.5.1 Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other consequences of trauma

After experiencing a traumatic event, the coping mechanisms of a person can be overstrained by the coming together of the above-mentioned factors and post-traumatic stress disorder can develop. There are three typical groups of symptoms:

- **Re-experiencing symptoms, also called "flashbacks"**

Traumatic events cannot be stored as "normal" memories. Time and again, they appear in the form of

nightmares or repetitive and persistent memories. The remembering of a trauma is accompanied by intensive mental stress: physical reactions such as trembling, palpitation or dyspnoea can occur. Vivid memories can also overwhelm a victim in the form of flashbacks, in the sense that they feel they are once again in the traumatising situation. Flashbacks can be triggered by stimuli which recall the traumatic situation – such as the uniforms of police or security officers, or customs personnel.

- **Avoidance symptoms**

People affected by PTSD often try to avoid stimuli which could remind them of the traumatic event. For example they might not watch war movies or will avoid talking about their experiences. Avoidance can also be subconscious – it can be represented by social withdrawal, extreme forgetfulness or dissociation, and it can become a general feeling of numbness or alienation from the world and other people.

- **Increased agitation caused by fear**

Permanent tension can result in extreme alertness, strong reactions of alarm and shock, irritation and fits of rage, insomnia and/or difficulties to concentrate.

- **Other consequences of trauma**

Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of several possible results of traumatic events. The symptoms can go far beyond those outlined above. Victims of trauma often suffer from strong symptoms of depression (such as brooding, aboulia, feelings of guilt and worthlessness). According to Maier, 70 % of trauma patients suffer from comorbid depression (Maier and Schnyder 2007, p 64).

Traumatic events that take place when people are very young or which are particularly serious can trigger far more serious disorders than PTSD. The Disorder of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS) is not yet included in international systems of diagnosis. Survivors of war and torture can display serious damage regarding the regulation of emotions, consciousness, self-perception and awareness of the body as well as social relations (see Herman 1992).

- **Suicidal tendencies**

People affected by PTSD are eight times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population (see Huber 2003). Depression, which affects many traumatised people, can result in higher suicidal tendencies. People who have announced they will commit suicide or have already attempted suicide are particularly vulnerable, as are people who have experienced war, torture, sexual violence or persecution related to racism, religion or politics (see Dormann 2006). Somebody who feels helpless, hopeless and has few chances of a better future is more likely to commit suicide (see Davison & Neale 2001).

When there is a lack of clarity about residence status, the situation can be extremely stressful and can lead to the destabilisation of an asylum seeker's mental state and to complete decompensation. If there is a threat of being deported (for example ahead of reaching adulthood), many traumatised young refugees become desperate: returning to the country where they went through traumatic experiences could pose a real threat to their lives because of revenge or persecution by former fighters. And even if there is no specific trigger, stress caused by past traumatic events, combined with the situation in Germany, if it is perceived as being

hopeless and desperate, can also lead to the symptoms becoming more acute and even to suicide.

1.5.2 Therapeutic care and support for former child soldiers in Germany

A number of therapeutic methods to deal with dysfunctions resulting from trauma have been developed over recent years.³⁹ Concepts that take cultural dimensions into account are particularly significant for the target group of former child soldiers.

Former child soldiers often face problems finding appropriate therapeutic care and support. On the one hand, the possibilities to provide therapy for refugees with insecure residence status are restricted by the asylum seeker benefit law. On the other, institutions providing regular care and established therapists sometimes feel overstrained by the complexity of the problem (trauma, different cultural background, possible language barriers and guilt). Because of this, former child soldiers in Germany are more likely to be cared for and treated in psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture. These are usually specialised in trans-cultural and trauma-related issues and are financed by donations or other financial aid. Thus, young refugees can be accepted as clients even if they do not have health insurance or without the consent of the local social welfare office that would otherwise have to incur the costs.

Support from the psychosocial centres includes not only (trauma)therapeutic care but also supportive group measures such as social stabilisation (residence law, accommodation,

³⁹ see Fischer 1999 / 2003, Flatten 2001, Hanswille; Kissenbeck 2008, Huber 2003, Reddemann 2004, Shapiro 1998, Van der Kolk et al. 2000

education, work permit for training etc.).

The capacities in the 20 centres however are limited; therefore, not all applicants can be supported and sometimes their names have to be put on long waiting lists. Furthermore, not all regions in Germany have such centres. Therefore, it is urgent that the provision for the care and support of traumatised refugees such as former child soldiers be expanded.

2. Interviews with former child soldiers

2.1 Interview partners

The interview partners for the study were identified with the help of various institutions throughout Germany, including the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, the networks of psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture and the refugee councils. In the course of one year, 17 interview partners were identified in Bavaria, Berlin, Lower Saxony, North-Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate.⁴⁰

Most of the interviews were conducted between December 2008 and May 2009. The names of all interview partners were changed.

The present study takes into account the statements of 14 interview partners. Ten interview partners came to Germany as unaccompanied minors: eight of them had already reached the age of consent while two were still minors. The other five interview partners were already adults when they reached Germany. It should also be highlighted that three young women were interviewed. It is particularly difficult for many former female child soldiers to talk about their situation since they are often heavily burdened by having been victims of extreme sexual violence.

Various factors make access to former child soldiers as interview partners difficult. Apart from the mental stress which can be a major impediment to

⁴⁰ The idea was to conduct interviews with 10 to 15 former child soldiers. Their biographies were to be characterised by varying factors such as sex, age, country of origin, nature of recruitment and deployment, level of education, time spent in Germany, residence status and living conditions linked to those factors. Some social workers and therapists gave feedback that they would not recommend the involvement of their clients in the study due to the psychological stress, or that their clients were not ready for it.

their participation in interviews, the taboos connected to the use of minors in armed conflict often affect the willingness of the person concerned to talk about it. In this context, it seems easier for interview partners from Sierra Leone (where the armed conflict has come to an end) to talk than for young refugees from countries that are still at war.⁴¹

2.2 Experiences in the countries of origin

2.2.1 Childhood prior to the recruitment into the armed group

- **Family background and social environment**

The majority of the interview partners came from rather poor families. The situation at home with the family was described in a positive way by several interview partners. Some of them grew up with single mothers.

“We had a very normal life. My mother always took care of us, she worked for all of us because my father had already died. (...) She sold fruit, she sold things in order to take care of us, so that we could go to school. (...) She was a very strong woman.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

Some interview partners had experienced the death of one or both parents in childhood.

“When I was still a child, three years old, I lost my daddy. When I was five, it was my mum who left me. I started to face life by myself, in the hands of my mother’s relatives. And I had an uncle

⁴¹ For example, former child soldiers from Sri Lanka were not in a position to be interviewed or their therapists found the burden too high for them. Despite intensive efforts it proved impossible to identify interview partners from Arab or Asian countries before the study was completed.

who took care of me. He was a pastor but he also died. (...) Maybe it was not easy for him to send his children to school and he could not take care of me and my life. I was forced to leave and to look for something (...), to look for survival in the forest.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

Two interview partners were from wealthy, intellectual families.

“My mother told me that they returned to Sudan in 1980 when they were invited (...) to participate in the peace process. My father was part of the black elite living abroad, who could easily influence the local population.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

- **Educational opportunities in the countries of origin**

The chance to attend classes depended on the financial situation of the families and they were limited for most interview partners.

“I grew up with my mum, and later, after I had finished my primary education, my mum didn’t have the money to pay for higher education.” (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

A parent’s death also had a negative impact on educational opportunities.

“I started school in Freetown, with my uncle. At that time, my parents were alive, my father and my mother, all of them they were alive. Till - until I reached class six, then my father died when he was bitten by a snake. And I stopped - I stopped my schooling for financial reasons. Then I had to go back to the village with my mum and my brothers and sisters. Then my mother took me to learn a trade, which was tailoring.” (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

Most of the interview partners who grew up in conflict zones could not go

Overview of interviewees

	Name	Country of origin	Age at date of interview	Age at date of recruitment	Period as (child) soldier	Age at date of entry to Germany	Residence permit status
1	Hassan A.	Sierra Leone	16	7	several months up to years	16	Residence permit for the period of the asylum procedure
2	Jean P.	Congo	16	15	one week	16	Exceptional leave to remain
3	Chérif C.	Guinea	20	12	three years	15	limited residence permit
4	David K.	Sierra Leone	19	9	three years	16	limited residence permit
5	Peter D.	Sudan	22	13	two years	15	limited residence permit
6	Steve J.	Sierra Leone	18	7	several years	17	Residence permit for the period of the asylum procedure
7	Mike M.	Sierra Leone	24	8	six years	14	unlimited residence permit
8	Abdoulaye M.	Sierra Leone	18	8	several weeks	16	Exceptional leave to remain
9	Kate K.	Uganda	25	15	five years	20	limited residence permit
10	Grace C.	Uganda	25	16	one year	18	unlimited residence permit
11	Rose P.	Uganda	19	12	five years	17	limited residence permit
12	Abdul H.	Sierra Leone	25	12	six years	18	Exceptional leave to remain
13	Belay N.	Eritrea	27	16	eight years	24	limited residence permit
14	Salomon Z.	Uganda	24	12	eight years	23	Residence permit for the period of the asylum procedure

to school on a regular basis because of the war.

“Sometimes we were to elementary school, yes, under trees or in grass thatched huts, where we learnt the alphabet. But it was not like this every day. Many parents didn’t even bring their children there because everybody was afraid their children ‘wouldn’t come home because there was a lot of violence, (...) children were simply kidnapped and then sold into slavery because everything is possible in a war zone. Someone who has a gun simply is like a god.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

- **Exposure to war prior to the recruitment into armed forces**

Most of the interview partners felt that their childhood had been affected by the war.

“I grew up in a normal way, I mean I played like other children but (...) I wouldn’t call this a normal childhood. (...) I was born in a war zone where there was war and unrest and the only thing you saw was destruction. (...) There was hunger everywhere, you could see children who were just skin and bones because their parents could not feed them. (...) I still remember this picture. (...) I always asked my mother why these children are like this, why we couldn’t just give them something to eat. Yes, but then the explanations came, that we cannot give food to the whole village.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

2.2.2 Recruitment

Most of the interview partners were forced in different ways to become part of an armed group or armed force.

- **Attempts to avoid the risk of recruitment**

One interview partner lived in a hideout from the age of 10 in order to

protect himself from being recruited as child soldier.

“There was the threat that I may have to go to war like a child soldier because (...) that was a law (...) that every child who was physically strong, no matter what age, as soon as one can hold a gun, you just get this AK-47, you are just forced to go to war. (...) This was a time when my mother was very worried. (...) Long, long time, long, long months, (...) almost two Christmas came and I lay in my hole under the floor. (...) I could only come out when it was dark and, oh god, there were things that you can see, that you can hear, but I hung out in my hole because I just didn’t want to die. Because I also simply didn’t want to go to war. (...) For me, this is the only reason why I am still alive.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

- **Kidnapping**

Eight of the interview partners were kidnapped when rebel groups attacked their villages.

Five interview partners experienced the murder of their father or mother in the context of their recruitment.

“One day the rebels started to attack cities in Sierra Leone. And my father said we should now run away from the village where we were living, to another place with soldiers, so that when the rebels would come, the soldiers would defend us and nothing could happen to us. But when we were on the road, the rebels stopped us. They gave us things to carry, and we had to go with them. And all of a sudden, a rebel came and said, take it now, we don’t have time, we have to go. And my mother said she couldn’t do it anymore, she would rather die but she simply can’t carry anymore, and then they did a lot of things to my mom (stops) and in the end, they killed her. Just in front of my eyes. And then we went with them to a camp where the rebels were staying.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

The three female interview partners from Uganda were also abducted: two by rebels and one by the Ugandan government forces.

Case Study 1

Hassan A. , 16, comes from a rural family in Sierra Leone. When he was seven years old, his whole family was abducted by rebels of the »Revolutionary United Front« (RUF), his mother was killed shortly after. He, his sister, and his father were used as fighters. His father died during this time with the rebels. After some time (he cannot exactly specify the time period) he was released with his sister, who was pregnant at the time, and fled with her to the neighbouring country Ghana, where she died. He returned to Sierra Leone and sur-

vived as street child and domestic servant with private persons. Since he was being threatened for being a former member of the rebels, he decided to flee. Through the sale of a diamond, which he still kept from the time with the rebels, he was able to finance his escape. A person who assisted him with his escape accompanied him in the airplane to Germany. He is still living in an initial reception centre for adults and has a legal guardian. Due to the psychological pressure and distress no asylum hearing has taken place thus far.

Case Study 2

Jean P., 16, is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. As an orphan child he was early obliged to earn his living, which he tried by collecting plants in the forest which he could sell. Doing this, when he was 15 years old, he was forcibly recruited by soldiers, taken to a military camp and abused. Since he neither wanted to be a soldier nor to kill, he fled after a few days. The military was looking for him, therefore he was not able to return to his home village. People from church took him to the capital Kinshasa hoping he could stay at a local orphanage. However, in Kinshasa he had to live on the streets, he felt

insecure and did not see any future prospects for himself. A catholic cleric helped him to escape to Germany by taking him with him on a plane to a pilgrimage. At the time of the interview, the 16 year-old has been living in a youth care institution for six months, where he feels comfortable and attends a German course. He wants to continue to go to school and go to university one day. He has not submitted an asylum request so far and was granted an 'exceptional leave to remain'. His guardian is pledging for non-deportation due to humanitarian reasons at the Aliens Authority.

heavily) I was brought to a place where I was put into prison." (Jean, 16, Congo)

- **"Voluntary" recruitment into the armed forces during war**

Three interview partners decided to join armed forces during the war.

