

March 27, 2003

## The Child Soldiers of Ivory Coast Are Hired Guns

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MAN, Ivory Coast — At Maquis Le Tirbo, a saloon of sorts in this rebel-held town, the air is thick with porcupine stew, and a boy, no more than 10, barely taller than his AK-47, strolls in for lunch to a thumping reggae beat.

Dancing between the tables, another boy, his dirty T-shirt stenciled with the face of the lewd American rapper Sisco, dangles a Kalashnikov from one hand, a loaded clip from the other. A third child soldier sits clutching a hand grenade the way a teenager in a saner place might hold a cellphone.

At the next table a group of young mercenaries from Liberia, pouring each other rounds of cheap rum, wear stars-and-stripes bandannas tucked under baseball caps like Los Angeles gangsters.

Here in Ivory Coast's wild west, in the most volatile theater of this country's conflict, the detritus of globalization meets the logic of war, West African style. A far cry from the war occupying international attention, this is how the world's other half fights today.

What began here six months ago as an armed struggle for the rights of disenfranchised ethnic groups now shows all the symptoms of a plague sweeping the region: lawlessness, gangsterism and a series of unspeakable atrocities.

The war is the latest outbreak of a virus of civil unrest that began over a decade ago in Liberia, slipped easily across the border and spread into Guinea and Sierra Leone. That it should infect what until recently was regarded as the most modern and prosperous state in West Africa is the most ominous development of all.

In this country, rich with cocoa, timber and diamonds, guns are as plentiful as mangos in March, and longstanding tribal enmities are easily deployed. As are hungry, bored teenagers with a gun in hand and a chance to star in their own Schwarzenegger fantasies.

Some of the hardened soldiers here today were the child soldiers of yesterday. They are plucked from refugee camps, trained in the region's other conflicts, in particular the one in neighboring Liberia, and raised on intoxicants and Kalashnikovs and the principle that where there is war, there is a paycheck.

"After this war ends, I will go to fight another war," a Liberian, about 25, who calls himself Shala, said at Le Tirbo, high and happy by midday. He had been sitting idle in a nearby refugee camp, he said, when a friend, Romeo, seated next to him, taught him how to fire an AK-47 and told him there was money to be made in the new Ivoirian war.

Romeo, slightly older, with expressionless eyes, will not say where he learned to fight, only that he expects to get paid. "There's so many young in this war — 15, 16, 9, 10," he says sagely. "You get big in war. If there's another war, you will not go there? You will go there. In a war, what we chasing? Isn't it money?"

Liberian mercenaries have been drawn into both sides of the war in Ivory Coast. They have committed some of its most gruesome atrocities and, for leaders on both sides, have become an increasing liability.

The Ivoirian state has lately found itself embarrassed by revelations that a Liberian militia was responsible for a massacre just south of here. Men were stripped naked, women raped and an entire town left littered with disemboweled, hacked corpses.

The Liberian militiamen, detained by French peacekeepers, confessed to their links to the government. The government denied the charge and pointed angrily to similar atrocities committed by Liberians fighting with the rebels.

Conveniently, both the government and the rebels are exploiting longstanding rancor between warring Liberian ethnic groups. One aligned with the Liberian president, Charles Taylor, fights alongside the Ivoirian rebels. Another, aligned with Mr. Taylor's enemies, fights alongside loyalists of President Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast.

From their presidential perches in Monrovia and Abidjan, the two men accuse one another of cross-border terrorism.

Meanwhile, rebel leaders seeking a mantle of respectability for their cause are having to confront the disorder in their own ranks, namely by Liberians in the west.

"They steal, they pillage," said Dosso Inza, the commanding officer of Seguela, a nearby town held by the largest rebel group, the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast.

He said his group had already warned colleagues in the west about the Liberians. "We told them to be careful, they escaped their control."

The chief's explanation was interrupted by gunfire. Some of his troops were having a bit of fun. "Who's doing that?" he yelled like an annoyed schoolteacher, then clicked his tongue in disgust.

He and other rebel leaders say they have zero tolerance for hooliganism. Anyone who fires without authorization is stripped of his weapon, they say. Anyone caught in the act of a crime is jailed indefinitely. When it is appropriate, the Liberians who have joined them — voluntarily, they add, and all under the command of Ivoirian rebel chiefs — will be sent back to where they came from.

A recent visit to Man, where the stench of mass graves still lingered in the air, showed a less orderly picture, however.

The stolen cars that screech along these roads are marked with the names of their rebel platoons, nearly all allusions to Hollywood and comic book heroes: Delta Force, Black Ninja, Death's Highway. Kids joy-ride through the empty streets, piling their guns and girlfriends and rocket-propelled grenades in the back, kicking up clouds of dust, sometimes firing in the air.

Clearly, some have not yet learned to drive: the town hospital, run by the aid group Doctors Without Borders since the regular staff fled, is awash with accident victims. Some have not yet learned to fight either: they come into the emergency room, having literally shot themselves in the foot.

Sometimes it is unclear who is in charge. One recent night a heavily armed band of teenagers held a gas station owner hostage for five hours, robbed him and killed his dogs. The man had no clue which side they were on, if any.

"It's very volatile," an international aid worker said here. "It's difficult for us to know who is doing what, who is responsible for what."

It is why aid groups that are in the business of working in war zones are reluctant to come here. An emergency coordinator with the New York-based International Rescue Committee decided on a recent visit that the area was simply too dangerous.

In this vacuum a rash of criminality blossoms. Schools have been shut. Jail doors have been flung open. Skinny boys whose voices have yet to change are the lords of their dirt-road checkpoints, each one a hodge-podge of hollow cars, felled trees and talismans for spiritual armor.

They poke their unwashed faces into the windows of a stranger's car. They beg for cigarettes, food, money. They demand to see travel papers; sometimes they hold them upside down and pretend to read.

The hardened ones scowl and swagger. "Everyone is a chief here," one boy shouts at a visitor less than 100 yards from where his commanding officer had issued the required permits. "If I say stop, you stop!"

Asked about the child soldiers, Sgt. Félix Doh, the chief of a ferocious western rebel army, gave the savviest comment: "We are discussing this problem with the United Nations so they can facilitate the return of our brothers, their reintegration into civilian life." Like other rebel leaders, he is keen to reopen schools but not so keen to say when his group might disarm its youth.

Besides, a spokesman for the Patriotic Movement said, the children are not allowed to handle heavy weapons, only AK-47's. When they joyride, firing off their weapons, it is only for fun, he said.

As squabbling continues over who will rule this divided country, international aid workers, seasoned in the conflicts of the region, warn that precious time is slipping away for those who are the most vulnerable victims of disorder as well as some of its ideal hosts: children.

Heedless, rebel leaders treat the subject of children in their ranks with utter blitheness. In Africa, one commander said, they look younger than they are.