

WHY HAS MURHABAZI BEEN NOMINATED?

Murhabazi Namegabe has been nominated for the World's Children's Prize 2011 for his 20-year long perilous struggle for children in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Since 1989, Murhabazi and his organisation BVES has freed 4,000 child soldiers and more than 4,500 girls who have been sexually assaulted by armed groups, and taken care of 4,600 unaccompanied refugee children.

His 35 homes and schools offer some of the world's most vulnerable children food, clothes, a home, healthcare, therapy, the opportunity to go to school, security and love. Most of the children are reunited with their families. Thanks to Murhabazi, some 60,000 children have passed through the doors of BVES' various centres and been given a better life.

Murhabazi and BVES represent children in DR Congo by constantly urging the government, all armed groups, organisations and everyone else in society to look after the country's children.

Not everyone supports Murhabazi's struggle. He has been imprisoned and assaulted and is constantly receiving death threats. Seven of his colleagues have been killed.



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Murhabazi Namegabe



“You're going to die tonight. Eat your last meal!”

Murhabazi read the short message that beeped on his mobile phone. He was in an important meeting with the UN, discussing children who were being forced to become soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He looked around cautiously. Had someone in the room sent him the death threat? Murhabazi has made many enemies during his struggle for the thousands of children being exploited and tortured in war-torn DR Congo.

“The fight for children's rights here is a matter of life and death. And I'm prepared to die in that fight, every day,” says Murhabazi Namegabe.

Murhabazi hadn't even been born when he received his first death threat. War was raging in Bukavu in eastern DR Congo in 1964, and his pregnant mother Julienne fled the narrow lanes to get away from the fighting. She didn't notice the soldiers' road block until it was too late. One of the soldiers pressed the barrel of his rifle against her pregnant belly, but just as he was about to pull the trigger, one of the leaders shouted: “Don't kill her! Let her go!”

Two weeks later, Julienne

gave birth to a son. She named him Murhabazi, which in Mashi means both ‘One who was born in war’, and ‘one who helps others’.

“My mother always says that we were allowed to live for a reason, that I was meant to be born. And that I was predestined to devote my life to protecting vulnerable people.”

Everyone should have food!

Murhabazi grew up in one of the poorest districts of Bukavu. But since his father had a job, the family always

had food to eat and the children could go to school. When they had done their homework, they could play with their friends. As soon as he started school, Murhabazi realised that not everyone was as lucky as he was.

“A lot of my friends were always hungry and couldn't afford to go to school. I thought that was unfair. Every day, hungry children gathered outside our house when we were about to eat. Mother put tiny amounts of food in their hands before she sent them away. I thought

Protected by UN

Murhabazi talking to a child soldier in front of a UN Jeep. Although the fight for children's rights in DR Congo is tough, some aspects have become easier for him.

"At first we had to go on foot and I often carried out rescue missions to free child soldiers on my own. Today I have UN protection when I travel to various armed groups. I'm not even allowed to travel alone these days!" laughs Murhabazi.



Difficult to rescue children

"Every time a child soldier is freed it's like a major victory. But negotiating with armed groups is not easy. They threaten to kill us when we ask them to release the children. Then it's difficult to handle the children, because they have been so exploited and damaged by adults. And in the end it can be difficult to get their families, neighbours, villages and schools to accept the children when it's time for them to return to their homes," says Murhabazi.

that the children should be allowed to sit with us and eat until they were full. I told my mother that I refused to eat her food as long as things remained as they were!"

Murhabazi talked to some of his school friends and together they began to campaign on behalf of the hungry

children in the district. Every afternoon they went around singing songs about how adults needed to take care of all children. The children explained to their mothers that they planned to go on a hunger strike until the poorest children in the neighbourhood were welcome at their table.

"At first it was just me and a few others, but soon there were over seventy of us demonstrating every day after school!"

"In the end the adults decided that the hungry children were everyone's responsibility, and that they could eat dinner together with families that had enough food to share!"

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Murhabazi and the other children carried on demonstrating, this time to encourage parents and teachers to stop hitting children, and for the right of every child to go to school. The older Murhabazi became, the more problems he saw for children in DR Congo. He knew that children needed adults to

take up their cause, and that he himself needed more knowledge if he was to be able to help children properly. So he studied child development and health at university. He stayed on as a teacher after he graduated.

On 20 November 1989 he was listening to the news on the radio after work, as he did every day. That particular day he heard the newsreader announce that the UN had adopted something that was called the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention stated that all children around the world were entitled to a good life. The newsreader also said that every country that signed up to the Convention would have to consider children's best interests in all decisions.