One youth describes how he was recruited as child soldier when he was 12 years old. This was after he had lost his relatives when they tried to flee from a rebel attack.

"It was midnight and we were sleeping, then we heard the weapons and people crying outside: the rebels are here, the rebels are here! We went out and there were many people on the road who were running towards the military camp and I don't remember well but then it happened, the rebels are between the people and... (stops) I lost my mother and my little brother on that day. I looked for them everywhere, did not find them and in the morning (low voice) we went to this camp, we ask there. But the military was already there, they had almost lost the war against the rebels. They wanted young people to volunteer, to help fighting the rebels. They had this list and there were many youth who put their names for fighting against the rebels." (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

- **Joining armed forces for economic reasons**

One youth decided to voluntarily join the government troops when he was 16 years old, in order to support his family financially. He said that after he had joined he was not allowed to leave the armed forces.

"I went to primary school, elementary. After that, I wanted to help my family. Then I didn't go to class 7. Then, at 16, I went to the soldiers. Then I wanted to go back, I had many

"The rebels came till I was 15, (...) they came often, but this last time they came and kidnapped me. No, it was not rebels, it was a soldier, he kidnapped me and took me to the barracks." (Kate, 25, Uganda)

- **Involvement in armed groups within a family context**

One interview partner said that his mother had not been able to afford school fees. She had therefore asked his uncle to take care of him. This uncle was in the military and the boy was expected to undergo army training.

"She took me to my uncle. (...) He was in the national army. (...) I started working for him, in his house, like house work, working for him. Later, after some time, about two, three years, then he was like, I could join the army, he told me to join the army. By then I was twelve. Actually I didn't just go direct into the army, I started going with him to training, (...) where he was training some other soldiers, so I got involved from the age of twelve. Time went on, I was training with the

soldiers, and later I came to be like a full soldier. And I remember around the age of 14, I could use the gun, everything, the gun and the pistol, and I could even go out with them to different missions." (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

- **Forced recruitment**

One youth explains how he was recruited forcefully by soldiers: "In my country, the Congo, there is more in the forest than business people, brigades of soldiers who beat the people there in the villages. Good, once when I got there, I was there with my manioc, all of a sudden I was surrounded by people on the road, people who had guns and they said give all that you have. I had some coins in my pockets, they took them away from me. (...) We take you with us, you have to do military training. Okay. I didn't understand what a military training is like. Because I was shy, in this moment tears were running down my cheeks. They told me: Because you are so shy we will beat you with the whip so that you grow a bit stronger. But I cried all the time, many tears. Then (breathing

papers from my school and from my home, from my family. But the commander of told me I couldn't. I did six months regular military service, six months in a camp. Then from there, six months, we went to war." (Belay, 27, Eritrea)

2.2.3 Deployment and responsibilities as child soldier

- **Military training**

Few of the interview partners had undergone a specific training as soldier.

"When you get there the first time you first have to learn to do exercises. (...) You do these things before learning to kill, to use weapons." (Jean, 16, Congo)

Most interviewees said that they were given tasks, which they had to learn to fulfil basically by themselves, right from the start.

Since they were very young and newly-recruited child soldiers, most had a kind of a special status in the beginning but were soon deployed as regular soldiers. Nearly all the interview partners were actively involved in battles – only one male managed to escape beforehand and two female interview partners did not make any specific statements about this topic. Other tasks that were given to them are outlined below:

- **Carrier**

The interview partners who had been abducted by the Sierra Leonean RUF rebel group said that they were used as carriers at the beginning.

"They gave us things to carry, some of the items - the things, that they - the goods they had stolen, we had to carry it for them and then, carry food for them, water for them, (breathes out)

when I just come sometimes to think of this - sometimes I just say like if it's a dream or like somebody is watching a movie, you know? (...) then- we kept on moving, (...) I don't know where I went, everything was - you could see things were not in order. Houses were burning, cars were on fire, people were dying, people are - everything. Passing dead bodies, you were so tired, you cannot stop, when you want to stop, they beat you." (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

- **Helper for supplies and military services**

Children are partly used to help supply the armed units. Two interview partners had to provide support for military tasks.

"You had to fill the magazines, the weapons and give them to them, carry some of the ammunition for them." (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

- **Services as spies and messengers**

Some interview partners said that the armed forces specifically used children as spies and messengers since they were less suspect to the enemy than grown-ups:

"If for example they wanted to attack a United Nations troop, they would send one of these boys, because (...) if they see a young boy like this, they don't know actually about, they just think, he's ordinary, he is looking for his family or so, he's lost, he's trying to survive, looking for a place to go. So, this boy, they send him and he will look, where, how these people are, in what situation, so he will just go back and say the people, they are lots, they are in this situation, so we can attack at so-so time." (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

- **Armed conflicts and violence against the civilian population**

Many interview partners were deployed during battles against other armed groups and also in the course of attacks on villages.

Some armed groups like the RUF in Sierra Leone seemed to explicitly use children and youths for conducting acts of violence against the civilian population.

"When we were in this camp we were somewhat like a dog and had to do everything by force, we just do what they told us. I think there is nothing bad I haven't done yet. (...) When we were in this camp, they always come with people whom they have arrested or who did something wrong somehow or who they suspect that they want to escape and run away from the camp. They always gave us knives to cut or chop off the hands. Sometimes children – the hands of children are cut off easily, and the hands of adults sometimes remain attached to them a bit. And sometimes when they have women who they want to kill they say we have to shoot these people. When we shot these people, then we became a man. (...) And sometimes they brought soldiers from the war or the frontline, they give us knives, we have to cut off the ears, sometimes (stops) remove the eyes." (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

- **Acts of violence against family members and community members**

According to the youths' accounts, the RUF forced children and youths who were recruited into their group to first commit crimes in their own villages, burning down huts for example:

"When they catch me in our village, at first, that is the law, when they - anybody caught in that village, you are the people that they are going to use to do bad in your village. (...) At first I start with burning houses, because they- they

give me petrol, I will use petrol to burn houses. (...) I don't have the willing (breathing in) but (breathing out) you will see examples that they will do to other peoples, that if they tell you something to do, that you don't do it, at that instant is clear, at that moment, they kill you. Because they- you have this order, you have disobeyed their order, so you have to do, you have to force yourself to do what you don't want to do. So, I have to force myself, I did what they told me, like burning houses is where I started- started with." (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

• Attacks and looting

The child soldiers were involved in attacks. Some of the items looted in the course of the attacks were used for their own consumption but the greatest proportion had to be handed over to the commander of the group.

"We loot shops. That is the way we feed. At times, when we need food, we go and break laws. (...) Nobody gets a special supply of food. No. You also

have to go stealing. (...) Break shops and bring out whatever thing you can lay your hands on for feeding. (...) 80 % of it is going to the boss. Then 20 % stays with us. And you can imagine how many we were then." (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

• Recruiting other child soldiers

Some interview partners had to recruit other children as soldiers when they were attacking villages:

„Anywhere you go, when you - we- ambush, when people run or - who - who is fortunate will be caught, we catch, we will have to recruit to join us, will join us, who are not capable- capable of joining us, we kill, other we cut hand. Understand? So we have to fight this war." (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

• Female child soldiers as victims of sexual violence

Some abducted girls were kept by the

armed groups to be available for rape by one or several fighters.

"It was a soldier. He kidnapped me and took me to the barracks. And made me his wife or turned me to be his wife. Then I had my children. I passed through (gentle moaning) hard times, very hard times with him. With him and with the situation also, in the country. We didn't have money, we didn't have something to eat. He did not help us. He was - he treated me like, you know, like a slave. He used to beat me." (Kate, 25, Uganda)

• Particular services of children in armed forces

Some interview partners remember that children were particularly protected in certain situations. They were brought to safe areas during fights for example.

"When they are fighting, we have to be staying behind and notice, that they are protecting us, and at the same time, because we were something like an asset (...) to them, because we are carrying their food and their things, so, we have to be staying back, and after we have to move." (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

Other accounts instead indicate that children were particularly used in the frontlines:

"What I don't really understand, we were the new youth, we were in front, and the, the commanders far, far behind. (...) (hesitating) Our group lost many, many colleagues." (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

Rebel groups sometimes deliberately used children as protective shields during battles since they assumed that their enemies would be hesitant to kill children. Rebel groups also made use of the willingness of children to take greater risks than adults since they seemed to care less about the danger

Case Study 3

Chérif C., 20, comes from Guinea. After the early death of his father, his mother earned their living and funded the school fees of the two sons by selling foodstuffs at the local market. At the age of approximately twelve years Chérif was separated from his family during a rebel attack against his village and subsequently recruited as 'volunteer' by soldiers of the national army. Over three years he was used as fighter. At the age of 15 he was able to flee. During a patrol, he met a friend of his parents. This friend sponsored and organised his escape to Germany by plane. He was housed in a refugee facility for adults without any additional care. Trying hard he managed to be

allowed to attend school. Due to the suffering of severe trauma symptoms, he then, upon advice from other Guineans, sought for support in a psychosocial care centre for refugees. After initial difficulties, he was able to stabilize after several years of intensive therapeutic and pedagogical support. His asylum request was declined. In subsequent judicial proceedings it was possible to successfully claim for the 'suspension of deportation' due to his trauma suffering. After three years in Germany he was granted a limited residence permit. By now he is twenty years old, has graduated in secondary school and is currently working.

and because they were eager to earn the respect of their commanders.

“And also they use these young, these child soldiers as we call them hostages or something like this. So they will just put them in front, sometimes, when for example the British troops were fighting, if they see these young ones, they will not shoot. They will just try to defend themselves. (...) This is sometimes how they intend to defeat the other troops, because they use them as a human shield. They put them in front, give them gun. You would not shoot at them when you see them.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

2.2.4 Structures and experiences within armed groups

• Ideological framework

All armed groups have a particular ideology or objective in whose name they claim to fight. Interview partners report about the “ideological training” which recruited children also had to undergo prior to the military training.

“We are fighting for the country. Fighting to protect diamonds I have never set my eyes on. (...) Fighting to protect our national resources. Fighting against the government that doesn’t want the good future for the kids.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

• Lack of rights and randomness in armed groups

Several interview partners were exposed to violence and humiliation after they were recruited:

“I was put into prison. (...) When you have to urinate you ask them: I want to urinate. – No, you don’t have the right to urinate. Where you are sleeping, maybe a man can urinate right next to it, you know that he can just do it. (...) When I made a mistake, they shouted

Case Study 4

David K., 19, is from Sierra Leone. His parents were small traders. When he was nine years old, rebels of the RUF attacked their place of residence. His father was shot and David abducted. He was first used as carrier, but shortly after had to participate in armed fighting as well. For three years he was forced to participate in attacks on villages and active fighting until he was arrested. He spent three years in detention and was eventually able to flee. After he found out that his mother had died as well in the meantime, he stowed away on board of a ship. At the age of 16 he came to Germany and was accommodated in a refugee facility for adults. He was

assigned a guardian and was able to attend school. The social worker in school organized a place for treatment in a centre for psychosocial care of refugees. His asylum application was first declined, but the decision was later revised: After an intervention by his therapists highlighting his severe trauma he was granted ‘suspension of deportation’. After two years in Germany he was granted a limited residence permit. Thanks to therapeutic and pedagogical support he was able to stabilize psychologically. He is now 19 years old, has graduated in secondary school and commenced an apprenticeship.

at me. (..) In the morning, it was cold, we remove our shirts, you have to stay like this. They force you to make exercises, run laps, let yourself fall.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

The interview partners also report that commanders abused their power and were difficult to reckon with:

“I saw many problems with the commander and the others. I wanted to talk a lot about it. (...) This was a big problem because the commander of my group, he was strict, strict against me. He didn’t want me to say what he had done. But when I see something, I say everything. (...) Then we fought with him. He just sent me to prison. I was there for six months, under the ground.” (Belay, 27, Eritrea)

• Mentors in the armed group

Few of the interview partners said they had friends within the armed units. They were less likely to establish close relationships because of the probability of losing mentors at any time and in a violent manner.

“You know somebody, and then you went to the battle, the person is down like this, before you - he was shot and then died, you are caught the trail, as if there was nothing. You come back home, you could not even think about him, it’s like: ‘Oh, I was with John, oh- where is he? He died. Forget about him. He has kicked the bucket.’ A new friend comes who always like - nobody is in your memory list, nobody is important to you.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

Some interview partners report that the commanders who were responsible for them assumed a parental role:

“I had a Commander who happened to be kind of a godfather to me. (...) He was nice, he was nice in terms of, you know, war aspects. He had a good heart, inside of him, but externally it’s not so. (...) He was more or less like a father to me then. He didn’t let anything happen to me.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

- **Drug abuse**

Nearly all interview partners indicated that they were given drugs. The use of drugs helps to avoid perceiving negative feelings, especially fear, and thus allows them to be controlled. At the same time, the experiences become partially unreal. Trauma-typical reaction patterns such as dissociation and derealisation have a similar effect.

