

CHAPTER II
ARMED CONFLICTS, RECRUITMENT, AND EXPLOITATION
OF CAAFAG IN THE DR CONGO

2.1 Armed Conflicts in the DR Congo

Armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) dates way back to 1996, when Rwandan Hutus invaded the DRC, then Zaire, to abolish Tutsi refugees who fled the country during the Rwandan genocide. This invasion worsened Zaire's crippling economic and political conditions as the country has been destabilized due to dictatorship and internal conflicts (Reyntjes, 2009, pp. 17-19). In Zaire, there has been long-existing tension between native tribes of Zaire and Tutsi tribes who had emigrated from Rwanda since before Zaire's colonization by Belgium. The Rwandan invasion fueled the tension that would soon rise to ethnic hatred. Many Zaire native tribes such as Hunde, Nande, and Nyanga launched numerous attacks against the Tutsi migrants, resulted in the death of approximately 14.000 people (Lemarchand, 2009, pp. 13-14). Under the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, the Zairian government proved its inability to handle the Rwandan invasion, and eventually, supported them by providing trainings and supplies, forced the involvement of foreign powers. Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi formed a military alliance called *Alliance des Forces Democratiques por la Liberation du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL) to avenge the deaths of Tutsi refugees. The alliance massacred Hutus of all nationalities in villages, refugee camps, and even hunted them down while they fled the country (Lemarchand, 2013). Compared to the Congolese national army, the AFDL soldiers were more disciplined, as stated by a witness from an interview retrieved from one of Sylvie Bodineau's works (Bodineau, 2019, p. 210):

When the AFDL soldiers entered, the first thing that caught our attention was that these soldiers were very disciplined compared to the Mobutu soldiers who had just left. They could not ask the people for money. And among them, which was remarkable, there

were child soldiers who were called *kadogos*. You could see them everywhere in the military. Many of them. Their age was around 14, 15, 16, 17 years old. - Anonymous

After the AFDL alliance succeeded in overthrowing Mobutu and replaced him with Laurent Desire Kabila, Zaire officially changed its name to the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the economy remained in its crippling state and even experienced further set-backs due to corrupt government. The public disappointment reached its peak when Kabila decided to implement centralization policies, bringing the possibility of the DRC to return to its authoritarian, Mobutu-style government (Kennes, 2005, p. 154). Kabila's government also gained disapproval from international communities. United Nations and western countries demanded Kabila to be held accountable for the Hutu massacre done by AFDL. The relation with its former ally, Rwanda, also deteriorated after Kabila ordered all Rwandan troops to leave the country at once. As the DRC began to isolate itself from international communities, domestic tensions began to worsen. The protests finally erupted into rebellion by the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), a Congolese Tutsi armed group backed by Rwanda and Uganda. The RCD occupied the cities of Bukavu and Ukira, while another Tutsi armed group occupied a territory on the northeastern of the DRC. Another witness retold the condition (Bodineau, 2019, p. 213):

The ALC, the Congo Liberation Army, which was led by the MLC, entered Gemena on December 24, 98. It was on the eve of Christmas. There, when the soldiers left Kisangani, Bumba, Lisala, in a plantation somewhere called Mindembo, still advancing towards Gemena, there were terrible clashes. And when Kabila's soldiers understood that they were not facing these soldiers, they began to fall back on Gemena. And finally, we had a terrible crowd of soldiers here at Gemena. So much so that at some point it is as if the number of soldiers even exceeds the number of the civilian population. - Anonymous

Kabila immediately sought help from Congolese Hutus and their armed group, Mayi Mayi. The armed conflict caused the deaths of more or less 4.000 rebels (Prunier, 2009).

Several efforts to bring peace back in the DRC have been done by the United Nations as well as the African Union. In 1999, a ceasefire agreement was finally signed, prompting all parties to cooperate in tracking, disarming, and documenting all militias operating in the DRC. The United Nations Security Council deployed 5.537 troops of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to monitor the ceasefire process (UNSC, 2000). Unfortunately, armed conflicts continued between rebel groups and government forces. As the situation began to worsen following the assassination of Laurent Desire Kabila in 2001, Congolese parties and armed groups held a peace talk, known as ‘the Inter-Congolese Dialogue’. The participants were the government of the DRC, the RCD, the MLC, the RCD-ML, the RCD-N, and the *Mayi Mayi* armed groups, as well as political opposition and representatives of civil society. The dialogue was held at a resort in Sun City, South Africa, from April to December 2002. The participants finally signed an agreement regarding the transition process, ‘Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the Democratic Republic of Congo’. In the document, all participants agreed to cease hostilities and to achieve reconciliation, as stated in several articles from the agreement (ICD, 2002, pp. 2-3):