"I was so happy. I organised a meeting at my house with a group of teachers, students and lawyers, and I told them the fantastic news. We decided that we would do everything in our power to get the government of DR Congo to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child."

BVES

Murhabazi's group called itself BVES (Bureau pour le volontariat au service de l'enfance et de la santé, Bureau for Volunteer Service for Children and Health). They started examining the situation faced by children in DR Congo. They planned to report the results to the government, and point out what the country needed to do in order to meet the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"We had neither money nor



Promotes children's rights on radio

Murhabazi has been speaking on the radio about children's rights once a week for over 20 years.





Teaches soldiers about children's rights

When Murhabazi visits an armed group, he teaches the soldiers about children's rights and negotiates with them to release the children.

vehicles, so we often hiked for several days through the rain-forest to reach remote villages. At night we were forced to sleep in the trees to avoid leopards and other dangerous animals. Sometimes we were given food in the villages, sometimes we ate fruit in the forest, but we were often hungry.”

Murhabazi and BVES continued with their struggle and started to compile facts about the lives of children in

the villages of DR Congo. Terrible facts.

“When we reported our results to the government, they weren't happy at all. DR Congo was a dictatorship back then. If anyone said anything negative about the country, like that children were suffering here, it was seen as an attack on the government. We were given a warning. If we didn't stop, we would end up in prison.”

Street children

Murhabazi and BVES did not stop. They started speaking on the radio once a week, so that everyone would hear about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and what life was like for children in DR Congo. Every time, Murhabazi repeated his demand that the government sign the Convention. And every time the government threatened to lock him up

because his talk was creating unrest in the country. Despite the threats against Murhabazi, the country signed up to the Convention in 1990, but the government made absolutely no effort to follow its principles.

“The streets of Bukavu were swarming with children who had no-one to look after them. Their parents were either poor or had died of AIDS. All these hungry and

Mobile phones and computer games fuel war

DR Congo has enormous riches. For example gold and diamonds, but also tungsten and coltan. These are minerals that are used in the manufacture of mobile phones, computers, computer games and MP3 players all round the world.

The war today is about who will have control over DR Congo's mines and natural wealth. “I was forced to dig for both gold and diamonds for my commander,” says Isaya, 15, a former child soldier rescued by Murhabazi.

The current conflict followed in the wake of the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994, during which almost 1 million people from the Tutsi ethnic group were murdered.

Thousands of the perpetrators fled to the forests of DR Congo, where they remained. Suspicion was rife and a struggle for power broke out between Rwanda and DR Congo, and soon seven countries were involved in one of the most brutal wars in the history of the world.

As recently as 2001, the UN accused Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe of encouraging the fighting in order to gather as many riches as possible. In 2008, the UN once again accused Rwanda of keeping the war going. In 2009, the organisation Global Witness revealed that fighting in DR Congo was now driven by European and Asian trade in the manufacture of mobile phones,

computers, computer games and MP3 players. Companies from Belgium, the UK, Russia, Malaysia, China and India were identified because they bought minerals from various armed groups that were brutally violating children's rights. Companies were keeping the war going by buying the minerals. The fact that politicians, businessmen and soldiers in Africa, Asia and the West are making huge amounts of money from the war in DR Congo makes it difficult to put a stop to it.



Children in war have the same rights

“Our children, who are growing up surrounded by war, are also entitled to live, to have a family, health-care, education and to be allowed to play. They also have the right to develop as people and make their voices heard, as well as to be respected in every way,” says Murhabazi.

dirty children were trying to fend for themselves. Many people referred to the children as ‘dogs’, but we said that they needed protection and love, just like any other child.”

In 1994, BVES opened its first home for street children, and 260 boys and girls moved in. After a few months, many of these children had moved back home. But new residents were moving in all the time.

Child soldiers

“We thought we’d seen the worst through our work with the abandoned children, but then the war started and life for all children here became pure hell,” says Murhabazi.

In 1996, Bukavu was invaded by various Congolese rebel armies with the support of Rwanda. Children were directly targeted during the war that followed.

“We had taken in unaccompanied refugee children from ethnic groups that the armies regarded as their enemies, so they destroyed our three homes for refugee children. Luckily I had managed to hide the children in time, so everyone survived. But my first colleague and friend was killed.”

All the groups that were fighting, including DR Congo’s army, were kidnapping boys and forcing them to become soldiers, and abducting girls to use them as sex slaves. Children had to leave school and were forced to flee, often ending up alone on the streets of Bukavu and other cities.

“Of course I had experience of looking after tough boys who had lived on the streets before, but child soldiers were a completely different matter. Young boys aged about ten who were on drugs, wearing uniforms and carrying huge weapons. They had been completely destroyed by adults. I wanted to do every-

thing I could to save as many as possible,” explains Murhabazi.