“It was like a game for us by then, when we were smoking. It was like watching a movie. So, I didn’t know by then that it was so bad. But later, when the war becomes very quiet, when we don’t smoke anymore, take drugs, then it is coming, when I am sleeping. I always hear sounds and see things which, which make me not to sleep and I get a headache.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

- **Survival strategies**

The environment and the structures of the armed groups had a great impact on how the children and youths now cope with their experiences of war and violence

The accounts of youths who were abducted by the Sierra Leonean RUF are particularly distinctive because of the strategic use of violence and randomness. At the beginning, the children and youth did not identify with the objectives and behaviour of the armed groups. They were forced to do things that they didn’t want to do. In the situation of hopelessness and the war’s intensity however they had no other option but to accept their fate. Some interview partners said that after the initial shock and horror, they “got used” to their new environment, that is, to the rebels and their activities.

“The fear was still there but it was terrible and I stopped crying because

Case Study 5

Peter D., 22, is from South Sudan. His parents studied in the US and belonged to the local intellectual elite. His father was a member of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and was killed in front of the family when Peter was approximately ten years old. Great pressure was put on the mother that Peter should join the SPLA. For many months he was hiding to protect himself from the recruitment by the rebels. When Peter was approximately 13 years old, the family was displaced from their village during clashes between troops of the national army and the rebels. Peter joined the SPLA to follow the example of his father and also to protect his mother. For approximately two years, he was used as fighter in hostilities and as spy. At the age of 15, he was picked up by members

of an aid organisation who sent him to Germany by ship. Without any additional care or possibility to attend school, he was put in a shared facility for single men. After one year, due to his serious trauma, he sought treatment in a psychosocial centre for refugees. Since then he has been receiving intensive trauma therapy and social-pedagogical support. The possibility of attending school was also arranged for him. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees granted Peter protection from deportation due to humanitarian reasons based on his severe trauma. After three years of living in Germany the 22-year-old received a limited residence permit. In the meantime, Peter graduated in school (vocational diploma) and has been studying at university for two years.

it’s like - I already lost my father in front of me, it’s like, I know that my mother also has gone and there is nowhere to go and then nothing to do. And then, I cannot stay back because I would lose my life too. (...) There is a proverb which we always said that once you fall in water, you just have to keep on swimming. Because if you don’t swim, you get yourself drowned. You’re already wet, so - do what you have to do. You have nothing to gain and you have nothing to lose.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

In such a situation of hopelessness and exposure, the armed group became the new environment and “home” for the children.

“Being a child soldier is like you just wish everything is only a dream or a game. Sometimes you wish you just lie down and don’t get up again, you cannot, I mean - in the worst parts of

it, when you are in, you can’t think of running. In fact, where are you running to? You can’t think of taking your own life, your life is more important to you. The people who are closer to you and who are around you, even though they are your enemy, but they - they are still your friends, they are your family. You have to look out for one another.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

The accounts of the youths indicate that it is hard for them to cope with the experience of having killed people and at the same time having been exposed to the risk of death. Just one interview partner reports that he refused to kill and that he would have rather killed himself instead:

“I am not made for his career, I cannot make it. I am too shy. Also this work, the job as such which you learn, which brings death. That is nothing for me.

I said to myself, when it comes to the point that I have to learn it, I will try my best to kill myself. (...) I cannot do what they want me to do, killing people. Because I also lost my parents, this is a memory that remains in my head, I would be so sorry to do the same to other people, to hurt people. (...) When I am in my bed at night I told myself if necessary, when this happens to me, I will take the gun and kill myself, but if I get a chance to escape, I escape. If they want to kill me, then they should kill me rather than living like this, because I cannot live like this.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

2.2.5 End of deployment as a child soldier

• No chances of leaving the armed group of one's own will

The interview partners' accounts indicate that the children and youths had almost no means of leaving the armed groups once they had become part of them. It sometimes took them several years before they were able to leave, either because they escaped, were arrested or because the war came to an end.

One interview partner explains how he deserted from the Eritrean military but then returned back after some months because he was being looked for.

„My sister was sick. I had to help her. Because my brother has only one leg from the war, he cannot help her. (...) They did not allow me to go. (...) Yes, then no other possibility, I just went to my family without them allowing me. (...) I didn't sleep at home. Because when I sleep at home, there are also problems, because the soldiers are coming and look for me in the house, they want to get me. When you go to the military as a soldier and then you go again, that is a big problem. I slept outside like this for almost six months. I work during the day, at night I am

outside. (...) I cannot stay at home for long. (...) Because when staying long, then there are many problems. The people are coming, the military. Then I just went back to the military.” (Belay, 27, Eritrea)

• Release

Only one youth said that he was released while the war was still going on:

“My sister was together with a rebel, and then she became pregnant. Because of the pregnancy, the rebels released us with two bodyguards. (...) They showed us a refugee camp. (...) We were in this camp, then they went back.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

• Demobilisation / end of the war

For some interview partners, the time in the military / armed group coincided with the end of the armed conflict. When the civil war in Sierra Leone was over, the child soldiers were also demobilised. Two interview partners describe their demobilisation as being as unwanted as their recruitment. For some it was impossible to go back to the village because their families no longer lived there or because they were not welcome because they had committed crimes during the course of their recruitment.

“They went to this peace accord. That we should stop fighting. Then they were coming to an agreement, the rebels with the government. (...) So after this, the fights, everything, they say we have to disarm (...) everybody, that the fight is finished. So, the leaders say everybody must go back. So, ah, even I, I think of it, how can I go back home? Maybe, inside of me, I don't really - I was not even planning to join these people: it is because they forced me, and now I joined them. So, I was thinking, how can I go back home. With these people I have done bad,

very bad things in my village. Okay, I decided, okay, I said, let me just give it a try. (...) So when I go back home, I have one of my friends, he says: (...) what can you do for this village. I said, ah, I said, but you don't see, I am not wicked, I don't have intentions for - I don't have any intention to join these people, you know that. He said, yeah, he said, why I am asking you, because there are many people they have killed here because of - they joined these rebels. So, all little I can advise you, you have to leave this village, so that you will not die. Okay. So, me I decide to leave there. (...) My family was nowhere to be found. Because when they entered my village, everybody just scattered, who is fortunate- I don't even know up to now whether they are alive or they are dead, that one I don't know. So I have to return back to my uncle in Freetown. So when I went there, he said he cannot allow a rebel in his house. That I can't enter his house. So I don't have any option.” (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

• Escape

Eight interview partners managed to escape from the armed groups. One youth was able to escape from the training camp one week after his forced recruitment. In order to avoid being recruited again, he was forced to leave his home and was brought to the capital by a church member. One interview partner escaped from the Eritrean military after six years and was then again sentenced to imprisonment and forced labour. By that time, he was already an adult:

“I was in the prison. (...) We work there, putting garbage from one car to another. (...) We were eleven or twelve people. And there were two supervisors for us. Then I lay down under the garbage. (...) And I put garbage on top of me. Then they don't see me. Yes, and this is how I came out of the hall. (...) When I was out, I saw where I was,

I see the border where I can go to the Sudan. I know this very well. Then I just walked into the Sudan. On foot. It was almost 9 o'clock by then. From nine o'clock till midnight I went by foot. On the other side of the border, there were Sudanese soldiers. On this side of my home. And then I slept in the middle. Because I was afraid, there are also mines at the roadside. But I don't know where exactly they are. It was dark. Then I slept there until five o'clock in the morning. (...) Walking again for almost six hours from five o'clock up to mid-day. I walked, yes. That was a bit difficult, there is a lot of sun, it is very hot. But I made it." (Belay, 27, Eritrea)

Two interview partners had already made escape attempts before they finally succeeded:

"Since I was kidnapped, I was taken to the barracks, I tried to escape one time from the barracks, in 2001. I went back home, but also the man came. And he treated my mother (...) badly, very badly. Then he also took me back to the barracks. But since then, I have never seen my mother. (...) I didn't know Germany, I didn't know anywhere - I just wanted to escape. If I could escape, at least I could get rest. Then I escaped, I thank God, with my children. (...) He was hiding money, I knew, where he had the money. I took the money and connected myself - there was a man, (...) he used to come to the barracks and he connected me to this man. He brought us to here, to Germany." (Kate, 25, Uganda)

• Capture and detention

Four interview partners report that their time as a child soldier ended with their capture. They were in detention for up to three years, under extremely poor conditions. They report abuse, torture and forced labour.

"Actually, my worst time in life was not when I was a child soldier. It was during the time I spent in prison (...). These soldiers, the national army, they were always torturing me in all ways, to see that I did what they wanted. (...) Honestly, it was too much and I couldn't bear it anymore. They wanted to take me to the court and be witness against this man, an opposition leader. (...) They never got enough evidence to put him in prison. (...) I was to say that I'm a rebel and he is our leader. (...) To be honest with you, I really spent so much time working for rebels, but I never met him in my life. (...) You just have to know the person from whom you get direct orders. You don't have to know others. (...) I really don't know if he is a rebel leader or not, I just know my direct bosses." (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

Three interview partners managed to escape from detention. The escape was often dangerous. One youth reports that he is haunted by memories of how he was smuggled over the border: "Ever since that when I came out of prison and up to now, I just feel like running. My life is all about running. And when escaping, I remember one hardest moment was crossing from Uganda to Sudan. (...) I spent more than six hours in a coffin. (...)

In Uganda, coffins they have some glasses, so if someone's dead, you can have a look on him, so that's what I used for breathing, for six hours. (...) I almost died in that coffin, and there is not a day that goes by when I don't get those memories." (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

• Rescue by a humanitarian organisation

One interview partner says that he was found by a humanitarian organisation when he was hiding in a village after a lost battle, surrounded by dead bodies:

"I was simply rescued by this organisation. (...) They only told me that it is not worth to remain in the UN refugee camp because it is a bit dangerous and also because of what had happened (...) to my father and my family. Just away from Africa. (...) They just said yes, they will prepare a long journey for me. (...) When I am where I was supposed to be, I would find people (...), they would take care of me, to see that I can again manage my life, that somehow I can also fulfil the dreams of my parents." (Peter, 22, Sudan)

Case Study 6

Steve J., 18, comes from Sierra Leone. As son of a critical journalist he was abducted selectively when he was seven years old and abused as a child soldier for years. After the end of hostilities he lived in different camps for war victims in Sierra Leone. Eventually he was found by relatives. He found out that his father had already fled to Germany with the family years ago.

When he was 17 years old, he followed him to Germany. An escape agent brought him to Germany by plane. At the moment of the interview, he has been in Germany for six months. Steve has now attained full age, lives in a residence for youth and takes German classes. Due to his severe trauma he receives therapeutic treatment. The asylum procedure is not finalized yet.

2.2.6 Escape to Europe

• Motivation to escape

The majority of the interview partners managed to flee to another country immediately after detention, release or escape from the armed group in order to protect themselves from the threat of being persecuted. However, one third of them lived in their countries or regions origin for a while, under difficult circumstances, until they had even more motives to escape.

“In Kinshasa, when I got to this orphanage, it was really strange. So, I had no place to sleep, this was a centre of which people say: You street children, you come to get food, in the morning, midday and evening. When you have eaten, you go again. Because there was no place at all where you could put up. When I went to get some food in the morning, I always stay there, I don’t know the capital. I always walked around (...), I see people walking, here, there. When I see that it is midday, I go, take my food. I tell them I don’t have a place to sleep, if they could find one for me. (...) If I had a place there where one would have said we take care of you, you will go to school, then I wouldn’t have had to leave the Congo.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

Some interview partners indicate that while they were still living in their home country, they were afraid of being exposed to the revenge of community members, since they were former rebels. They report incidents when former rebels were murdered.

“It was so difficult for the rebels because everybody stares at you. At every move you make, they stare at you. And we feel guilty in every second. (...) And you were very, very, very lucky if you came across a foreigner. You want anything: he or she will give it to you. But if you come across somebody that is of your colour or

somebody that is from your same land, then you are in big trouble. (...) Then you are down.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

The interview partners who remained in their country of origin after having been associated to an armed group report specific threatening situations which were catalysts for their decision to escape:

“I was in Sierra Leone and I was working there in a garden for a man. I was there with the hope that maybe one day I can find a family member. I was there and two boys pass by and point their fingers at me. I didn’t know what they wanted. (...) Suddenly these two boys come back to me again and say: You bastard, it is time for us to revenge what you have done to us, now it is our time to pay back. They wanted to beat me with wood and I ran away.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

• Preparing the escape

The reports of the interview partners often contradict the picture of criminal smuggler gangs who facilitate their “victim’s” journey to Europe out of greed and using unethical means:

“When I think about it today, I see people who risk everything to save people’s lives, to give people a new start without knowing if they will see us again one day or not. They have no interest to see us again but they think that some time we will not forget that I was rescued and that somebody helped me. Simply to start a new life, this was the feeling that they always showed us.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

One male says that he was found in a camp for displaced people by relatives who organised his trip to Germany where his father was living. The other interview partners decided to escape because they did not see any other way

of surviving. They did not necessarily choose Germany as their destination but grabbed whatever chance they had to escape. Until their arrival, they often did not know where they would end up.

