


CHILDREN, VICTIMS OF THE CRISIS IN KASAI

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In August 2016, fighting broke out in one of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) poorest regions— Kasai—after a traditional leader was killed in clashes with security forces. The situation deteriorated in 2017, unleashing a wave of violence that has now engulfed nine of the country's 26 provinces.

The crisis is having a devastating impact on children. Children are being forced to endure horrific ordeals such as death, injury, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention and recruitment into militias. Children cannot access health services due to the fighting and thousands have been denied education because their schools were destroyed, looted or robbed of teachers who had fled or been killed.

This horrific abuse of children must stop and perpetrators must be brought before justice. Children should be safe in their homes, schools and playgrounds, not forced to fight on the battlefield or wounded or killed in the violence. When I was in Kananga, the capital city of the Province of Kasai, in April I met with children that had been released from armed groups and forces. They told me harrowing stories that no child should ever have to experience.

The future of an entire generation of children is at risk in the Kasai region. UNICEF and its partners have been able to respond to the needs of more than 150,000 people affected by the crisis, including children, with health care, education and child protection programmes. But, while we appeal for the violence to stop, we call on all to do more for the children in the Kasai, and to do it now.

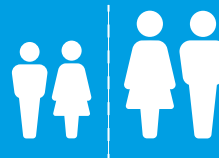
Dr Tajudeen Oyewale
UNICEF Acting Representative in the DRC

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Between **40% and 60%** of the militia members are children, often younger than 15, which constitutes a war crime. **More than 500 cases** of children used as combatants or human shields have been registered.



According to the latest estimations, **5000 children** have been separated from their families: they are particularly vulnerable to being recruited by militias and to being victims of violence and abuse.



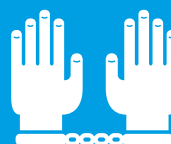
The population and particularly the children live in a state of deep shock and panic. Children show signs of **psychosocial distress** and are often afraid to leave their parents, even for short amounts of time.




600 cases of sexual violence have been registered affecting **350 girls and 4 boys** since the beginning of the crisis in August 2016. Stigmatization and fear of reprisals influence the number of survivors willing to report the violations. Consequently, their actual number is likely to be under-reported.



At least **100 children** have been killed between January and March 2017. Numerous cases of summary and extrajudicial executions have been reported, affecting in particular children allegedly associated with the militias.



More than **300 children** have been arrested in Kananga and Tshikapa between August 2016 and March 2017. Thanks to local child protection actors, only a dozen are still in detention in central prison in Kananga. The living conditions in the cells are precarious. There are also reports of children being victims of torture.



Children bear the brunt of extreme violence

Thousands of children and families have fled attacks, looting and violence in Kasai, with entire communities moving in search of security. In the panic and chaos, many children are being separated from their families. Currently, 5,000 children would be separated and waiting to be reunited with their families.

All six grave violations against children are ongoing in the region, including killings, maiming, use of children by armed forces and groups, arbitrary arrest and detention, rape and sexual violence, attacks on schools and health facilities, and denial of humanitarian access.

The use of children by militias operating in the Kasai and the dramatic consequences of this for the physical and psychological integrity of children, and for their education, is particularly alarming. Children are being used in the conflict to carry supplies, cook and serve adult combatants, and to fight. They are often the first to be injured or killed.

Together with its partners, UNICEF is providing children released from militias or detention with urgent medical care and psychosocial support, and as well as family tracing and reunification. UNICEF partners have set up child-friendly spaces to help these children cope with their trauma and continue their schooling. Yet, children's needs remain huge and more needs to be done to support their safety, recovery and development.

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The slight frame and soft-spoken manner of 17-year-old Jean Baptiste* are that of a boy, but his childhood was cut short when he was forced to join the insurgency in Kasai last year.

“The rebels promised us that everything would be better,” he recalls. “They told me that I could have a better life.”

He describes being forced to train with the militia and fight in battles where he saw many people get killed, even other children by his side.

“It made me so sad to see so many people get killed,” he says. “I wanted to get out of the armed group and go home.”

He now lives in a center for children who have managed to escape or have been released from the militias. They are recovering, processing what they’ve been through and learning some useful trades to help them get on their feet when they return home. For Jean Baptiste, it’s hard being away from his family and he misses them terribly. He’s hoping that he can save money so he can get back into school and lay the foundation for a bright future.

“I need help to continue my studies so I can live a peaceful life,” he said.

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*Name was changed for protection reasons

“The center’s aim is to help the children to transition from military life to civil life”

Pierre Cilengi, psychologist, partner of UNICEF



Reaching displaced families with life-saving services

OCHA estimates that more than 1.4 million people have been displaced by the violence, including 850,000 children. More than 30,000 people have fled to Angola. Displaced families have fled their villages to surrounding areas, often hiding in makeshift huts in the bush. These families are the most vulnerable and the least accessible. They don't have proper shelter, clean drinking water and sanitation, enough food to eat and health care.

Most displaced, however, live with relatives and host families who are already struggling to survive in one of DRC's poorest regions.