First rescue mission

“One day I met a group of mothers in utter despair, who told me that 67 children had been abducted from their village.”

Murhabazi set off with a bag packed with a bunch of bananas and books about children’s rights. Alone.

“I took a motorbike taxi without saying exactly where we were going. If I had, I would never have been given a ride!”

When Murhabazi arrived at the rebel army’s camp in

the forest, he was arrested. He was surrounded by over a hundred armed soldiers. Guards took Murhabazi to the leader, who asked what he wanted.

“I said that in our culture, adults always take care of children, but that I’d heard that this army had stolen children and forced them to fight instead of going to school. I said that I was there to take the children back to their parents again. The leader was absolutely furious! He thought I was one of the enemy because I wanted to weaken his army by taking his child soldiers. He ordered his soldiers to tear up my books about children’s rights. Then the beating started.”

Children released

Blows from rifle butts rained down on Murhabazi. When he had taken a thorough beating, they locked him up. They explained that he had two choices: to be a soldier in their army, or be executed. The next morning as they were preparing to kill him, one of the leaders stopped the proceedings. He had been too



We will burn the uniforms

Murhabazi with boys he rescued from being soldiers. The picture shows how they swap uniforms, so that no-one knows which armed group they belonged to. Now they will burn their uniforms together.



Child soldiers become child rights warriors

“I’m convinced that we will succeed in the end. One day, all child soldiers in DR Congo will be free. Every day I feel renewed strength when I see former child soldiers becoming children’s rights warriors in their families, schools and villages!”



drunk to recognise Murhabazi the day before. Now he said:

“He’s no enemy soldier. I know that this man helps street children in Bukavu.”

Total chaos broke out when the kidnapped children heard this.

“The children cried and shouted out that I should help them too, just like I helped the street children. They wanted to go home! I told the soldiers that they had to release the children. I said that if their plan was to bring down the government and create a better country, then using children as soldiers was not the way to do it. The children had to go back to school! Who else would be able to build the new and better country that they wanted, if all the young people were drugged-up soldiers instead of young people who had been given a good education?”

There was a heated discussion between the leaders. Some agreed with Murhabazi, others didn’t. But Murhabazi managed to convince them in the end. The soldiers let the children leave the forest. The first 67 rescued child soldiers ran to freedom!

Prepared to die

That was thirteen years ago. Murhabazi has freed 4,000 child soldiers. Some 60,000 children who have suffered because of the war - girls who have been subjected to sexual assault, unaccompanied refugee children, child soldiers and street children - have been given a better life,



thanks to Murhabazi and BVES. There are now 209 people working at BVES, which has 35 homes and schools offering children a home, healthcare, therapy, the opportunity to go to school, security and love. Most of the children are reunited with their families.

Murhabazi has gained many enemies. He gets threatening telephone calls and text messages, and he rarely sleeps in the same place two nights in a row. Seven of his colleagues have been killed in their fight for children’s rights, and he himself has been assaulted and imprisoned.

“There are a lot of soldiers, politicians and businessmen, both in DR Congo and in other countries, who are making a great deal of money out of the war. The more unrest there is in the country, the cheaper it is for them to rob us of our natural resources, such as gold and diamonds. In the hunt for riches, everyone, even the armies of other countries, uses armed groups and child soldiers, and everyone rapes girls. When I fight against this I make a lot

of powerful enemies, because I’m disrupting their business activities. They are also afraid of being reported to the UN International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.”

The fighting and the violence against children in DR Congo is continuing, despite the peace deal in 2003.

Murhabazi will not stop fighting for their rights.

“We have to keep going. Nothing will stop me as long as I know that there are children in an armed group. Not death threats or accidents.

When it turned out that it was soldiers who had sent the death threat during the UN meeting, everyone wanted me to stop and leave the country. The UN and Amnesty felt that it had become too dangerous for me to stay. And they’re right really. But how could I leave? I have a responsibility to all the vulnerable children that I and BVES have taken care of. The children trust me. I cannot let them down. Every day I’m prepared to die for them.” 🌐



Murhabazi helps the boys to get their uniforms off, which they have put on for a ceremony in which the uniforms will be burned. The boys can have a different uniform to the one they fought in, so that no-one knows which armed group they belonged to.





Children should be playing!

“My parents always let me play a lot when I was a child. As long as I had done my homework I could go out and play football and play with my friends. It’s had a huge impact on the way I view childhood. Children must be allowed to play! It’s important for all the girls and boys who are with us here at BVES to be able to play as much as possible,” says Murhabazi.