“I didn’t know where to go, I didn’t know if it somehow would be a white country.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

Within the group of the interview partners, the organisation of the escape took three different forms: they either paid the facilitators of their escape with their own money, friends or relatives of their parents organised their escape, or they were brought out of the country by humanitarian organisations, which were usually religious, or by individuals such as priests, without having to pay anything.

2.3 Situation in Germany

2.3.1 Arrival in Germany

• Arrival

The interview partners describe their arrival in a completely different world. Many report that they did not understand where they were, even after they had arrived in Germany.

„All the places we got to were so strange and so well organized and advanced for my thinking, for my understanding, for oh my God! Everything was so - was so complex. Everybody I saw was in a rush. (...) It was like everything was totally in order. You know, I almost lost him (the person facilitating the flight), I almost lost him while I was looking. I wanted to pass time to feed my eyes. It was so - it was so - it was so fine. It was like: Man, there is a world somewhere. Like you pass the time looking and looking. (...) Every words I’ve met, at every station we stopped, I couldn’t read none. (...) I saw the way people attend to other people, the way they

communicate, you know, it was so, so different. It was kind of a different world, a civilized heaven on earth or something, I couldn't think of the right adjective to qualify that very particular day I stepped out of that country." (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

Case Study 7

Mike M., 24, is from Sierra Leone. At eight years of age he was abducted by the RUF, his parents were killed. After six years as child soldier he managed to flee. He came to Germany when he was 14 years old and was placed in a youth housing project. Mike received therapeutic treatment over years and graduated in secondary school. His asylum request was declined, but during the judicial proceedings he was granted 'suspension of deportation' due to humanitarian reasons. After graduating in secondary school, he started a family. Mike is father of three children. He has an unlimited residence permit and works as translator.

• Initial contacts and informal networks

All the interview partners say that after their arrival in Germany, they first sought for help by people who looked African and who helped them:

"Fortunately I come across a black man, (...) being able to come to my rescue. That is where I come to learn that for we - when you need a help for us Africans, you have to find a black brother but any other place, nobody you know. Because it's only a black man who knows what another black man is going through (...). So he tried to assist me, you know? He said it's okay, you are welcome and you are

now in Germany. (...) He said this is Europe, and then he directed me towards the Federal Office." (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

2.3.2 Procedure for granting asylum and residency

• Reception and allocation

Several interview partners describe their experiences during the asylum process : they registered at the Foreign Resident Authority or at a branch office of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. Usually, they got a train ticket and had to go to a central institution responsible for the initial reception centre located in the area that had been allocated to them, where the asylum hearing usually took place too. The early days in Germany were characterised by procedures and swapping of places which were hard for them to understand and where they do not have the right to decide for themselves.

One female interview partner reports that the relief about the successful escape outweighed the difficulties such as inappropriate accommodation and frightening train rides alone in a strange country:

"First I registered myself and then I got a schedule where I should go. The first night was very tough, we had such small beds and such a thin blanket, although for me, that was good. Somehow a new life, everything from the stress and everything I went through. Then I got this schedule. I didn't even know a word of German and had to go from (point of arrival) to (large city in another State). There I thought how do I get there, where is it? What can I say? (...) And then I met this woman, at the train station. I only showed her the schedule all the time. The woman came with me up to (large city) and I took suburban train. There

was a big ship in (large city), at the (river), a very large ship. I think this is going to be demolished. The refugees were coming from everywhere and it was very cold - new life, new people from everywhere, you know? (...) There were very many people on this ship, and all of them were brought away one after the other." (Grace, 25, Uganda)

• Asylum hearing

Some interview partners remember that the asylum hearings and the related procedures were incomprehensible. They describe the atmosphere during these hearings as sometimes unfriendly.

One male interview partner who was 15 at the time explains how he felt lost and exposed at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, how he missed his home country and his family to which he could not go back:

"Okay, the worst time in my life was in this Federal Office. (...) It was just a horror. (...) The people were completely unfriendly, okay? So, we didn't have a value, us people there. (...) Nobody wants to listen to you, nobody wants to know how you are, nobody. Everybody is just interested in the paper which you have, or they give you another paper on top of it, that I cannot read. Everything for me was like: What is this? And nobody is reading it for you to explain it; I am just feeling homesick. I miss my father, my mother, everything that I lost. This was a time when I was just finished." (Peter, 22, Sudan)

However, a female interview partner describes this period positively: from the beginning, she received psychosocial support because of her psychological status:

“Then they have such an interviewer from the Federal Office (...) who interrogated me, for three hours. I was lucky because I was so burdened by my past experiences so that the (social worker) was allowed to come with me. (...) And she held my hand throughout the interview, and this was a very, very big support.” (Grace, 25, Uganda) While many interview partners highlight the pressure they felt regarding the conditions of the asylum procedure for , this young woman describes her attitudes within this period of time, seeing the problems in Germany as subordinate to the situation in her home country:

“They said you have to wait for long until you get a reply, and it was all just about life. But for me, that was luck, that I was out of all this pain, the whole stress, the whole trauma of my childhood, I mean the difficult life on the boat with the cold, getting up at five in the morning, like in prison, but that was not so important for me. I looked at it as something being normal. Because I was happy by then.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

- **Assessment and definition of age**

Many of the interview partners who entered Germany when they were still minors report that their birth of date was changed during the asylum procedure. Two of them were declared to be 16 and thus became “eligible for asylum”, while two others were declared to be adults. All interview partners say that they did not receive any explanations and that they found it incomprehensible and scary that their details had been changed. They felt powerless and this was a strain.

“The first thing was my date of birth, (...) I go to this man, the concierge, he says he cannot speak English, but I say: Wrong. That was desperation at its highest. (...) I had given them my date of birth, and then I get the

Case Study 8

Abdoulaye M., 18, is from Sierra Leone. His father was an active member of an armed local self defence unit which tried to resist the attacks of the RUF. Abdoulaye had to participate as a child. When he was approximately twelve years old, the RUF attacked his village. His mother was brutally murdered in front of him and Abdoulaye was abducted to become a child soldier. After a relatively short time, he managed to escape and return to his home village. The reason for his flight from Sierra Leone was the threat of a local sect, which, after the death of his father, intended to initiate him by force. A catholic cleric organised his escape, at the age of 16 he arrived in Germany by ship.

He was placed in an accommodation facility for adults and lived very isolated in a small town. Over a year he was denied the possibility to attend school, instead he had to perform unpaid, charitable work. Through fellow Sierra Leoneans he came in touch with a counselling centre where he received psychological support. This centre could achieve that he was allowed to attend school. By now, he is attending the 10th grade of secondary school. His asylum application was rejected, he only was granted “exceptional leave to remain”. Legal action has been taken and is on-going to challenge the imminent deportation. At the time of the interview he had just become eighteen years old.

paper back and I read (changed date) although I was born on (birthday). They put an additional year so that I was already 16 years old. (...) Nobody is interested in it. He says: No. That is why I went to the concierge because I had given my filled forms to him. The concierge looked at me and said he had no clue. And then I just tried to talk to someone, I said the birthday is wrong, (...) I didn't write this because what I had written was crossed and then another thing was put there. I was afraid, I wanted to know why.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

- **Federal Office for Migration and Refugees decisions and residency**

When the interviews were conducted, the asylum procedure had not yet been completed for three youths and one minor had not yet applied for asylum. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees had granted protection from deportation on humanitarian grounds to two youths and to one according to the Geneva Conventions. One female

interview partner had been accepted for asylum according to article 16a of the German Constitutional Law. She recalls how she was notified:

“Then I got a letter from the Federal Office. (...) I went there to (social worker) with my letter, and what was it? You are accepted! You have a passport and you get a visa, one to two years! I was at a friend's place, we hugged very hard, I cried and screamed out of joy, because I knew how many people were sent home every day. (...) This was a breakthrough.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

However, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees had rejected the applications of seven interview partners, usually with the rationale that they had not been politically persecuted.

“I was rejected. They said that my statement was not on political grounds. But for me it was more than political. Because political people, people in

politics, people who are really in political problems, some happen to them a short time. (...) Some governments, they just take over and these people start suffering until the government is gone. But there are some people, some other people who suffer from the beginning until sometimes until the end. (...) For me it was not the government searching for me. But it was horrible for me." (Kate, 25, Uganda)

During the hearing, one interview partner did not mention that he had been kidnapped at the age of 12 and later been forced to participate in attacks against villages and in battles because he was ashamed. He only mentioned having been used as carrier. His application for asylum was rejected. The rejection of another interview partner's application by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees was revised after a psychosocial centre for refugees and trauma victims intervened. He was granted protection from deportation on humanitarian grounds.

The remaining six interview partners appealed against the decision. In the case of one interview partner the court proceedings are still ongoing and the case of another male interviewee was rejected again. Four interview partners were granted protection from deportation by the court. They had received support by psychosocial centres and other advising bodies.

Two of the interview partners whose application was rejected were granted "exceptional leave to remain" in Germany. The court case of one of the interview partners is ongoing while the other interview partner had just received information that he would be deported. He reports that he has been living with an "exceptional leave to remain" for several years and hoped he could stay.

"I was thinking, these people know that I'm in a big threat. Because, as I have been inside a war, I - I did many terrible things, that's - they should realize that I can't go back to that country to - to do anything. My life is in danger. So I think that these people will not send me back. So after they allowed me to work, they even give me a passport so that I can do any - I can work anywhere, at any time. So I started this my work. It's one year- one year, one month fulltime work. Then they - they wrote me that I have to go to - I have to go and see my embassy. (...) So I went there, they identified me. After two weeks (...) they wrote me a letter, that I should willingly go and say to them that I want to go back, (...) from now till January 15. If not, they will deport me." (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

At the time of interview, seven interview partners had a residence permit for up to two years only. Two interview partners had received permanent residency. One interview partner describes her feelings about her long-term prospects in Germany:

"Today I am here and very, very happy. Since January, I have an unlimited residence in my passport. I have got all papers for the application of a German passport. What a dream." (Grace, 25, Uganda)

2.3.3 Accommodation and care

• Initial accommodation

Only one of the interview partners was immediately given accommodation in a youth welfare institution after his arrival in Germany. The other minors and adults were first brought to big central institutions where they shared rooms with other adults.

"They brought me to a place where adults were staying. (...) Nobody cared about me. I just cannot sleep at night, I get these dreams, nightmares, I dream bad all night long and in the room where they put me, in the moment I manage to fall asleep the people start to become loud, and I just cannot sleep. (...) There are six beds in my room but for now, we are four living there." (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

One interview partner reports that the institution for initial accommodation reminded him of the prison from which he had escaped because of the control, the guards and the way food was distributed. He therefore had negative feelings towards it.

"It was a transit camp with security and they give you a card, they carry everything away there. I had new clothes, new underwear, and then they showed me my room. (...) And then they show you papers, the rules, all the regulations of the camp and everything. (...) The first experience in Germany is like: I tell you, you better go back to where you came from. This is what I thought. (...) We all have to line up, like prisoners. Again lining up and waiting for the food. This was like in the prison where you were, where I was coming from." (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

• Being taken into care and youth welfare services

All the interview partners who came to Germany when they were minors were appointed a legal guardian: five were taken care of by a legal guardian attached to the youth authorities, three by a legal guardian working for an NGO and two interview partners did not specify. All of those who had

Case study 9

Kate K., 25, is from Uganda. When she was nine years old, her father was killed by a rebel attack. She was severely injured during the attack as well and is still suffering from the consequences. When she was 15 years old she was abducted by a soldier from the national army and was forced to live with him in a military camp in forced ‘marriage’ for six years. During this time, the soldier mistreated her and sexually abused her. Together with her two

children she eventually managed to flee to Germany. She financed her escape by plane with money she had taken from her ‘husband’. Her asylum request was rejected. With support from her therapist she was able to take legal action against the decision and obtain ‘suspension from deportation’ due to her illness. Now she has a limited residence permit. Due to her disability she is unable to work.

been or were still cared for by a legal guardian working for an NGO report that s/he played an important and supportive role in their lives.⁴²

“And when I arrived in Germany, everything started a bit difficult with the language and the different things and the culture, everything was just a bit complicated. When I was appointed to a legal guardian, things started to get better. It is actually quite okay now. And I got support from everywhere, from the youth welfare office and from my former guardian.” (Mike, 24, Sierra Leone)

The youth authorities’ legal guardians are mentioned less often and thus appear to have a less important role.

Half of the youths who had entered Germany as minors were

accommodated and cared for in youth welfare institutions. Their reports about their experience of safe living conditions and receiving support are positive:

“Generally I feel better here because I have a place to sleep here, I go to school. I don’t have to try to move on my own. They give me food. They support me well, when I have a problem I tell them about it and they help me well.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

The staff in the institutions are the persons the youths have most connection to at the beginning.

