

Moses (15 y.o.) & Joshua (16 y.o.), former Liberian child soldiers living in Sierra Leone

This story is about Moses and Joshua, two teenage conscripts who were plucked from their home in Monrovia, Liberia, and forced to fight in Lofa County. They are now refugees, living in a camp in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Their story and their needs reflect the stories and needs of the majority of the world's refugee youth. Their desire for happiness has not been quenched despite their traumatic experiences. The next episode to their stories is yet to be composed, but with appropriate and constructive support, Moses, Joshua and other refugee youth can write positive chapters in their lives and those of their communities.

Moses is 15 years old. Joshua is 16. The two teenage boys have happy memories of their life in Monrovia. Mornings were spent at school, while in the afternoons they sold jeans in the shop that belonged to Joshua's father. But it was not all work in the shop. Their friends would drop by and hang out, listen to music, sing and dance. Moses and Joshua love music and movement. They remember how they used to celebrate the end of Ramadan with singing and dancing on the beach with their friends.

Those relatively carefree days stopped abruptly two years ago when Moses and Joshua were abducted from the jean shop by soldiers. They were herded with other teenagers into a military compound where they were given a week-long crash course in loading and firing guns. After this minimal training, the boys were deposited by helicopter in Lofa County in the north, to fight in the front line as expendable child soldiers.

The military commander welcomed the newcomers with the words, "Death is better than life." Certainly the boys' lives for the next year were harrowing and traumatic. Instead of dancing and singing with their friends, Moses and Joshua were forced to carry large weapons that were too heavy for them, and to fight and kill rebel soldiers. One of Joshua's worst memories is of the time when he was forced to execute a captured soldier, at point-blank range.

One day, Moses and Joshua were able to escape their adult captors by hiding in the bush. Together with three other teenagers, they made their way across the border to Sierra Leone. The boys hoped to leave behind them the tension, fear and menace that characterised their year spent with the soldiers in Lofa County, but their new freedom was marred by harassment by Sierra Leonean soldiers. Most of their savings from their meagre army pay, totalling 20 US dollars, were confiscated and they were left penniless.

The five boys trekked south through Sierra Leone, staying close to the border. They were able to find odd work in exchange for food, and sometimes for a little money. They headed for the southern border town of Zimmi for they had decided to return to Liberia by re-crossing the border at that point. But before they reached Zimmi, they were robbed of their clothes, shoes and little remaining money. They were arrested by the Sierra Leonean police and taken to Freetown where they were forced to spend three months in police barracks before they were moved to the Padema Road central prison.

The prison was crammed with criminals and political prisoners. Living conditions were appalling. The prisoners were fed only twice a day – bread and tea for breakfast, and a little rice for lunch. Moses and Joshua were regularly beaten by the prison guards. The scars of the wounds left by the whips are still visible on their arms and backs. For a period of time, they were allowed out of their bare and gloomy prison cells until 4 o'clock in the afternoon but were forbidden by the adult prisoners to join in their football games. The boys were only allowed to watch. The only activity they were allowed was reading, but Moses did not know how to read.

Their situation became worse: in the three months that led up to the Sierra Leone presidential elections on 14 May 2002, security measures were tightened in Freetown. This included the complete incarceration of all prisoners in their cells.

Finally, in June, the Liberian Embassy contacted Moses and Joshua. Through the Red Cross, the boys were able to ask UNHCR for assistance. The boys were removed from the prison and sent to an orphanage managed by an NGO. After two weeks, Moses and Joshua and other teenage boys were moved to the Jimmi Bagbo refugee camp. However, troubles started again for Moses and Joshua. The group of boys wanted to return to Liberia and together, they left Jimmi Bagbo camp and headed towards Zimmi. Moses and Joshua were robbed again, this time by their companions who ran off with their clothes and blankets before heading back to Liberia. Moses and Joshua remained in Zimmi where UNHCR officers helped them reach a refugee camp in Bundajuma, in Bo district, in Sierra Leone.

Moses and Joshua still live at the Bundjuma refugee camp. Over the past few weeks, they have gradually integrated into the camp life, but the days do not pass by easily. Both boys have been deeply psychologically scarred by their year of fighting as young soldiers and by their term of imprisonment in Pademba Road jail. Moses is prone to mood swings and he sometimes spends entire days sitting on a bench, withdrawn and staring blankly ahead. When he arrived in the camp, Moses suffered from severe anaemia and from anxiety attacks. His condition is improving and he has enrolled in the camp primary school.

Joshua is more outgoing and seems contented with refugee camp life, but he too, sometimes slips into depression. However, as both boys make new friends in the camp and at school, they are less dependent on each other and less likely to be affected by the other's mood swings. Their mornings are taken up with primary school, and part of the afternoon is set aside for homework. They participate in any football or volleyball game that is started but much of their day is spent sitting in the shade of their hut, by the entrance to the camp, either chatting with other refugees, or quietly watching the other refugees who go about their daily activities of collecting water and wood, preparing meals, or simply walking around the camp. There are too few activities for young people in the refugee camp. Boredom is pervasive among all the youth.

But, there is some excitement in the boys' lives. At the moment, they live with 50 other refugees in transit quarters, sharing a little room that is barely big enough for their two sleeping mats. They are looking forward to moving very soon into their own house, a simple structure of tent sheeting over a wooden frame that they have built themselves. They will share this new home with two other separated minors.

Their immediate future is within the confines of the refugee camp. It is too dangerous for either boy to return to Liberia because of current instability in that country. UNHCR is trying to trace their parents. Moses' mother moved to Guinea when fighting escalated again in Liberia in 2000, while his father remained in Monrovia. Joshua's parents were still in Monrovia when the two boys were kidnapped. Under international laws, the boys are recognised as separated minors.

In the meantime, with the help of UNHCR and NGO field staff, Moses and Joshua will try to live normal, productive lives in the camp. Their current concern is to be included in the distribution of non-food packages, which contain blankets, lamps, sleeping bags, kitchen sets and, very importantly, bars of soap. Moses and Joshua are desperately waiting for soap, to be able to clean their clothes so they can go to school properly dressed. They intend to finish primary school and would like to enrol in secondary school. Moses wants to be a mechanic, while Joshua would like to work as an engineer in his home town of Monrovia. They both dream of a peaceful future back home.