Friends Kasereka and Mupenzi Dame playing at Murhabazi’s boys’ home for former child soldiers.

One of the worst wars in history

- The war in DR Congo is one of the biggest and most brutal in the history of the world. It has been going on since 1998. A peace agreement was reached in 2003, but fighting is still continuing in the eastern parts of the country, which is home to the children you’ve been reading about in *The Globe*.

- Around 5.4 million people have died, either in the fighting or from disease and starvation as a direct result of the war.

- At its worst there were over 30,000 child soldiers in the country. Thousands of them have yet to be reunited with their families. The UN reports that 848 children were forced to be soldiers in 2009.

- Some 200,000 rapes have been reported since the war began, but many believe that a lot more women and girls have been exploited. In 2009, half of the victims were children.

- Over 1.5 million people in DR Congo are refugees.

- Over 5 million children in DR Congo do not go to school.

This is how Murhabazi’s organisation works:

- Visits armed groups and informs them about children’s rights, so that all those fighting are aware of how children should be treated in war, according to both the UN Convention and Congolese law, for example, that child soldiers are forbidden.
- Organises the release of child soldiers and girls being sexually exploited during visits to armed groups.
- Visits refugee camps and takes care of unaccompanied refugee children and street children.
- Offers freed child soldiers, exploited girls, unaccompanied refugee children and street children protection, a home, food, clothes, healthcare, psychological help, and the chance to go to a school that prepares them for returning to ordinary school again, as well as vocational training in tailoring or carpentry.
- Traces the children’s families and helps the children to return to their homes. They always prepare the children’s families, as well as neigh-

bours, politicians, religious leaders and teachers in the villages, well in advance, so that the children are accepted and welcomed back properly. If it is not possible to reunite the child with his or her family, BVES helps the child to find a foster family. A child is never sent away from Murhabazi’s home until they know that the child will be going to a safe environment.

- often supports the children’s families financially so that they can afford to let the children go to school and have enough food. It may be that the organisation helps a parent or older sibling to find work in order to support the family.
- Often helps freed children with school fees and school uniforms long after they have left Murhabazi’s home, sometimes up until they start university.
- Informs the rest of society about children’s rights. One way that Murhabazi does this is via a regular radio programme.





Faida, 15

LOVES: Peace. This is the first year in a very long time that I have not been involved in war.

HATES: War and death.

THE WORST THING THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME: Being kidnapped and becoming a soldier and a sex slave.

BEST THING THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME: When Murhabazi rescued me and I got to go back to school.

LOOKS UP TO: Murhabazi of course! He saved my life.

WANTS TO BE: Someone who fights to make sure children have good lives.

DREAM: For all the children in the world to live in peace and be loved.