One interview partner describes his new life in the youth welfare institution and how he compared it with his experiences in the military. He is torn between feelings of sympathy and trust towards the staff, and general feelings of mistrust:

“It feels fostered. (...) It’s like being in an environment where you have the facilities to speed up your dreams. (...) It’s different. (...) At first it was strange to me, but I came to understand it. We have people, governing us, officers, caretakers, this and that, taking control of everything. I was given an apartment. Not the whole house, just a room for myself. I was enrolled in

a school. The school is still a refugee kind of school: my school comprises of strictly refugees. But it’s still a school. And then the organisation which we are being governed by takes us around sometimes, in their own way. You know, they carry little things in their own way that could please us, that could really, really, really please us. (...) The organisation that is governing me now at least they are concerned, if I may say. Or due to the job, maybe the job makes them to be concerned. Probably they are not personally concerned or caring about our situation. But let’s look at it from the aspect of the job. They are concerned. They help sometimes, although they are not God. They cannot really help everybody because they too, they have their own private problems. But they tend to help when there are problems where believe they are capable of helping. In my country, in such situations that happens to be my mother – in my motherland, they don’t give a fuck about you. So, now comparing in a foreign land, where nobody knows you but still tries to help in a way he or she can help, at least it’s appreciated. I’m just talking at this present moment that I’m in. So I don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow, maybe tomorrow they will kick me out, like: get out of our land, we don’t want you any longer. Nobody knows anything. I’m just talking due to this present situation I’m into now. For the up-keeping, they are really trying to make us feel okay.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

One interview partner was at first given accommodation in adult housing. He said he was 15 years old when he first came to Germany, but his age was defined as 17 years during the assessment. In a situation of crisis because he was psychologically stressed and overwhelmed by the living conditions, he was transferred to a group in which youths lived together. He however had difficulties to accept

⁴² There are three different categories of guardians in Germany: (1) the individual guardian (Einzelvormund) is a private person who takes on a guardianship on voluntary basis; (2) the legal guardian working for an NGO (Vereinsvormund) is assigned by an NGO that is recognised for guardianships, and usually is a social worker; (3) the legal guardian of the youth authorities (Amtsvormund) is a staff of the respective youth authority who however should act independently. All three categories of guardians are biased lobbyists of those entrusted to their care.

Case study 10

Grace C., 25, comes from Uganda. She informed the author of this study about her experiences as a child soldier, but does not want them to be published. A soldier who knew her parents helped her to escape. Shortly after her 18th birthday she arrived in Germany by plane. Because she received a lot of professional and voluntary help right from the start, she was able to attend school and graduate

in secondary school. Soon she will complete a qualified apprenticeship. The long lasting therapeutic treatment contributed to her psychological stabilisation. Almost two years after the submission of her asylum application, she was granted asylum under article 16(a) of the German Constitutional Law. By now, she has an unlimited residence permit and would like to apply for the German citizenship soon.

the “control” of the staff after he had been “under control” in the military and was no longer in the collective adult housing unit. The conflicts in the group of youths with whom he was living escalated and he had to leave. He was then once again given accommodation in an establishment for refugees.

- **Accommodation in institutions for persons seeking for asylum**

Most of the interview partners, including five minors, were given accommodation in institutions for asylum seekers. One interview partner recalls the time when he was brought to a home for single men by a staff member of the youth welfare office:

“But then she told me: ‘Unfortunately, I have to tell you that I will bring you to a house where you have to look after yourself.’ I was not afraid. ‘But you have to take care by yourself, but when you have problems’ - then she gave me her card. ‘Call me.’ (...) Okay, and then we get to this home. She told me right away that all of those living there are adults.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

Some interview partners describe their desire for more care and support, and say that they did not feel comfortable in

the institutions where they shared their rooms.

One of them reports how he felt when he was given accommodation in a far-off village with another minor, without the possibility to go to school and nothing to do.

“It was very difficult to live there because I was there with one other boy, he is also from Sierra Leone (...). The boy attempted suicide several times, he want to kill himself. I said no. (...) So I always intervened, all these things. He said, what type of living is this? We came at least for us to seek protection, you know, and these people, all of a sudden, where they take us, no, nothing. There in (village) there is nothing, no shop, nothing. Sometimes we have to walk, it is seven kilometres from (village) to (small town), we have to walk by foot, seven kilometres to (small town), and we buy some food to eat and we go back. So it was very difficult, the boy was totally out of mind, you know? (...) He decided it was better for him to go and die in Sierra Leone then to come and die here.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

He also reports that staff of the youth office who wanted to help the youth to get accommodation in an appropriate

institution failed because of the resistance of the head of the office: “Mr A (employee of the youth administration) said: Ah, I saw in TV, they criticized Germany that it is the only country in Europe where young asylum seekers are allowed to live alone, and it is against United Nation law. He told me that. He said that for that reason, he wanted to write something to the administration, so maybe they can find a - how do you call this - Kinderheim, where children are living. (...) He was trying, trying. (...) They refused all these things. I don’t know. But the man was very sympathetic. Mr A said: I don’t think it is good for you here, if you continue to stay here, you will not - maybe you will do something stupid.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

All the interview partners describe the institutions for accommodating asylum seeking persons as daunting places. One talks about his first impression of the housing where he had to live as an unaccompanied minor:

“I saw the house and I thought: my God! I was sitting inside a car like this, and the taxi driver (...) asked me to come out. I said: Come out where? He said: here of course, you have reached your location. - Which location? - It’s this. (laughs). Then he went to the back and removed my bag (laughs) and dropped it. I said: Let me come with you. Then he called the concierge who came over. He was speaking English and he asked if I was speaking English - I said yeah. He had already got information about me. He said that, this is the place where I would stay. It was a horrible building.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone) Some of the youths report that they were housed in buildings where drugs were sold. They lived with adults who had nothing to do and no prospects. Two interview partners however stress that, compared to the conditions in their home countries, the discomfort in the institu-

tions where they were accommodated did not seem important.

“You can’t compare this to living in a wooden house with maybe 20 people in one room. Boys have to sleep on the floor or you take your sleeping turn by turn. When one wakes up, he leaves for you to sleep. Then compare it to a place where you have escaped to. This place too, is not so conducive, but you have electricity, you have water to bath with. At least the bed you are sleeping, you are the only one in it. At least for that little bit of experience, you would always say it’s okay.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

Case Study 11

Rose P., 19, is from Uganda. When she was twelve, she was abducted by rebels and her family was killed. She was held captive for five years. As 17 year-old she managed to flee. She was pregnant when she arrived in Germany. She was granted ‘suspension from deportation’ due to humanitarian reasons and has a limited residence permit. She receives therapeutic treatment due to the severe trauma she is suffering. She is living in a private apartment with her children and is participating in an integration class.

One young man reports that some of the details of the housing (for example long corridors and shared rooms) brought back memories of traumatic experiences in prison. He was then allowed to live in a better place where he has his own apartment.

“When I was in prison, I was arrested with one guy. He was called Joshua and we had been staying in the same hostel. Then, a few months later, when we were in prison, he died and I slept with his body and some other dead bodies

for almost a week-end. (...) The first place where I was living, it was not so nice, it was like - the way it was built, I mean, it was so complicated. It had a long corridor, a very long corridor, and in the room where I was staying, I was sleeping with some people. Some were sleeping on the ground and it was really just not so easy for me, bringing back memories, seeing someone sleeping just on the ground always (crying) - my friend, just, when I’m sleeping just between both of them.” (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

• A flat of one’s own

When a residence permit is issued, refugees are allowed to move out of their shared accommodation and to get their own flat:

“Yes, and then I set up my own flat. I just have an old sofa, but for me, it was like a dream. New life, residence above all, a whole year without having to go there to get a new visa every month. Oh, that was beautiful.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

2.3.4 Maintenance

• Maintenance in youth welfare institutions

The interview partners who are housed in youth welfare institutions report that they are comprehensively cared for: their means of subsistence, school material etc., are all provided:

“Whatever you do, they buy it for you. You don’t have the permission to buy anything. They only say that the money they give to you is for your own personal things. They buy your few things. Not that they buy luxurious things or fashion, but the little up-keeping is different, they just take you with them.” (Steve, 18, Sierra Leone)

• Living of benefits related to the Asylum Seekers Benefit Act

Young refugees who are not housed in child and youth welfare institutions have to make do with the benefits given them by the Asylum Seekers Benefit Act during the first four years of their asylum procedure. Only after one year they can apply for a work permit, a job or training scheme.

If they decide to go to school, they remain dependent on these social benefits which are then cut and from which they have to finance their food, clothes, electricity, public transport, school material etc. The interview partners report how difficult it was to meet their needs with the little amount of money⁴³:

“The money we receive here - now I am getting 170 Euro for a month⁴⁴, and if for example I pay 50 Euro to my lawyer (...) and I have to buy food for the month because that is what I used to do, by food, maybe I was paying over 50, 60 Euro just for food. Sometimes I have to buy a book, like today also, now we have to buy a new book for German classes, you know. And now they give us the book number to order it. All these things. Sometimes I have to buy a card to charge my phone. Now it is over two months, three months that I haven’t charged my phone. (...) So it is very difficult. For example my food, I can only get African food in (big city), there is the only place where we have an Afro-Shop. So I have to take the bus, it’s almost 10 Euro from here to

⁴³ Since that time, the benefits have been increased following a judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court of 18 July 2012 because they violated the “fundamental right to a decent minimum income”. Federal Constitutional Court, 1 BvL 10/10, 18.7.2012.

⁴⁴ The costs for electricity in the home for asylum seekers are retained by the social welfare office.

(big city), to go and come back. So I used to buy a ticket for the whole state which is cheaper, it is 18 Euro. So I use it, I am going there, I buy a lot of African food and I bring it home, you know. This is the way I am living.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

One interview partner reports that he only received 190 euros per month since he was a minor. It was impossible for him to cover his living expenses and school materials. He therefore tried to get a job without a work permit. But since he did not have the right to work he was unable to defend himself against poor conditions at his workplace.

Asylum seekers can be forced to work for one euro an hour, “serving the public good”. One interview partner reports how he was denied the right to schooling although he was a minor and how he had to work under threat of having his financial support cut.

“God knows everything of what we went through. It’s very difficult. I was in (village) doing communal work, you know, we worked for eight hours a day. Here also in (small town), we worked for eight hours a day, and it was very hard. Sometimes we worked in a forest like this, you alone, you clear all these things. It was very difficult. But I have nowhere to complain. So we just have to do it. Because they said that we have to do it; if you don’t do it, you will get no money. (...) Later, when I came to (village) we worked sometimes in the graveyard, in the forest, it doesn’t matter, any type of work. They will just say, you have to do this, you have to do this.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

• Job and occupation

Six of the interview partners at the time of interview were already working. They stress the importance of

Case Study 12

Abdul H., 25, is from a rural farmers’ family in Sierra Leone. After the death of his father, his family was unable to continue to finance his school fees. He started an informal apprenticeship as a tailor at the age of twelve. Shortly after, his village was attacked by the RUF. He was forced to participate in the destruction of his village and afterwards abducted by the rebels. For years he was forced to participate in hostilities and attacks on villages. When he was 18 years old, peace talks were initiated and the fighters were sent home. However, Abdul H could not return to his village since he was threatened due to his past

as a rebel. With some money, which he still kept from his time with the rebels, he financed his escape by ship to Germany. Due to fear and shame he has not mentioned his abuse as a child soldier in the asylum hearing. His asylum request was declined. Abdul H. lived with ‘suspension of deportation’ status for years, worked and tried to ‘forget’ his past. In 2009, he was threatened with deportation and he started to be affected by massive trauma symptoms. Only now the 25 year-old started to make use of therapeutic help. In an appeal of his asylum case he is now trying to obtain protection from deportation.

earning their own money and not depending on benefits anymore:

“Up to now, I have not been without a job. I always work. (...) As I said before, I can earn my money myself very well. Maybe I even earn more than some people who went to study. I have my regular job, and I have a good income. And I am also working as an interpreter, I even work for (office of a public administration).” (Mike, 24, Sierra Leone)

2.3.5 Education and training

Most of the interview partners stress the importance of education and training. They are highly motivated to go to school and to learn. They look at education as very important for their future.

“I like going to school. I like the school because I am telling myself, without school I won’t get far in life. (...) In order to be someone in life, you always

have to study in order to become intelligent. Also when you are working, when you know that you completed your studies, then you are able to manage situations well, or also at work, you know how you have to behave. This is why the school for me is a really good thing. (...) I am always busy learning, learning a lot so that I can make it up to university if I have the means.” (Jean 16, Congo)

• German classes and integration courses

Those who were housed in youth welfare institutions took German classes:

“With German, well that is a bit difficult, it is hard, I can speak a bit. (...) I know that I will still learn it. (...) I have to go to German classes, a language course. I do nothing else than learning all that.” (Jean, 16, Congo)

Minors who were not housed in youth welfare institutions often had a big problem accessing education.

One interview partner was able to attend an integration course before he started school, thanks to the initiative of a helpdesk worker who had to struggle with a lot of resistance from administrative barriers.

“She put me into an integration school. This is only for persons who are given a paper by the Federal Office: they will send them to study German for a while, maybe for six months.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

Two other interview partners attended an integration course after having received their residence permits.

• **Schooling**

Many interview partners stress the great importance of going to school.

Three interview partners were at first not allowed to go to school although they were minors and they suffered. Two of the 16 or 17 year olds had to push for the permission to go to school. They took their own initiative and were also supported by their therapists and advisors.