To strengthen the resilience of these vulnerable displaced and host families, UNICEF is providing humanitarian cash transfers (US\$100 per household) and using the innovative Rapid Response Mechanism to deliver life-saving supplies, emergency health care and water and sanitation services to displaced families stranded in remote areas. A total of 50,000 households will be benefitting from essential items like tarpaulins, mats for shelter and cooking utensils.

“We’ve had to adapt quickly, find new ways of working in a crisis.”

Alphonse Kalonji Tshikala UNICEF's Child Protection Officer

As of 21 July 2017, UNICEF and its partners have:

Reached



157,490

affected people with life-saving interventions, multi-purpose cash transfers, education, essential non-food items and child protection measures.

Refurbished



24

classrooms.

Treated



2,734

children suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Reunified



695

separated or unaccompanied children with their families.

Provided



40,421

people with WASH kit

Supported



34,232

displaced children with psychological and educational activities in child-friendly spaces.

Supported more than



3,600

children to take the national primary school final exam.

Provided



11,225

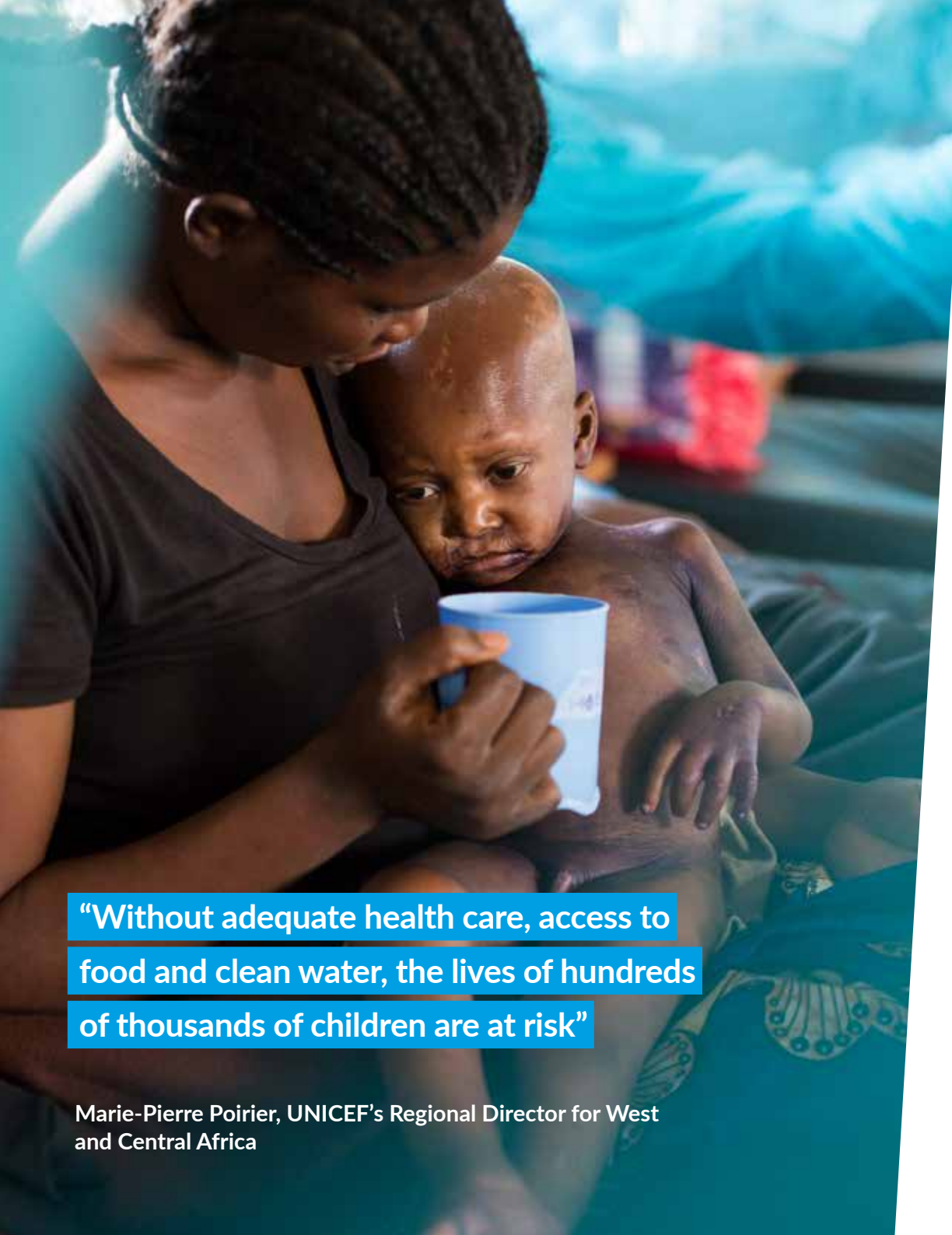
displaced or returned households with unconditional cash support.

Trained



64

new teachers in conflict-affected areas.