Faida was a soldier

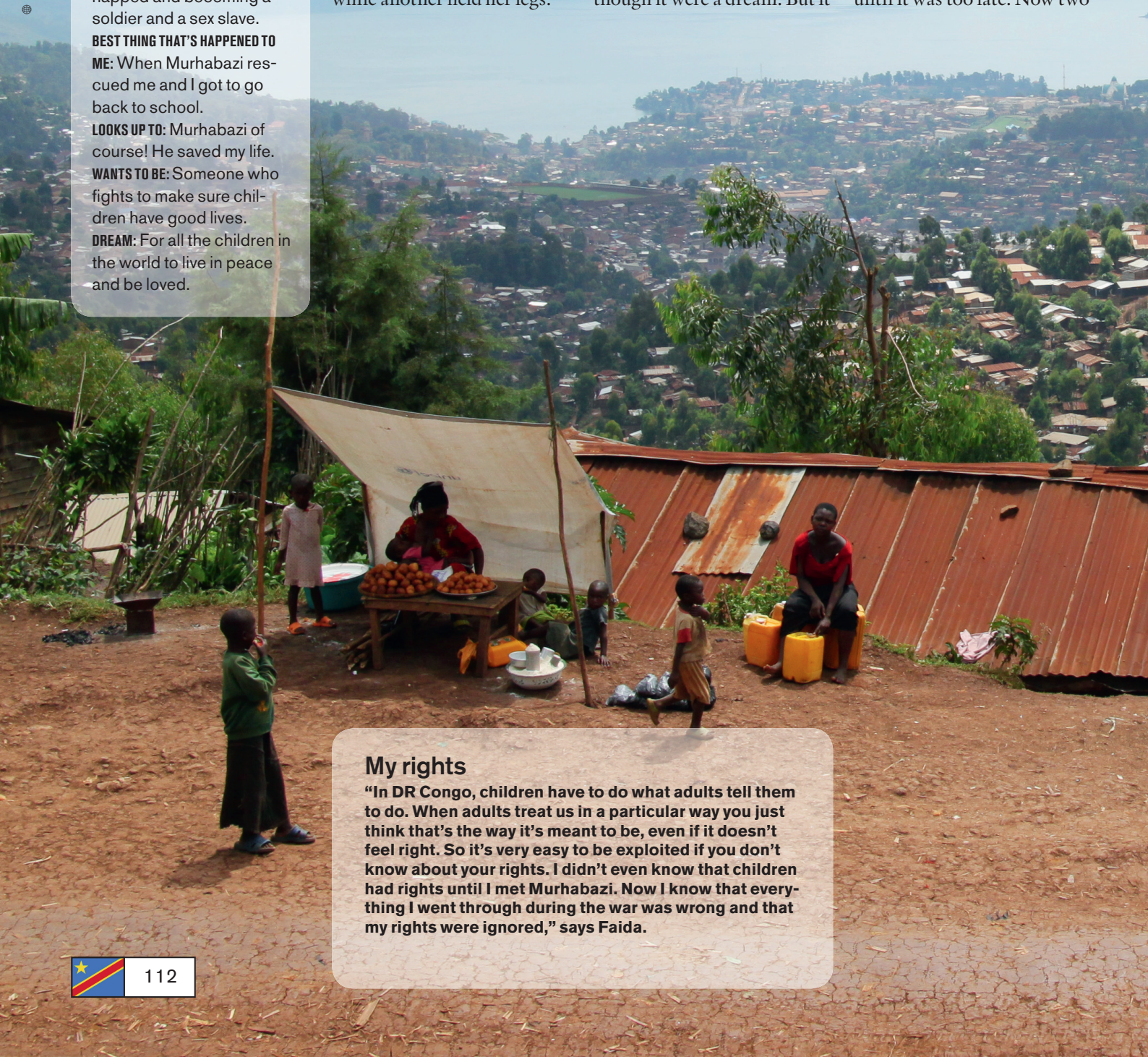
When Faida was eleven years old, she was kidnapped by one of the many armed groups operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was the beginning of a nightmare that lasted four years, during which she was forced to be both a sex slave and a soldier.

“I don’t think I would have survived if Murhabazi hadn’t rescued me. He risked his own life for me. He’s like a father to me,” says Faida.

The rifle butt struck Faida hard in the face. She tried to get away, but she was rooted to the spot on her back in the high grass. One soldier was holding her arms while another held her legs.

Then six soldiers took turns to rape her. Faida could hear the screams of her friends nearby. They were suffering the same fate. The screams of her friends seemed far off, as though it were a dream. But it

was no dream. Faida and her friends had been working in their families’ cassava field, just like they always did during the school holidays. No-one noticed the soldiers until it was too late. Now two



My rights

“In DR Congo, children have to do what adults tell them to do. When adults treat us in a particular way you just think that’s the way it’s meant to be, even if it doesn’t feel right. So it’s very easy to be exploited if you don’t know about your rights. I didn’t even know that children had rights until I met Murhabazi. Now I know that everything I went through during the war was wrong and that my rights were ignored,” says Faida.

r and a slave

of Faida's friends were dead. When one of the soldiers raised his machete to strike Faida, the commandant shouted:

"Don't kill her! She can be my wife!"

Armed soldiers guarded Faida and her friend Aciza as they trudged through the field, completely naked.

"We found it hard to walk because we were injured, but they forced us."

Finally they came to a road where the soldiers' lorry was



Murhabazi helps us

"Murhabazi helped me to start up a market stall. Sometimes he helps us with money for clothes and food. If anyone in the family gets sick, he makes sure we get medical help. I don't know how we'd cope without his support, because my dad died in the war and mum refuses to have anything to do with Faida," says big sister Donia as the sisters do the laundry together.



My family!

"The day I was called to BVES to see if a girl they had there was my Faida was the happiest day of my life! Today she is my daughter and belongs to my family," says Faida's big sister Donia.



Frightened neighbours say cruel things

The big photo shows the view from where Faida lives with her sister Donia.

"It's not always easy for me here. A lot of the neighbours are afraid and shout things at me: 'You're a soldier! Go back to the forest where you belong! We don't want you here! Whore!', and things like that. It hurts. But not everyone does that. My best friend is called Neema, and she accepts me as I am," says Faida.





My friend Neema

“We often braid each other’s hair, Neema and me,” says Faida.

“I usually charge three US dollars to do people’s hair,” says Neema. “But Faida never has to pay. We’re mates! We meet every day and can talk about anything and even share secrets, because we trust each other.”

parked. The girls were lifted into the back, where sixty soldiers were already sitting and waiting.