“We always told them before, we told them that we wanted to go school and learn something. They said no, no, no. They have no possibilities, nothing like this. (...) My house is here, and the next opposite there is one school, a middle school. So, when I was living there, every morning I saw these children going to school. I was not feeling good, you know? At that time, I would just wake up and go to work. But I was not feeling good, you know, until I told Mrs C (advisor) that I wanted to learn, I want to learn. And Mrs C found a way. But first Mrs B (advisor) tried in the administration and they refused, they said no, there is no way they can help me. I would have no right to go to school, all these things. So later she tried another way, and this is the way now. But now, I think it is better because in the school I have friends

and every day I am learning new things, which is important for me. (...) I like it. I want to learn.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

• **Challenges and the need for support**

The young refugees have to overcome language barriers and gaps in their previous education. One interview partner explains how difficult it is to use a computer since they had never before been exposed to them:

“At the moment I still find it difficult, you know, because (breathing heavily) not from the school work, from the school work I don’t find it difficult, only that for example in Africa, I was not using a computer before. (...) I don’t have good results in it, I don’t like it. But I’m trying and my teacher, she understands that it is difficult because I was not using a computer before. I understand everything, but like for example if we are using MS Word or so, I am not so fast in typing. That is my problem. That’s why last time one man gave me an old computer and so I can learn, at least to be faster.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

To have to once again attend classes after having gone through extreme experiences as child soldiers can be irritating for some youths and it is not always easy for them to appreciate school:

“Even the school where I was going, I was not having a chance. I was seeing it like a waste of time. But with the therapy, at the end of the day I came to realise, yeah, it was something worthwhile. And then, the therapy also helped me to fight for something. Like - even though the school was difficult, you know, but it helps us. (...) We did something for the school and then they were proud of us and then we were also proud of them.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

Psychological stress can make it hard for former child soldiers to focus on lessons since they also have to deal with traumatic memories. A former child soldier describes this problem:

“Sometimes I cannot study very well, you know, because I cannot - my thinking is not so, you know. I am not giving one hundred % efforts in my studies at the moment, I’m just trying.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

One interview partner explains that he had hoped school would help him come out of his isolation and improve his psychological state but because of the burden of his experiences as a child soldier he initially remained isolated at school too. .

The environment in the housing units where the youths live can also be unfavourable:

„The situation in the home also, when the teacher gives us homework to do, alone at home, I cannot. And I cannot think, I have neighbours who are always loud and things like this. Yes, and the situation is very difficult for me.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

The interviews indicate that the daily school structure can be a stabilising factor for the youths, and that experiencing success and good results at school can boost their self-confidence.

• **Professional training**

Three of the interview partners were able to take part in a training scheme. When the interviews were conducted, two of them had not yet qualified. They confirm the stabilising and motivating effects of the training scheme on them.

“And then I did the training as nursing assistant, and we had our exams and I was the best student. (...) I am

nurse Grace now, nursing assistant. I have my qualification as nursing assistant. Great. Then I was also the best student here, it was published in the newspaper in Germany! It was a positive report, not like this and that, but as a qualified nursing assistance, within this year only, with all the problems of the language and all that, all the stress. And then I was there with the best result: 1.1 in practical subjects and in the written examination. Fantastic! (...) I saw myself and I thought oh God, me in Germany! In the newspaper! Being the best student! Yes, this was simply a dream.“ (Grace, 25, Uganda)

and social support, but also their own capacities and attitudes.

- **Friends and other people “replacing” the family**

Having friends in Germany is important to most interview partners. Their friends often also come from their home countries.

“I have friends. But my friends are all women, and they are very good to me and they are helping me so much. (low voice). (...) They are always there for me when I have a problem, when I’m sick, because sometimes, I am

somebody to be with. Or somebody to - They always call me, because they are not staying here, they are staying in (village). They call me and we talk or sometimes they tell me: Come! Come during the weekend. And I go there, spend the weekend and I feel like at least, there is somebody who is there for me, I’m not just alone (crying).“ (Rose, 19, Uganda)

Most interview partners confirm that they are looking for a replacement for their relatives among their friends and also professionals and they feel as if they find this.

“I lost my mother when I was 16 years old. I don’t know where my father is but Mrs H (therapist) and Mrs S (social worker) are like my German parents. I have many friends, I am in a church community, mixed with Germans and Black people, I am singing in the choir, am active, I am riding a bicycle, I do sports – just normal. Yes, I managed to find my way.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

- **Voluntary support**

All the female interview partners received a lot of voluntary support. The young men participating in this study did not mention support from others as frequently as the female participants.

“And then I got to know a woman, a German woman who has a practice as homeopath. (...) And this woman also brought me to her home, introduced me to her mother (...), they welcomed me and paid for my German classes. (...) The landlady always gave me curtains, table clothes, vases, all sorts of things. She is calling me, how was your exam today? How are you? I got to know very many nice people, I think this is part of my luck.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

One interview partner says that he also works as a volunteer which has

Case study 13

Belay N., 27, is from Eritrea. He grew up with ten siblings. Due to the poverty of his family, he was only able to attend primary school. When he was 16 years old, he joined the national army to financially support his family. After a short period of time he wanted to leave the military again, but he was denied to do so. Since he openly mentioned existing corruption and injustices inside the army, he was harrassed, for instance he was not allowed to take any holiday and was detained and convicted to penal labour. Since there was no possibility for legally dropping out of the military, he escaped after eight years. Since he was being persecuted as deserter in Eritrea, he crossed the border to Sudan where

a relative helped him to flee to Europe. As 24 year-old he accidentally arrived in Germany with the wrong lorry, he had actually intended to go to England. After just a few months the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees granted him protection from deportation under the Geneva Refugee Convention. Now he has a limited residence permit and a passport. He is attending a language course, lives in his own flat and earns his living as unskilled worker. He also financially supports his family in Eritrea. Still, he would like to do a professional apprenticeship. He is the only interviewee who does not report on any psychological stress.

2.3.6 Stabilising factors and social support

In summary, it can be concluded that the interview partners attribute the stabilisation of their well-being to a combination of different factors – mainly the general conditions, security

sick. Sometimes I’m in the hospital and my children are alone. They take my children for me. If I or one of my children is sick and I need to be with the other one, they always offer me this kind of help, every time. And sometimes it’s not just the help, but it’s the contact (crying). Because sometimes I feel lonely and I need

helped him to make more contacts and become a bit more stable.

“I engage myself in a lot of social activities, and Mrs N (school social worker) has helped me a lot to come in contact with a lot of people, and then, you know, ways of fighting, you know, difficulties, sadness. (...) To be a better person in society.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

- **Breaking the cycle of isolation through education and work**

Access to education and work is described as an important factor in breaking the cycle of isolation as a refugee, and find some direction in Germany.

“The people who are living in a home don’t know how the others are living, they are only there in the home, are not allowed to go to school, are not allowed to work, how can they then know how life is here? I have learnt it because I have gone to school, I had contacts with German people, I worked, and now I know a bit.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

- **Own resources**

The interview partners talk about their own resources, their capacities and strategies to solve problems which help them to become more stable. Many interview partners are religious. They explain that their beliefs and the connection to the church community give them strength.

“This is the most important thing, church, God is doing everything and you stay positive (laughing). And I continued like that, up to now, I still go to church, sing in the choir, participate in everything and still believe that God has been with me up to today.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

Religion can give hope for someone in despair and isolation. One interview

partner points out that the Qur’an prohibits suicide which has helped him to not harm himself.

“The only thing I’m doing, I’m just at home, praying, praying, praying. Because I used to pray five times a day. That is the only thing I believe is helping me now. (...) There are some parts in the Qur’an, you can read that God will tell you that to kill yourself is sinful, and the punishment is hell, you know? So, sometimes I find it difficult, I say okay, let me just try and fight this stress, this type of condition, you know? That is why I’m just - my entire life I’m just praying, praying to God for a good beginning. (...) I have a little bit of hope, you know? Because I think maybe it will not last forever. Because I was in problems, I was at war, God freed me from these struggles. I think that maybe one day God will free me from all this negative thinking. That is my belief at the moment.” (Abdoulaye, 18, Sierra Leone)

Interview partners who are isolated use television to get some distraction. They say that this can give them some comfort:

“I take most of my time on TV and I watch these programs on health and things like that. But I see so many people who are worse off than me, and they are living, they survive. So, that one also gives me strength. When I get - when I feel sadness inside of me, then I see someone more, who is - someone who is sicker than me, then I say ah, then I am not alone. There are some other people. Then I have to live with it.” (Kate, 25, Uganda)

One interview partner explains that he has been able to make use of some of the skills he learnt as a child soldier – for example the ability to manage life on his own and to be able to stand alone.

“As a boy, I learned to be alone, where there is no father and no mother. You

have to know that you have to believe in yourself. (...) You are all what you have. You are yourself. You have to be, to put yourself in competition. Try to fight for something beneficial in life. Try to make yourself known in the society. You know, with obedience, patience and respect, which is the most important thing- Give respect onto others, so that you earn it with respect. Be it a child or an old one, it doesn’t matter which age. You have to be more sensitive, you have to be creative, try to be creative and skilful, to make ends meet, to make your living. Even if you don’t have any chance of surviving. Like for instance when I was in the jungle. I was all alone, but - even though in rains, with sun, but I know, I have to make it. I shall live. I shouldn’t give up, because I’m the only one.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

All those who already have children consider the responsibility for them as an important and stabilising factor. The high degree of own initiative and the stamina of many of the interview partners is striking. One female interview partner emphasises diligence, the ability to adapt to new situations and own motivation, as well as pride in what she has achieved:

“And always hard working, I never complained, I never caused problems when they said Grace, do this work, do the dirty one, clean here, do this, I have done everything. The (therapist) had told me: Grace, you have to do everything. Do everything! You have nothing to lose if you do everything. Because you know what you want, you want education, you want to be trained, and you have to work hard. Don’t complain. (...) I never did, and I always got good feedback. (...) I wanted to live a positive life. This in summary means that the motivation has to come from you. I always see shows in the TV, they say you cannot change the world but you can change

yourself. So you are the centre, that is you. You have to decide, I want to have it like this or like that. (...) I am also proud of myself (laughing). This is what I tell myself, then I go somewhere in town, sit down and eat a big ice cream with a lot of fruits. And then I say yes, I do something good to myself. I have worked so hard, I went through many things, both good and bad, and now I sit down here and just look forward. This is what I hope for many refugees. (Grace, 25, Uganda)

2.3.7 Trauma, stress, symptoms and coping mechanisms

Only the interview partner who decided to join the Eritrean military services at the age of 16 does not talk about the symptoms of psychological trauma. However, the other interview partners do and usually refer to their experiences of violence in their home countries.

Looking back at the early days in Germany when they thought they would be deported or their precarious living conditions in Germany, they

describe the stress as being particularly intense. Their mental stability is usually connected to their certainty about receiving a residence permit and having prospects for the future.

“There were very tough times, with trauma, with crying, with fighting, really, almost giving up, with everything. But I found my way and now I feel quite okay and you can see that I am again leading a normal life. This would be my message to the young refugees, the children and the youth, women as such, the adults, to look forward. They are stuck in their past, they don’t want to learn anything, they are simply afraid where they would end up in their lives, how the future will be and so on. I know many people who went back home again. Their application was rejected, they were deported. They were put into prison and then brought back to Africa. And there they are. Then we used to cry and thought now it will be us, I will be the next and tomorrow it’s your turn. You are coming and they say the room is empty, he is gone. The people are living with this fear. But for me, it was like a victory to go through

all that. I still see some people now (...) who are still within the procedure. Up to today. Still. And they see me and they say my God, you are so lucky that you have a normal life now. You undergo training in Germany. A young black girl who never had dreams in her life.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

The interview partners talk about a number of stress factors. Many describe how they still suffer from being separated from their parents. Some mention stress related to the living conditions in the new environment, to the experience of being a stranger and isolated.

“Since the time I came here, a lot of things were not okay. I think I could be like someone who is free, with no one still chasing me, but so many things are hard, you know. It’s so hard being somewhere where you don’t know the people, you can’t speak their language and it’s like you don’t know anything. Even no family. (...) Sometimes it’s hard in life, when you don’t have anything, you don’t have anyone, just by yourself.” (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

Case study 14

Salomon Z., 24, is from Uganda. He grew up in poor conditions with his single mother. Since she could not afford his further education after primary school, she left her son in the hands of an uncle who was a Captain in the national army. There he first served as domestic worker and by the age of twelve, his uncle started taking him to military trainings. At the age of fourteen, Salomon was a ‘fully trained soldier’. When his uncle switched sides from the national army to the rebels of the Peoples Redemption Army, Salomon joined the rebels as well. He participated in

attacks against villages where children were abducted to be abused as child soldiers. However, he primarily served as spy and messenger. The rebel organisation sent him to high school and university. But instead of being able to study and to graduate, he was obliged to spy on and agitate fellow students. Salomon was already over eighteen when he was arrested by government soldiers after a demonstration. In a house search they found a parcel with weapons which he had been assigned to take somewhere. In the following three years of detention Salomon was massively tortured. He was extorted to

wrongly testify that one of the leading opposition politicians had been a rebel leader. The rebel group eventually organised his escape during a transport of prisoners. Several months before the interview, he was smuggled to Germany by plane. His asylum procedure is still ongoing, he has only a temporary residence permit for the period of the asylum procedure. He is attending a language course. Due to the severe physical and trauma symptoms, he is now under treatment. He is trying to actively deal with his past as child soldier and victim of torture.

