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Youths Again Forced to Fight in Congo, Aid Group Says

By REUTERS

KINSHASA, [Congo](#) (Reuters) — Fighting in eastern Congo this month has led to a surge in child abductions by armed groups that force children to fight, carry ammunition or become their sex slaves, the aid group Save the Children said Monday.

Children's rights advocates, including Save the Children, say most of the factions fighting in eastern Congo's web of conflict have used child soldiers.

Save the Children says that it has demobilized nearly 7,000 children over the past three years, but that some of them are being forced back into armed groups by a wave of recruitment since a government advance and rebel counteroffensive this month.

“The situation for children in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is catastrophic,” Hussein Mursal, Save the Children's country director, said in a statement. “Fighters from all sides are using children as frontline fodder.”

Some children were held captive in small holes in the ground as punishment or after being captured by enemy groups, the statement said.

Mr. Mursal said in an interview that his organization had received more than 100 children in the past two weeks who had run away from armed groups, but that it could not estimate the total numbers involved.

“It's very difficult to know,” he said. “What we see is the tip of the iceberg.”

Children previously rescued from armed groups are at greater risk because commanders seek out battle-hardened youths, many of whom fail to reintegrate into family and community life because of a lack of resources for care and schooling, he said.

The violence this month in North Kivu Province was mainly between the army and Laurent Nkunda, the dissident Tutsi general.

But a host of other armed groups, including traditional Mai-Mai militiamen and Rwandan Hutu rebels, also roam Congo's eastern provinces.

Alpha Karupala, a child fighter reached by telephone in eastern Congo on Monday, said he started fighting when he was 11 or 12, first for the Mai-Mai and then for government forces. He thinks he is now 17, but he cannot be sure.

"We fought and received nothing," he said. "To save ourselves, we stole and used weapons to rob civilians. Even though maybe we were scared sometimes, we knew God was with us children."

Theophile Hakizimana Museveni, a Goma-based spokesman for the Mai-Mai, denied using child soldiers.

Officials from the army and General Nkunda's camp were unavailable for comment.

President [Joseph Kabila](#)'s government has called a peace conference for Thursday in Goma, but General Nkunda has yet to say whether he will attend.