“I was terrified I would be raped again,” says Faida.

Everyone’s slave

The girls were left alone during the long journey to the soldiers’ camp. But then it started again.

“The commandant dragged me into his house. He abused me all night, even though I was seriously injured.”

The next day, the commandant and a few soldiers went looting.

“As soon as he’d gone, the soldiers that were left started abusing me. There were over twenty other girls and women in the camp, but no-one could help me. They were in the same situation as I was and there were armed guards watching us all the time.”

When the commandant

came back, Faida was his alone. But as soon as he was out fighting or looting, she was abused by everyone. Day after day. All day long.

Back home in the village, Faida’s family were getting increasingly worried. Why didn’t she come home? They went from village to village asking if anyone had seen her. But since no-one in the village had been kidnapped by soldiers before they hadn’t even considered the possibility. After a month everyone was convinced that Faida had been killed in the war. They said their farewells to Faida by having a period of mourning and holding a memorial service in the church, just like they did when someone died.

Life as a soldier

After six months with the soldiers, Faida was feeling dreadful.

“I was going mad. I just

couldn’t handle being everyone’s slave any more, despite the drugs they forced us to take.”

Some of the girls in the camp were soldiers, and Faida had noticed that they were never raped. One day she asked the commandant if she could be a soldier too.

“He agreed, and after two months of training in how to use a machine gun, knives and a bow and arrow, I was a member of his army.”

The raping came to an end, but the violence didn’t. Early one morning it was time for Faida to carry out her first attack.

“I was terrified, but we were given drugs before we left the base. All my fear disappeared and I became very aggressive. The soldiers said that the drugs made us invisible.”

Thirty adult

soldiers and seventy children hiked up the tree-covered hills, lugging their heavy weapons. The children were forced to walk at the front.



Family chores

Faida cooks a kind of maize flour porridge called ugali for the family. Ugali is the most common dish in eastern DR Congo.





Faida and Neema help each other with lots of things, like fetching water.

“I would be very lonely if I didn’t have a friend like Faida,” says Neema, 16.



Beloved sister

“It’s terrible that our mum refuses to see Faida. Because she was so sad when Faida disappeared! And how can neighbours shout out such stupid things at my beloved sister?! All children who have been exploited in war have been treated horrendously. We have to give them a lot of love. Faida often has nightmares and gets depressed, and I try to comfort her. I will protect her with my life,” says big sister Donia.

After a couple of hours of walking they spied the enemy camp down in a forest glade. A camp just like theirs, with soldiers, women and children.

“My group started shooting and there was total chaos.

People were screaming and bullets were flying all over the place. Shots rained down on us in the forest, bits of bark and wood chips sprayed everywhere. My friend Aciza, who was lying closest to me, was suddenly hit in the back. She died.”

When the attack was over, Faida and the other children were sent down to the enemy’s camp.

“We were supposed to strip the bodies of money, mobile phones and weapons. It felt strange because it was the first time I’d done this.”

This was the first of many battles for Faida.

Murhabazi

Faida missed her family so much it hurt. She was constantly thinking about escaping. But she couldn’t.

“A little boy tried to escape once. He was shot immediately. After that I didn’t dare even try. I was also ashamed. Who would want to look after me after everything I’d been through? Who could love me? No-one.”

But there was someone who wanted to take care of Faida. Someone who did everything in his power to save her and the other children. It was Murhabazi.

“I had just finished the washing the first time he came. A few Jeeps rolled up at the camp. An unarmed man climbed out of the Jeep with his arms in the air, and he said: ‘Amani leo!’, ‘Peace now!’. It was Murhabazi. He could easily have been killed, but he wasn’t afraid,” Faida recalls.

Murhabazi went up to the commandant and said that he was here to bring the children home. He said that children shouldn’t be soldiers, they should be going to school.

“When the soldiers heard this they quickly hid us. I

tried to cry for help, but they pushed me into one of the houses.”

The commandant refused to release the children, so Murhabazi had to leave empty-handed. But he didn’t give up. A few years later he came back, but it ended in the same way.

Third time lucky

When Faida had been held for four years, Murhabazi came again. And this time things were different.

“I couldn’t believe it when Murhabazi hugged me and said: ‘This is your chance! Everything’s going to be all right.’”

And everything was all right at first. Faida got the chance to start school again at Murhabazi’s home for vulnerable girls. There were loads of children to play with and talk to. And adults you could trust, who were always there for her. She felt safe. Things went so well for Faida at the BVES school that she was soon able to go back to an ordinary school. Things started well there too.