[1] The Parties to this Agreement [...] renew the commitment, [...] to cease hostilities and to seek a peaceful and equitable solution to the crisis that the country is facing. [2] [...] agree to commit themselves to the process of creating a restructured, integrated national army [...]. [3] [...] agree to combine their efforts [...] for a withdrawal of all foreign troops from the territory of the DRC and the disarming of the armed groups and militia and to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the DRC. [4] [...] combine their efforts to achieve national reconciliation. [5] [...] agree to take all the necessary measures to make the people and the leaders involved in the transition process feel secure both in Kinshasa and in the whole of the national territory.

However, despite all the parties involved managed to sign the agreement, the realization of the transitional government faced various challenges. One of them was the refusal of the parties to give up their power to form a

centralized government (CRS, 2005, p. 2). The armed groups also insisted to maintain their control over several territories in the DRC.

Unfortunately, the years-long war and armed conflicts have depleted the country's economy. Per capita income had fallen to between USD 78 and USD 88. GNP had shrunk by 40 percent, inflation had risen to 520 percent, and exports had dropped by 45 percent. Up to 64 percent of the population was underfed and 33 percent were malnourished (FAO, 2001). These sufferings affected several regions where armed groups held their bases, such as North and South Kivu (FDLR), Ituri, and Northern Katanga (Mayi-Mayi). Many of those groups continue to wage war against one another to fight control over regions in the DRC. For example, ALIR I, Mayi Mayi, and the RCD were all fighting each other to establish control over Itombwe (Prunier, 2009). The failure of President Joseph Kabila who succeeded his father after he was assassinated also contributed to the long-lasting armed conflicts in the DRC.

In January 2019, opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi was inaugurated as the new president after winning the December 2018 presidential election. Although this inauguration marked the first peaceful transfer of power in the country's history, the opposition parties accused that the results have been rigged. The accusation was based on several technical issues and delays in voting for more than a million Congolese. An analysis of the polling data also indicated that Tshisekedi's rival, Martin Fayulu, was the one who was supposed to win the election as he won 59.4 percent votes (Financial Times, 2019). With people's discontent regarding the election result, as well as several crises and ongoing violence across the country, it is possible that President Tshisekedi would face the same obstacles his predecessors went through.

2.2 Recruitment and Exploitation of CAAFAG

The on-going armed conflicts in the DRC have caused the emergence of many armed groups, as well as the increasing number of crimes and violations committed by those groups. From 1 January 2014 to 31 December

2017, there are more or less 6.168 total documented and verified cases of child recruitment to armed groups and armed forces in the DRC (MONUSCO, 2019, pp. 17-21). According to a report by MONUSCO, the recruitment of CAAFAG serves 70 percent of all child abductions in the DRC. Armed groups like FRPI and Nyatura recruited 30 to 40 percent of its child troops by abduction. There are also other ways to recruit the children, as what was done by armed group Kamuina Nsapu, using political and ethnic campaign, magical protection, and death threats. There are several factors on why armed groups and armed forces choose to recruit children (MONUSCO, 2019, p. 30).

1. Boost Ranks

Children could quickly multiply the number of fighting forces. Most of the armed groups recruited children either just before launching attacks or after suffering from huge defeat.

2. Loyal Fighters

This factor is mostly used in attempts to persuade children in joining armed groups as well as in boosting their fighting spirit. High commanders of the armed groups usually tell the children about the sufferings of their families and community. This would later give the children a sense of obligation to avenge their people.

3. Cheap Labor

Children need less food, clothing, and shelter compared to adults, yet they tend to work harder and easier to persuade and manipulate. This is why armed groups prefer to abduct children and use them as porters and send them to frontlines. Members of armed groups could easily threaten to kill the children if they dared to disobey, and since the children are weaker than adults, it is way easier to make them scared and control them.

4. Magic Powers

Most of the Congolese people still believe in superstitions. These beliefs also apply to several armed groups, who believe that virgin children have the power to become bulletproof. These children were sent to the

frontlines to protect other combatants from the opposing groups and to restore the group's magic to its full power.