Many of the interview partners indicate that the fact of their residency being insecure and the restrictions connected to their lack of official status were very stressful (idleness because of not being allowed to work and the obligation to stay in their assigned district). Insecurity related to residence status always goes hand in hand with the fear of being deported.

“You are not allowed to work, you are not allowed to leave the area, you are always controlled. This is hard, it makes life difficult, without hope. (...) Your staying here, that is a problem. Am I really accepted? Will I be sent back to Africa next week? Will I live today? Am I sick? Am I allowed to go and visit friends? You are not allowed to move from (State), you are not allowed to work.” (Grace, 25, Uganda)

- **Racism and social exclusion**

One interview partner describes how he suffers from the hopelessness of his current situation: because of the obligation to remain in a certain area, he is forced to permanently stay in the small town where he feels excluded and attacked. Several interview partners mention isolation and racism.

“With the situation in Germany (...) for a black person, you know - the racism is very hard. But for now, these past few years, it's getting less. It is not easy. It is the older people who still have the mentality of racism. But not all. Like (part of a city), before those years, there were only few black people. When you were going out, people would be looking at you as if - you know? Sometimes you come across embarrassing situations, a police control for example. (...) You see the racism, it's difficult. (...) The differences between you and others, you know? But, as I said earlier, that's the way it is. And I know, with time, things will change to the better. That

is where our prayers and my hopes go to - at least one day, just everybody will have the same rights, regardless of race, colour, background or sex. Everybody will be able to have the equal rights. I am not talking about Germany as such, I am talking about the world, so that everybody will be able to live in a better place.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

The same interview partner puts his feelings of exclusion in Germany into perspective by recalling his experiences in his home country:

“Whatever situation I am in right now, here in Germany, no matter, but I would say (...) it is much better than what we Africans are seeing in our own countries - that is the big thing. (...) Sometimes the society makes you - you are not even on the right track. Keep on walking the rest of your live, do things right, no matter if what they are doing is wrong. The majority is always bigger than the minority. There is no chance in anything. Seeing my live today in Germany is - compared to those days back and with other people, I would say that, yeah, I give thanks to the almighty God every day because it's much better. So much, much better.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

- **Symptoms of trauma**

Many interview partners mention symptoms of trauma such as sleeping disorders, nightmares, haunting memories, problems concentrating and forgetfulness.

“I am simply not feeling well and I am always tired, I don't sleep and sometimes I am thinking of things which I don't want to think about. Then, all the memories are coming back. For example at the school where I am going now, sometimes I am learning something and when I go out, I forget everything at once.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

Several interviewees wish to forget what has happened in the past, but say that the memories always get to them:

“I cannot control my head, I always get nightmares. I need help.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

One male interview partner describes the intensification of his psychological problems after he arrived in Germany, due to the isolation and the lack of anything to do. He was overwhelmed by memories of the war that appeared in the form of hallucinations:

“Then the real horror starts. All those experiences, experiences of war, everything comes up, one after the other. Because I am just lost in my thoughts. (...) I only stay home. And then, I have seen so many things. (...) I still ask myself, how could this happen? (...) I still have the same eyes, I think I am normal. I am just sitting there, and people are coming out of the wall. I don't know how I can describe this but really, they are coming out from there, bloody hands, what I have seen in war. Cut-off hands, yes and the destroyed (stops)...” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

Many interview partners try to avoid thinking of their past experiences by distracting themselves with work, school or another occupation.

“When I stay at home alone, it also makes me think back. But if I get something to do that keeps me busy, then I don't think too much. (...) Before I started coming for the therapy, I used to make sure that every time I'm busy doing something like cleaning or something, so that I don't think too much.” (Rose, 19, Uganda)

- **Feelings of guilt**

Some interviewees talk about their feelings of guilt which still affect them today.

“What I have done when I was a child... No matter what people say, that you were small, that you were under drugs and so on, but I feel that I have done something, because I still see pictures, I still see pictures, the people to whom I did something, and this is very, very hard for me to live with.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

• **Suicidal tendencies**

Several interview partners say they have thought about suicide in the past and in the present:

“I don’t know if there is something important for life. Because sometimes I see like life is meaningless. It’s nothing. We all struggle with life and at the end of the day (crying) it turns out like nothing. So to me, life is nothing. I mean it’s there, but it means nothing to me.” (Rose, 19, Uganda)

2.3.8 Professional support through social work and therapy

Many interviewees are grateful for the chance to live in Germany, to receive support, to have their basic needs fulfilled to have escaped from persecution and poverty in their countries of origin.

“Here are people who do a lot of work. They help. The help is good for me, it’s very good. Because like me now, I don’t work. If I were to be in my country, I could not be eating, my children could not be going to school, they would not have clothes, food and so. But here it’s - the care is okay. Good.” (Kate, 25, Uganda)

• **Staff in refugee housing, in counselling centres etc.**

The staff in accommodation centres are important as they are the first people the newly arrived former child

soldiers come into contact with and are those who seek further support.

“When I had just arrived in Germany (...) I met some people who first wanted to hear my story and then they were there to help me, every time when I had a problem, when I was sick or when I wanted something, they were always there to help me, help me with my children. They treat me like their own child. To ensure that I am happy all the time. (...) They were two old ladies, one had worked in the home where I was, where I was brought to. The other one was my caretaker, and the care and the love that they gave me was more than just working in this home. Yes, they were always there for me.” (Rose, 19, Uganda)

Teachers and school social workers who are in contact with the former child soldiers can also be important points of contact and can seek further support.

Some of the interview partners were helped by psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture, which offer therapeutic support and social counselling.

One interview partner reports that a psychosocial centre put him in touch with a mentor who spoke his mother tongue and accompanied and supported him whenever necessary (for example on issues related to education and administrative issues).

“When he (mentor) comes to me, we do not only do the home work, we also talk. He explains to me how I can better get organised here in Germany, how I can live, how the culture is, the public offices, I must be patient. So, if I wouldn’t be able to talk – I am really stressed by the public offices.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

• **Therapy**

The majority of the interviewees has either already received therapeutic care or is still receiving it, usually in psychosocial centres for refugees.

Nearly all the interview partners describe therapy as key to their stability. They identify different factors which they consider important. For them, the therapists are important people with whom they can interact with, whom they can trust, and with whom they can discuss issues that are taboo in daily life, and who can give competent advice and support regarding their problems. Some interviewees confirm that regular therapy sessions have helped them, and that the symptoms of trauma have decreased over the course of time.

“After I had been assigned to a therapist at the (psychosocial centre for refugees), I went to see him every week and told him about my problems and we talked and slowly, slowly the trauma goes away. It has not come up since years now.” (Mike, 24, Sierra Leone)

One interview partner explains how the therapy helped him to activate his own skills and resources:

“The most important help I got from the therapies, the talking. They allow me to see what is in my mind, release the tension. To put into practice, to allow my fears to go away. It helped me for me to be myself, for me to notice the environment around me. (...) It motivates me more, (...) to be self-conscious, to be focussed, polite and then make use of my own abilities, to exploit my abilities to do something out of my life.” (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

2.3.9 Hopes and aims for the future

The interviews indicate that former child soldiers need time and security in order to develop new prospects for their life in exile. In the interview with the youth who at that time had only been in Germany for a few weeks, it is very clear how the experience of war and of being a child soldier can affect ideas about the future:

“At the moment I don’t know how the future will look like, how it can look like, but what is there in my head now is: first, I want to learn or go to school, then I want to become soldier in order to fight the evil. (...) I want to help other people, those who don’t have power. (..) I want to help people. Maybe God will forgive me one day. (...) I want to revenge my mother and my sister, and help people.” (Hassan, 16, Sierra Leone)

Another interview partner who is still going through the asylum application process describes the difficulties of developing his own goals for the future in a completely different world, after a life of heteronomy. As long as permanent residency is not granted, it is very hard to make plans for the future because fear of being deported overshadows everything else.

“To say the truth, I don’t know. (Talking in a low voice, visibly moved) Because it’s very hard to just get out of one life into another life and then come from this life into the other one immediately. I have been fighting, (...) from twelve years on I have been a soldier, and now I am 24 years, including the three years in prison. So I spent more time just as a soldier, knowing that the only way you can take care, can go on with your life is only with the gun. It’s not the first time that I am receiving that question, but I really don’t know what I can be or

who I can become. (...) I am living in fear almost every day of my life. I went through a lot, both in prison and as a rebel. Every time I was like a homeless person, someone who is just running because you can’t stay anywhere. Every time you are here, they are looking for you. You change everything, you run to another place. And in prison it was worse. So, every time that I’m here and I don’t know what’s going on with my case, I don’t know if tomorrow I will be deported back or what is going to happen to me tomorrow, it scares me much more. I just don’t know what I can become, because I don’t know if I will ever be here or if I’m taken back. (...) I’m just scared of everything. (...) I just want to be free. (whispering), just to be happy like any other person. Just to live a life without fear. Yeah, that is what I want at the moment.” (Salomon, 24, Uganda)

Another interviewee who still only officially has been given “exceptional leave to remain” describes how difficult it is to develop goals so long as external conditions remain so uncertain:

“I can’t see my future because I don’t even know where to start from. Yeah. It’s when I know where to start from - then I can know my future.” (Abdul H., 25, Sierra Leone)

Those interview partners who have already been living in Germany for a long time, who have managed to secure their residence status and who have access to therapy and education were able to develop their own ideas of a “normal” life.

Several interviewees talk about plans for the future and about how to “repair” the past:

“We went through many things, maybe we can start a project, if we manage, in order to help other children. This is why we start working now. (...) I would love to help so that other

children don’t have to go through the same thing, and to help those children and other people who already have been into it, so that they can continue living, in order to have a normal life. (...) Because I can see myself, without the help I could well be like that up to today. (...) In any case, I learnt a lot and I went through many experiences, I would continue to fight, not only for me but also for other young people.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

Those whose parents and other relatives may still be alive hope to find them again one day:

“My future? First of all to find my family again and to live happily with them. I would also be very proud of myself if I could help other youth. (...) I am afraid and I am ashamed that, if I find my mother again, she would look at me as a not so good boy. If she would think I am a bad boy, she would cry forever. Because she would blame herself for it, (...) I never wanted that. And this gives me more strength to keep on running, so that when I find her she can be proud of me. And I would also be proud that maybe I could help her.” (Chérif, 20, Guinea)

Many want to devote their lives to peace and change:

“What I would wish for is to never again in my life participate in war. I also want to simply help people who have problems, problems related to war. Something like an ambassador of peace, for my life. I hope I can make it. Just to be loud, an ambassador for peace.” (Peter, 22, Sudan)

Some interview partners stress their desire to attain a high level of education so that later on they can assume positions of responsibility in their home countries and advocate a fairer society.

Others appreciate the help and support they have received in Germany and want to give back some of this to others.

“I just wish that there will be a time and ways for me to show lots of appreciation. For instance if I make it in life, you know. Whether I’m rich or I’m half rich. But I’m not determined to be a poor man. (laughing) To show the people who make me today, who show me the way, who help me to be what I am. (...) To show the individuals who have the confidence in me in the first place, even though they do not know me. Who say: David, you can do this. People like Mrs K (school social worker). To give back to them, you know? To prove that their confidence did not fail. (...) So that at least they will keep up their good work and good faith, knowing that what they are doing is not a waste of time. Not only about the money, it has something to do with the heart, too. Yeah, to say that I’m grateful, and many, many thanks, I pray for them always, always.“ (laughing) (David, 19, Sierra Leone)

3. Conclusion and recommendations

Former child soldiers need particular protection. The results of the study show that the current procedures for reception and granting of asylum do not do justice to traumatised former child soldiers.

That former child soldiers who come to Germany as refugees get appropriate care and support should not be left to chance. According to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict that Germany has signed, the state is obliged to guarantee adequate care, assistance and treatment to former child soldiers.

- **Improving the identification of former child soldiers**

The authorities have to ensure that former child soldiers are identified as such when they arrive in Germany, qualifying them as particularly vulnerable refugees. In the context of the clarification procedure, the reasons for the escape of minors and their individual needs regarding help, care and therapy must be assessed. Further measures must be determined and initiated by specialists – for example psychosocial support, legal representation, the clarification of residence status, accommodation appropriate to the needs of the youths, and access to education. If necessary, specially trained experts should also be made responsible for defining a minor's age during the clearing procedure.

- **Housing former child soldiers in non-shared facilities**

The study suggests that accommodation in shared facilities for asylum seekers is far from conducive to the well-being of former child soldiers. Conditions in such homes can result in an intensification of their psychological stress and can

prevent stabilisation of their mental state. Minors must be housed in an environment that is appropriate for youths and where educational care is guaranteed.

Child and youth welfare institutions where minors are housed must ensure that young refugees who are under psychological stress are given support. The staff of such institutions must be able to deal with the specific complexities related to child soldiering. Therefore, adequate training has to be organised for the staff.

The study indicates that former child soldiers who have become adults are also among the group of vulnerable refugees who can come under additional stress because of the conditions in homes for asylum seekers (poor conditions of the institutions, shared rooms, inhabitants who are stressed, deportations etc.). They must be cared for in a secure environment which can facilitate their stabilisation.

- **The acceptance of the experiences of child soldiers as grounds for escape and asylum**

The research shows that former child soldiers need to be granted long-term and guaranteed residency so that they can become mentally stable and develop prospects for the future. Government agencies and courts must therefore recognise them as politically persecuted refugees in need of protection, and grant them asylum status.