But Faida had trouble concentrating and she suffered mood swings.



➔ “I could get so angry with my classmates when I felt that they didn’t understand me.”

In the end she couldn't cope any more and dropped out of school.

Meanwhile Murhabazi had managed to find Faida's mother. Faida was overjoyed but just like at school, things didn't turn out as she had hoped.

“Mum couldn't even look at me. She was afraid and didn't want anything to do with me. As though everything that had happened was my fault. I can't tell you how much that hurt.”

Luckily, Murhabazi also managed to find Faida's older sister Donia, who welcomed her with open arms. Faida is now part of her family.

“And I've still got Murhabazi. Even if things aren't that easy right now, I know that things will be OK because he is a part of my life. He's like a father to me. Even though he was risking his own life, he still tried to save me not once, but THREE times! He is completely different to the commandant and other adults I've met, who just use children. Murhabazi is on our side. Always!” 🌐



School or sewing course?

“Murhabazi wants me to learn to sew until I've recovered a bit and can start school again. So that I can learn a trade and to help take my mind off all the difficult things I've been through. And also so that I'll be nearer him and the psychologists at BVES. But I'm not sure. It would be better if I could cope with continuing in an ordinary school. A good education gives you more opportunities in life. And I know that I can succeed, I know I'm smart!”



War against girls

Girls and women are often the ones who end up suffering the most in war. Some 200,000 rapes have been reported since the war began, but many believe that a lot more women and girls have been exploited. In 2009, half of the victims were children. Those who survive the rapes often find it difficult to be accepted back into society as they are regarded as being 'unclean'. Solidarity and love within families and villages is destroyed. Many of the victims are infected with the disease AIDS.

“Murhabazi took me to hospital at once for an examination and HIV test. I was extremely lucky, because I hadn't been infected while I was with the soldiers. But a lot of other girls at the home are HIV positive,” recalls Faida.

At the moment, 13 of the 68 girls who live at Murhabazi's home for abused girls in Bukavu are HIV positive. Since 2002, 176 of the girls who were helped by BVES have died of AIDS.

“We try to offer the girls who are HIV positive all the support we can, and make sure that they get free medication,” says Murhabazi.



Mutiya

burns his uniform

At Murhabazi's boys' home in Bukavu for former child soldiers, a group of boys is preparing to return home to their families to start a new life. But first they're going to burn their old soldier's uniforms.

"It's going to be just fantastic to swap my soldier's uniform for a school uniform again," says 15-year-old Mutiya.

We'd just finished our last lesson one Friday. My friend Mweusi and I were on our way home. We were telling each other stories as we walked. Suddenly there were three soldiers standing in front of us, aiming their machine guns at us. They said: 'You can't pass here! If you try and run we'll shoot you on the spot!' My parents had been killed by soldiers, so I was really frightened. We started crying and my friend wet himself. We begged them to let us go, said we were supposed to carry on

going to school, but they just laughed and said: 'What's so special about school? We don't care, you're coming with us anyway!' Then the soldiers tore off our school uniforms, ripped them apart and trampled the rags into the mud. They took our school bags and tore up our books. After three days of being beaten at one of their prisons, we were given our soldier's uniforms. Just a few days later, I was sent out to fight for the first time. Then I was trapped for two years. I survived, but five of my friends were killed. I saw so much death and blood.

Back then I never imagined that I would get to swap my soldier's uniform for a school uniform. I had given up hope when Murhabazi saved my life. He came to the military camp and told us children who had been forced to become soldiers: 'You shouldn't be here. You're going back to school again. Come with me.' It felt unreal, but Murhabazi kept his word! I've started school again here at BVES. Now I'm going home to my older brothers, and I'm going back to school in the village. I can't tell you how happy it makes me! But before we go we're going to burn our old military uni-

Different uniforms

Murhabazi gathers the boys together before they go down to the courtyard where the uniform-burning ceremony will take place. They are wearing different uniforms, because all the various fighting groups in DR Congo use child soldiers. The boys at the home belonged to different armed groups. But here in the photos – for the boys' own safety – they do NOT necessarily wear the uniform they used when they were soldiers. They may be wearing a uniform from a different fighting group to the one they themselves belonged to.



forms. The uniforms remind me of all the bad things: death, blood, war, looting... It's going to feel just great to burn this rubbish, I will feel free afterwards. When I go back to the village I'm going to put my school uniform on instead. When I'm older I want to rescue children from armed groups, just like Murhabazi rescued me." *Mutiya, 15, spent 2 years as a child soldier*

Yes to school uniform!

Before it's time to burn the uniforms, the boys make signs. Mutiya writes 'Yes to school uniform' on his.