5. Proof of Power

Due to the on-going armed conflicts, regions in the DRC are controlled by different armed groups. They establish rules and impose taxes that, more often than not, burden the civilians. This condition then prompts armed groups to enforce their power by abducting children if their parents or other family members fail to obey the rules.

In regions with armed conflicts like the DRC, extreme suffering tends to be generalized. Any form of violence and brutality has either been experienced or witnessed in daily life. The armed groups and armed forces also used violence and brutality, be it psychologically or physically, to train the CAAFAG, as cited below:

The initial thing was that they break [the children] down psychologically and emotionally and then they tried to rebuild you into what they want. Our initial arrival at the camp was this shocking experience, where, not only I was drugged, not only was I forced to shoot someone, unwillingly. I was blindfolded and they gave me an AK-47 in my hand which I dropped it and they kept on laughing.¹

This shows that the armed groups and armed forces tried to exert as much violence as they could to destroy the children psychologically in order to rebuild them as obedient soldiers.

In a community where the toxic culture of masculinity is still deeply believed, violence and brutality have become the expression of the only acceptable emotion for boys; anger. Violence and brutality are also done for the sake of protecting the honor of their families and communities as well as to prevent shame. In his book, William Pollack stated that boys put on violent masks not because they feel strong or self-assured, but rather because they feel anxious to protect themselves from the wounds (Pollack, 1999). When armed groups and armed forces exert violence and threats in

¹ Part of the transcript of an interview with a former CAAFAG in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

the recruitment of CAAFAG, they give a sense of burden and fear on the boys to protect their families and communities. Congolese children will have no other option than joining the armed forces as refusing and fleeing would be deemed “unmanly” and “a disgrace” and will cost the lives of family members. As they being recruited as CAAFAG, those children no longer allow themselves to show their “shameful” fears, thus become the victim of “shame-hardening”.

When boys become hardened, they learn to remain silent and mask their suffering. They would later resort to violent behaviors, as it was what they believe how “men supposed to act”. As cited below (Bodineau, 2019, p. 211):

Children and young people were more aggressive compared to adults. The soldiers who were adults had a little reserve. But the kids were very, very aggressive. And in most cases, it's as if the adults remain calm and they leave the burden of harassment in the hands of the little ones. - Célestine

This shows that in order to survive, the boys have no other option but to obey orders and commit atrocities. They are forced to live up to the “Boy Code” to avoid shame and prevent themselves from “losing face”. With all the pressure to become tough, strong, and violent as what most Congolese people believe a man should be, the boys do their best to protect themselves by, unfortunately, hurting others.

2.3 Toxic Culture of Masculinity in the DRC

The on-going armed conflicts in the DRC have affected the lives of its people, whether they were the men, women, or children. With 63 percent of the population live under the national poverty line and the inequality continuously widening, it becomes the main concern of Congolese to try to survive and improve their living condition (JICA, 2017, p. 5). Based on the strong male-dominant culture in the DRC, it is no wonder that Congolese men are constantly pressured to strive and to use their power to subject others. The Social Institutions and Gender Index stated in their 2014 report

that the gender inequality in the DRC was ‘very high’. Another report released in 2019 showed a little improvement, despite the inequality was still on ‘medium’ level (OECD, 2019). The classification was based on several findings, such as discriminatory family code, inequality in physical integrity, limited access to assets and resources, also lack of freedom as a citizen. As cited from a former child soldier in the DRC:

[...] And I think as the Congo has been developed, yes it become a lot more, very patriarchal society. I think it’s reinforced by, especially by colonialism that tried to reinforce gender norms, that were brought by Europe. [...] In Congo that’s still very much the case, especially when you are in economy, social, and political fields, men are still dominating the society. Many aspects of them.²

From the statement above, it is clear that in the DRC, the strong male-dominant culture has seeped into households, society, as well as religious beliefs.

Congolese people believe that as a man, one must have a strong position to guide and fulfill the needs of their family. They believe that men must be masculine, and by masculine means asserting their power to subject others, be it, other men or other women. The failure to exercise these ‘masculine’ behaviors will be considered as a flaw to their masculinity (JICA, 2017, p. 10). Masculinity became something that should be maintained through continuous action in order to preserve male dominance.