The study also concludes that the current practise often does not consider former child soldiers' specific reasons for fleeing their home countries and the related stress. This can result in stressful and tedious

procedures to determine the residence status of those concerned.

Persecution must be recognised as a specific situation when decisions regarding asylum are taken. Children and youths who escape to Germany to escape the threat of recruitment must be protected. The same applies to children and youths who have escaped from an armed group. Threatening situations for former members of armed groups can occur even years after a conflict has come to an end.

- **Organising hearings for asylum in a manner that is conducive for former child soldiers**

The special situation of former child soldiers must be considered during asylum hearings. As soon as indications are given that a person seeking asylum was recruited as a child soldier, specially trained staff and interpreters must be employed. The high probability that an asylum seeker will be traumatised must be taken into account when hearings take place. Traumatized people who are not stable are often not able to report on events in a detailed, chronological, consistent and unambiguous manner and this must be taken into account. Legal guardians and, if desired, other persons of trust should be present during the hearings.

When minors are involved, such hearings should only take place after they have already been in Germany for a few months to ensure enough time for the clearing procedures and allow them time to calm down and prepare themselves.

If necessary, the hearings should be adjourned until the former child soldiers are mentally stable thanks to the help of therapeutic support. Expert advice and psychosocial support during

the asylum procedure must be granted from the beginning.

- **Abolishing residence obligation**

Residence obligation means asylum seekers have to remain in a specific geographical area and can impede access to advice and education, as well as social networks. It can result in further stress for the traumatised young refugees. This restriction is absolutely counterproductive and should be abolished. Residence obligation violates the human right to freedom of movement (Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in the year 1948).

- **Guaranteeing therapeutic care**

Former child soldiers are likely to be heavily traumatised due to the experiences of war, having been victims of extreme violence and forced to become perpetrators. On top of this, they are stressed by the escape from their home country, the arrival in a strange culture and the fact of usually being alone, without friends or family. The study indicates that therapeutic care and support for former child soldiers is extremely essential so that they can learn how to deal with stress. The study also documents that to date there are no regulations about access to therapeutic care.

It should not be left to chance that former child soldiers might meet people who recognise their psychological status and can administer appropriate care. Access to therapy and psychosocial support must be granted from the start and the person providing such care has to be qualified for dealing with interculturality, trauma and questions related to being a perpetrator. It is the duty of politicians and public administrators to ensure that the appropriate capacities are available – for example through the provision

of the necessary financial means for psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture.

Former child soldiers must be housed in facilities that from the onset grant access to counselling, therapeutic services and medical care.

- **Ensuring access to education and training**

The study points out the need that former child soldiers be able to access education and training. This also applies to youths aged over 16 and adults. Young refugees who are traumatised are particularly in need of occupation, a daily structure, targets and experiences of success. Including them in a class structure and having them supported by teachers can give them a sense that they have a regular daily structure and thus help bring them stability. It must be taken into account that they might have special needs because of gaps in their education or stress.

The report also shows that access to education often depends on the initiative of the young refugees themselves, on local projects or on the judgement of the local authorities. However, the government should ensure right from the start that former child soldiers are given the chance to develop professional prospects for the future, even long-term prospects. The study indicates that the young people can make use of such chances and build up an independent life despite psychosocial stress.

4. Demands of terre des hommes and the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

The compliance with international treaties

The Federal Republic of Germany must change the relevant laws and practical procedures after the withdrawal of its reservations to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. They still prevent the equal treatment of all children in Germany.

Reception procedures suitable to the needs of children and guardianship

- After arriving in Germany, minors have to go through a qualified clearing procedure that lasts at least three to six months. Their needs and – if documents are not available – their age must be assessed and defined by specially trained and neutral experts trained in psychology and in children's rights.
- Traumatized children must be identified and cared for psychologically.
- Refugee children and German children must have the same right to access medical treatment, therapy, education, professional training and the labour market.
- Refugee children must receive support according to their age and their stage of development, for example through youth services.
- All refugee children must be granted support according to the Social Code, Book Eight (SGB VIII).
- Refugee children, and especially those who are traumatized, should in general be treated and welcomed compassionately because they are particularly vulnerable, both physically and mentally.
- Minors should not be housed in places that are not suitable for children. Children should be housed in places where they can receive professional

support. In Germany, this can only be ensured in certain cities.

- Unaccompanied refugees must always be assigned a qualified guardian and legal support. Decisions must be taken with parents or the guardian, and they must be taken in the best interest of the child: it must be decided whether the best interest of the child is to apply for asylum, to return to their country of origin or to be assigned to another town (if for example the child can be reunited with family members in another town or if s/he could join up with other people of the same language and/or culture).

Asylum procedures and regulations must be suitable to the needs of children

- Unaccompanied minor refugees aged 16 and above are treated as adults in Germany when it comes to judicial issues related to foreigners. This must be changed.
- Grounds for escape that are relevant to children (for example recruitment as child soldier, child trafficking, well-grounded fear of sexual abuse) must be considered as relevant grounds for asylum and must be recognised in practice.
- All traumatized children must be granted a guaranteed and long-term residence status so that they can find mental stability.
- The assessment and definition of age (when documents are not to hand) and the identification of particularly vulnerable children such as traumatized children are significant points in the proceedings for the further care of a child. Only qualified and neutral experts who are trained in psychology and children's rights should be made responsible for this. The age definition must be based on the level of maturity since medical methods are not sufficiently accurate.

- Restrictions related to asylum such as the residence obligation impede access to education, training and therapy centres and should therefore not be applied. The obligation for residence violates the human right to freedom of movement (Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in the year 1948).

No deportations, custody pending deportation or imprisonment on remand

- Forced deportations, custody pending deportation and imprisonment on remand for minors without documents must be abandoned completely. They are in no way compatible with children's rights.

Guaranteed access to education and work

- All refugee children must be granted access to regular education up to the age of 18. Access to educational services - especially for former child soldiers - enables young people to have a regular daily structure and especially to develop prospects for their future.
- Young refugees must have equal chances to build their own future and to facilitate their integration into society. Access to vocational education and in-firm-training should not be affected by their status.

Establishing regular opportunities to immigrate to Europe

- The European Union must establish additional legal access for refugees in order to stop the alarming conditions for refugees on Europe's borders. Children and youth are further exposed to additional traumatic experiences during their escape.
- The granting of protection from persecution must be guaranteed and not left to chance.

5. Glossary

Armed conflict

The term “armed conflict” describes both international and non-international armed conflicts of larger and smaller dimensions. Today, in many cases state forces, often supported by paramilitary groups, fight against opposition groups (frequently called rebels – see “Armed groups”).

Armed groups

In most of today’s armed conflicts, state forces (armies), often supported by paramilitary groups, fight against armed opposition groups (frequently called rebels). Paramilitary and opposition groups are non-state armed groups. In many cases, both states forces and non-state armed groups use child soldiers.

Child soldiers

A legally binding definition of the term child soldier does not exist. The “Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict” (2000) refers to children who have either already been enlisted by the armed forces or non-state armed groups or who these groups intend to enlist in the future. In more current documents, such as the Paris Principles from February 2007 www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf, which till December 2012 were signed by more than 100 countries, one speaks of “children associated with armed forces or armed groups”. According to the generally accepted definition specified in these documents, a child soldier or child associated with an armed force or armed group is “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The Convention entered into force in 1990. It is a human rights treaty setting out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. The Convention generally defines a child as any human being under the age of 18 and sets standards for the protection and support of children all over the world. All states, except Somalia and the USA, have ratified the Convention. Germany ratified the UN Convention in 1992.

Demobilisation

The formal and controlled discharge of soldiers from national forces or non-state armed groups.

ECOMOG

The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, or ECOMOG, was a West African multilateral armed force established by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOMOG was a formal arrangement for separate armies to work together and to curtail military conflicts. It intervened in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Côte d’Ivoire.

Exceptional leave to remain (“Duldung”)

Refugees whose asylum application has been rejected but who cannot be deported on humanitarian or other grounds receive an “exceptional leave to remain” and suspension of deportation”, for a period of time that ranges from a few days to several months. Several restrictions regarding residency obligation (see glossary), the right to work, access to social benefits are imposed upon them.

Initial reception centres

When they first enter Germany, refugees are allocated to a certain state, according to an allocation quota. They first have to live in an initial reception centre for a period

of up to three months and are then reallocated to institutions located in local municipalities.

Non-state armed groups

See “Armed groups“

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC)

The Optional Protocol bans the recruitment and use of children and youths below the age of 18 in armies and in armed groups http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11-b&chapter=4&lang=en. However, state armies are allowed to voluntarily recruit minors above 15. The Optional Protocol entered into force in 2002 and was ratified by 151 countries, including Germany in 2004. Article 6 stipulates that “State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to the present Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service. States Parties shall, when necessary, accord to these persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration”.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

See “Trauma”

Refugees

Refugee is a legal term used to describe a person who fulfils the definition set out in the Geneva Convention of 1951 relating to the status of refugees (“Refugee Convention”). The Geneva Convention contains the internationally recognised definition of a refugee, and this definition is applied by all countries which have signed the Convention. Article 1 states that “the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person who..., owing to well-founded

fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” The term “refugee” used in this report is not determined by the fact of whether a person has officially been recognised as refugee or not.

Residence permit (Aufenthaltserlaubnis)

A residence permit limited up to three years can be granted to people who are entitled to asylum as well as refugees granted protection from deportation according to the Geneva Convention. It can also be issued on humanitarian grounds, for example in case of a life threatening disease which cannot be treated in the country of origin. The Residence Act passed in 2005 lists 30 different residence permits, whose differences are explained in a series of paragraphs. A residence permit always has a time limit and can only be extended if the conditions that existed when it was granted still exist.

Residence title for specific purposes (Aufenthaltsgestattung)

For the period of the asylum procedure, aliens receive a “residence title for specific purposes”

Residential obligation (Residenzpflicht)

Refugees with an unsecured residence have to permanently reside in an “area of physical restriction”. This applies to people seeking for asylum who have to remain in the administrative district to which they have been assigned, and for people with an “exceptional leave to remain” who

have to remain in the respective state. If they wish to leave the area, they have to make an application for it at the Foreign Resident Authority in due time. The Authority then judges if the application is in line with “urgent public need or compulsory, or if the rejection of the approval would be an inequitable hardship” (§ 58 Subsection 1 of the Asylum Procedure Act (Asylverfahrensgesetz)). The residential obligation results in isolation of the persons affected; for example, participation at German lessons and events, or visiting friends or relatives often is prevented. When someone applying for asylum violates the residential obligation by moving out of the district without a written permit, s/he is punished with a fine or detention. The residential obligation violates the central and universal human right to freedom of movement.

Taking into care (Inobhutnahme)

According to the Eighth Book of the Social Code (SGB VIII), § 42 Subsection 1, Clause 1 Num. 3, the Youth Welfare Office is entitled and obliged to take a child or youth into care in case a foreign child or youth comes to Germany as an unaccompanied minor, and if no person is in the country who is entitled to take care of him or her. All those below the age of 18 have to be assigned to a legal guardian and have to be housed with someone who is suited to host him or her, in an appropriate institution or in other accommodation. A home for asylum seekers is not appropriate accommodation in the sense of this regulation, since appropriate care cannot be guaranteed. <http://b-umf.de/images/stories/dokumente/handlungsleitfaden-4.auflage-2009.pdf>

Trauma

When people are exposed to (life) threatening situations with which they cannot cope, in consequence they can develop psychological stress reactions

such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), accompanied by flashbacks, avoidance and increased excitement due to fear. Children who experience war and violence are particularly at risk.

Unlimited residence permit (Niederlassungserlaubnis)

Refugees who are recognised according to Article 16a of the German Constitutional Law (Grundgesetz) or the Geneva Refugee Convention, and whose recognition has not been revoked after a maximum of three years have a right to unlimited permission to live in Germany with an unlimited residence permit. Refugees who have a residence permit on humanitarian grounds and who want to get an unlimited residence permit must have been in Germany for at least seven years. They also need to prove that they have already contributed to the pension scheme for five years, that they can assure their livelihood and that their knowledge of the German language is adequate.

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terre des hommes Germany was founded in 1967 by a group of dedicated people to help children who were badly injured in the Vietnam War. The organization is independent of state, church and political parties and supports children in need in around 450 projects in 35 countries.

terre des hommes does not send out aid workers and concentrates instead on supporting local initiatives. Our onsite project partners build schools and child protection centers to care for the children. The work carried out by terre des hommes is strictly geared to preserving and promoting the rights of the children. In Germany, volunteers in 146 cities are committed to the interests of children.

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Federal Association for
Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (B-UMF)

Since its foundation in 1998, the non-governmental organization Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors represents young refugees and advocates for their rights.² The association has 170 members that are organisations and individuals working with young refugees all over Germany. This wide membership provides the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors with an overview over the living conditions of young foreigners.

The examples mentioned in this report represent several aspects of everyday work our members and stand for many similar cases. In addition, the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, in partnership with UNHCR, regularly evaluates the reception conditions for unaccompanied minors in federal states. The Federal Association also cooperates with UNICEF Germany and is part of the National Coalition for the Implementation of the CRC in Germany.

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