“Without adequate health care, access to food and clean water, the lives of hundreds of thousands of children are at risk”

Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF's Regional Director for West and Central Africa

Keeping children and women healthy in the midst of crisis

Even before the latest outbreak of violence, Kasai was among the most deprived in the country. More than 1 in 10 children die before the age of 5 due to the lack of adequate health care in this impoverished part of the country. Half the children are stunted. In recent months, widespread conflict across the region has cut children off from services and dramatically increased their vulnerability to illness and death.

One health center out of four in the Kasai region is not functioning normally following attacks, destruction, looting and the flight of health workers. Many mothers are too scared to visit health services because of the fear of attack en route.

Nearly 400,000 children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition due to disrupted markets and families' lack of access to food. Eight health zones in Kasai have been put on nutritional alert.

UNICEF is working with local partners to improve access to health care and ensure that the lives of children and women are safeguarded. Health facilities in Kasai are being strengthened with medicines and health equipment. Local communities are benefitting from the construction of water points, latrines and hand washing units, as well as hygiene awareness messages on how to protect themselves against cholera and other water-borne diseases. UNICEF provides therapeutic food to children in nutritional centers and trains community workers to screen children for severe acute malnutrition and refer them for treatment.

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“A few weeks ago, our village was attacked. All the houses were burned. Not even the health center was spared. All my possessions went up in flames, and everything in our field was destroyed. My husband and I saw no other option but to leave our village.

We decided to go our separate ways. This was a difficult choice. I was going to go to my parents, near Miabi. My husband went further away, to earn a bit of money in the artisanal diamond mines. I therefore found myself alone with our two children, one aged 5 and the other 4 months. We spent a whole day walking 30 kilometers through the bush to my parents.

My parents aren't rich. They are old and the small plot of land they own only produces a few vegetables and a bit of cassava. Not enough to feed the eight people who sought refuge with them. My four-month-old son, Kabenge, was already thin. After the long walk and the lack of food at my parents' place, I could see Kabenge was continuing to lose weight. I was very worried about his health.

Fortunately, I managed to get him to the hospital in Miabi in time. Kabenge weighed 2.8kg when I arrived here. The pediatric nurse gives him therapeutic milk from UNICEF. In a short space of time, he has gained 400 grams. The nurse has assured me that he's going to get better. I hope that the violence in the region will end soon and that I will be able to get back to my husband.”

Tshinguta, aged 22, Miketa

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Schools should be safe places where children can learn

An estimated 150,000 children in the Kasai region need emergency education. 404 attacks on primary and secondary schools have been confirmed by field staff since the violence started in August 2016. Many other schools are now being used to shelter displaced families or occupied by fighting forces. Lingering insecurity has left children and teachers unwilling or unable to return to the classroom.

UNICEF has supported children to take the national primary school final exam in June and July 2017 and remedial courses are being offered to out-of-school children. The provision of school supplies and uniforms is also helping keep children in school where possible. However, the needs for the new 2017/18 school year remain enormous, with many schools still destroyed and teachers killed, injured or displaced.

“They say that education is the future, why shouldn’t I have the right to a future, too?”

Fiston which received the support of UNICEF to take his national primary school final exam

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“I was on the way home from the water pump when I heard the gunfire. I threw away my bucket of water and ran towards the town. When I got there I saw lots of people fleeing. I rushed home, but the door was closed—my family had already fled. So I followed a dozen strangers who left for the jungle with their belongings on their heads. I couldn’t take anything with me.

After four days hiding in the jungle, I went to Mpanda, a four-hour walk. There, I found my mother, my brothers and my sisters. My father wasn’t there. To this day, we haven’t been able to find him.

When we returned to my village, I didn’t recognize my school. The roof had disappeared and the rain had damaged the equipment. Before, our school and our village had been our pride. UNICEF had put in a water source and eight toilets. With the violence, everything disappeared. We lost everything.

Nobody returned to class because militiamen were intimidating the teachers and students. We had to wait until March to restart classes. In April 2017, I signed up for free catch-up classes, put in place by UNICEF, so I could pass my state exam at the end of the school year. I received school supplies and a new uniform. School is a priority for me.”

Muda Kalongo, student at the Cítolo school of Kabea

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UNICEF's urgent asks

1. **Stop the violence in the Kasai region** so that children and families can regain access to basic services and that perpetrators of violence are brought to justice.
2. **Give full and unconditional humanitarian access** to all conflict-affected areas in Kasai where children and their communities—displaced as well as host families—are in dire need of assistance for their survival.
3. **Immediately halt the use of children by the fighting parties.**
4. **Immediately end attacks, looting and destruction of, health centers and schools** and their staff.
5. **The international donor community needs to stand by the population of the Kasai region**, in particular the children, and provide urgent and timely funding to humanitarian aid programmes.





40,2 million USD

is the budget of UNICEF's Response Plan for the Kasai-crisis for six months. 40% of the needed funding has been secured from or pledged by USAID (cash and donation in kind), UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), and the German and French National Committees for UNICEF. UNICEF also extends its thanks to the Canadian, Swedish and Japanese governments for their flexible emergency funding that was used in Kasai.



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