Congolese children are thus assigned for their future roles in society based on their genders since early childhood. Boys were given toy cars or playhouse and should participate in the *barza*, which is a family and village council where boys were expected to consult on their education and local culture (Lwambo, 2013, p. 57). The *barza*, which was essentially established to enforce positive traditional values to the boys, became a place where little boys and young men constantly trying to endure the pressure and expectations from the elders in the community. The young men and

² Part of the transcript of an interview with a former CAAFAG in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

little boys were expected to help, and eventually replace, their fathers in sustaining their families' daily needs. They were expected to work and to earn money. They were expected to be rich, because to be rich means to achieve manhood, to assert their full male power. As cited below (Lwambo, 2013, p. 58):

Having work is the most important thing for a man. Even if a man behaves badly in order to get rich.

This shows that the constant pressure of being economically successful resulted in the boy to sacrifice honesty and hard work in favor of earning more money, including joining the armed groups. By joining armed groups, the boys are being exposed to economic opportunities that are not available to those who didn't join the armed groups. They wouldn't mind looting civilian houses and robbing civilians before killing them.

Sexual dominance is also seen as a form of 'manliness'. In the conflict-prone regions in the DRC, nine percent of Congolese men reported that they had experienced sexual violence during the conflict and 16 percent reported that they had been forced to watch others carried out rape against someone. These atrocities date back to their childhood, as 21 percent of Congolese men reported that they had been forced to either touch someone else's private parts or had someone else touching their private parts when they had yet turned 18. 11 percent of Congolese men admitted that one of their family members forced them to have sexual relations before they had turned 18 (Deepan, 2014, pp. 27-28). These horrible childhood experiences then shaped them either into solitary individuals whose masculinity has been wounded or into aggressive individuals who also force their sexual dominance on others as a way to reassert their 'manliness'.

In the DRC and other countries as well, armed groups and armed forces become the most brutal evidence of 'masculine' behaviors. They exercised their 'masculine' behavior by looting villages, attacking civilians, and even raping Congolese people, be it men, women, or children. As stated by one of the male rape survivors below (BBC, 2017):

They killed my father. Three men raped me, and they said: ‘You are a man, how are you going to say you were raped?’. As a man, I can’t cry. People will tell you that you are a coward, you are weak, you are stupid. It’s a weapon they use to make you silent.
– Stephen Kigoma, male rape survivor.

This shows that the armed groups and armed forces in the DRC uses rape as a mean to humiliate and demoralize Congolese people, thus making them easier to be forced into submission. Boys and young men who became the victims of sexual assault were ridden with shame and guilt for failing to become ‘manly’ and protect themselves from the attack.

2.4 Michel Chikwanine: Story of A Former CAAFAG in the DRC

Michel Chikwanine was only five years-old when he was abducted by an armed group in the DRC. He was playing soccer with his school mates when the armed group came, blindfolded them, and took them to their camp. Prior to the incident, Michel grew up in a middle-class family in Beni, DR Congo. Michel’s father was an activist and a notable lawyer. Their family had a vast garden at their house, where his mother, who is also an activist in the community, planted the flowers she always brought from places she traveled. As the third child and the only son of the family, Michel is accustomed to sharing, a value that his father taught him during his childhood. He always had other kids from the neighborhood to come over to his house to play in the backyard or had lunch together. He had them over so much that when the kids’ parents couldn’t find them, they would always check on the Chikwanines’ house, where they would find their children eating.

On that eventful afternoon, Michel was playing soccer with his school mates after school ended, ignoring his father’s warning to go home before 6:00 PM. It was during that game when several men from the armed group came, blindfolded them, and took them to the camp. Until this day, Michel still does not know which armed group abducted him. When they arrived at the camp, still being blindfolded, Michel and the other children were divided

into two groups. Michel was then handed an AK-47, which he dropped repeatedly because it was too heavy for a 5-year old to carry. The soldiers who were first laughing when he dropped the gun began to feel impatient and shouted at him to aim the gun straight ahead and shoot. Due to the fear of continuously being shouted at, Michel shot and felt something liquid splashed onto his face, clothes, and shoes. When he was allowed to open the blindfold, he saw that it was Kevin, his own friend, whom he was forced to shoot at.

Michel stayed at the camp for two weeks before eventually managed to escape. During his training period, the armed group tried to break the children down psychologically and emotionally, so that they could rebuild them into what they want. The armed group acted nice at times, but other times they suddenly became very demanding and shouted at the children. Every night before the training, Michel and other children were given *brown-brown*, which is a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder. The armed group believed that by using the substance, they could gain superpower, thus every night they would cut the children's arms and sprinkle *brown-brown* on the wound. The use of the substance caused Michel a lot of headaches and he spent his nights at the camp shaking and shivering, as if he had a fever. The commander of the group also held the belief of holy water that could make them bulletproof. Therefore, every morning before they went to battle or to train, the commander would pour the water on himself and his soldiers to protect them.

At the camp, Michel was assigned to relatively easy tasks, such as cleaning the boots of the commander and other soldiers, to bring the guns back from the training field to the storage room, as well as to clean and assemble the guns. He was also assigned to carry the magazines when the armed group was about to launch an attack on other villages. During these attacks, Michel and other children were told to march at the front and to scout at the village. This method was done so that people in the other villages wouldn't shoot immediately, because they saw children instead of adult soldiers.

It was on one of the scouting missions where Michel found his opportunity to escape. The camp location was near Rwenzori Mountains that border Congo and Uganda. Rwenzori Mountains are located near Butembo and more or less four kilometers away from Beni, the town where Michel's family lived. Michel ran away during one of his scouting missions and escaped through the forest. He managed to navigate his way through the forest from his experience of spending a lot of his spare time in the forest with his friends and his father. He kept on running and tried to find water banks and banana trees, which he knew were the signs of people's settlements. One day, when he had managed to find a river and was following the stream, he heard the voices of several people talking. Afraid that they were the soldiers from the armed group who chased him, he laid in the grass and stayed still. However, the voices gradually became noisier, so he looked up and saw that he had reached the road. It turned out to be the Kasindi-Beni-Butembo Road, which was the road connecting the three cities as well as connecting the DRC with Uganda. He followed the road and eventually ended up at the small grocery store where his family usually bought daily necessities. The owner of the store recognized him and took him back to his home.

The first few months after returning to his family were the hardest for Michel. The use of *brown-brown* for two weeks caused him to develop some kind of addiction to the substance. He also couldn't sleep at night because his whole body was shaking. His family thought that he suffered from malaria and took him to the hospital, but the doctors said that it was not malaria. Michel also didn't go to school for a few months. The process of healing from the addiction effect also affected his temper. After he returned to school, he started to get into fights with many other kids at his school. These fights caused him to be absent again from school for a few months. Michel eventually moved to Goma where he lived with his aunt and cousins for a few months.

By the time he returned to Beni from Goma, his father has already been forced to leave the country for criticizing the government and for his attempt to expose the government's motives for war. Michel and his mother and sisters continued to live in Beni until one day the government soldiers broke into his house looking for documents that his father might have left. Failed in finding the documents, the soldiers raped Michel's mother and sisters and forced him to watch. This event made them realize that their family was no longer safe in Congo. Michel and his family were then smuggled out of the country to Uganda, where his father had fled. It was also in Uganda, in 2001, where his father was assassinated. Shortly before his death, Michel's father left him a message:

Never forget that we are Congolese. That we have a home. That we have a culture. That we have a people. But most important of all, always remember that great men and great women throughout history have never been described by their money nor their success, but rather by their heart and what they do for others.³

Until this day, Michel and his family believed that the reason behind his father's assassination was his political activism.

Three years after his father's assassination, Michel and his family were granted asylum in Canada. His first few years in Canada were unpleasant. He should adapt to the cold after being used to warm and humid weather in the DRC. He was also bullied in school for being African. He was told numerous times by his peers to "go back to his country". As Michel himself recalled:

I remember thinking as a kid that they don't know that the reason that I'm in Canada, that I moved to Canada wasn't that I want to, but because the world wants access to Congolese minerals. And the need for Congolese minerals that was causing the conflicts that are causing so many Congolese people out, that caused them to be refugees.⁴

³ Part of the transcript of Michel Chikwanine's speech at the 2015 RISE Awards.

⁴ Part of the transcript of an interview with a former CAAFAG in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The pain of being bullied and discriminated against, the understanding of how that discrimination was steeped from ignorance, the encouragement from his teacher to tell his story, and the final message left by his father inspired him to retell his story.