No more soldier's uniform!

“Look carefully at the sign now everyone. It says ‘No more soldier's uniform’. You will never wear a soldier's uniform again, you will have school uniforms, don't ever forget that! Now we will burn the uniforms!” cries Murhabazi. Mutiya and the other boys start removing their military clothes with shouts of joy and applause and they put them in a pile in the courtyard.



We're going home!

The big day has arrived. Murhabazi and BVES have managed to trace Mutiya's family and the families of fifteen other boys. Now, finally, they're going to return home after several years of war.

“I'm so happy for the boys. This is what we're fighting for all the time. Every time a child is saved and gets the chance to have a good life again it's one more victory for us,” says Murhabazi, laughing.

Murhabazi's bag

Each child who has been at one of Murhabazi's homes gets a bag containing things that will make life a little easier when they go home to their families. The bag contains:



A toothbrush



Soap



Radio is important

“I am giving you a radio so that you know what is happening in our country and around the world. It's important. Listen to stations that broadcast news and that tell you about children's rights. If you find a station that is preaching hatred, violence and war, change channels! The radio runs on solar energy so you don't have to buy batteries.”



New clothes



Blanket



A pair of shoes



Radio



Toothpaste



Towel



Good luck!

“Mutiya, you want to start school again and begin a new life. I know that you are well prepared and I wish you every happiness in the future!” says Murhabazi, and hugs Mutiya.

“Thank you dad, thank you! I will pray for you to help you find the strength to carry on fighting,” replies Mutiya.



Uniforms go up in smoke

Mutiya and his friends sing and cheer as the uniforms are destroyed in the fire.

New dreams

"I had given up hoping. But at BVES I got the chance to go back to school. I was so happy, although it made me think about all the time I had lost. Two years! Just think how much I could have learned during the time I spent as a soldier. Now I'm going to start at the school in my village, and in the future I want to be like Murhabazi!"



Goodbye friend!!

The boys say goodbye to each other and to Murhabazi. They have become firm friends and helped each other through difficult times, so even though they're longing to get home, it's not easy to part.

Goodbye! We're going home now!



Balls instead of bombs!

"The soldiers took the boys' school uniforms and gave them soldier's uniforms instead. And weapons instead of pens. Bombs instead of balls. But we give the boys footballs to take home with them. Those who live near each other can start a football team and carry on meeting and supporting each other. But most of all, they should have fun!" says Murhabazi.



"This is a really happy moment! My only worry is that new fighting will break out in the areas that the boys are returning to, and that they will be forced to become soldiers again. It happens, and it makes me so angry. It's extremely tough, but we just start over every time it happens. One boy was taken three times, by three different armed groups. Each time we freed him. We never abandon the children, and we don't give up until they're all free," says Murhabazi.





Dreams about good stones

“The armed group that took me forced me to dig for gold, diamonds and other minerals. I had to give all the gemstones I found to my leaders. I was their slave. Those of us who had to dig tried to hide a bit, just a tiny bit, but it was difficult. If they found out, you got a severe beating. You might even be killed. When our group wasn’t digging, we attacked others who worked in the mines. I don’t know how many people died. Then we used the gold and minerals to buy weapons from rich arms dealers who came out to the forests. I think that in the end, the war was about different groups, both Congolese and foreign, fighting for control of mines in DR Congo. If we didn’t have all these minerals, there would have been peace ages ago. Maybe there would never even have been a war. Now all the natural riches are bad for us. But really they should be good. If DR Congo’s government could sell the minerals properly, we could build schools, roads and hospitals. All the things that people need. I dream of such a day. I also dream of one day becoming a tailor and having a good life. And I believe I can do it, because Murhabazi and BVES are behind me.”

Isaya, 15, spent 2 years as a child soldier



Murhabazi never lets you down

The idea is for the children freed by Murhabazi to stay at his centre for three months. But sometimes it takes longer to trace families and then help the children to start their new lives. That’s how it was for Bahati.

“Even though Murhabazi couldn’t find my parents after three months, he didn’t kick me out of the centre. Instead he took care of me for over a year, as though I were his own child. I still see him as my dad. After school at BVES, he helped me so that I could start going to an ordinary school. He paid my school fees and for everything else. And I told Murhabazi about my dream of becoming a journalism. Then he helped me and I got the chance to do a test for a journalist course for young people at the organisation Search for Common Ground. I passed the test and the course, and now I’m a youth reporter on their radio programme, ‘Sisi Watoto - We Children!’ It’s probably the best programme in the world, because we talk about the most important issue there is, children’s rights. A lot of children call us and the whole idea behind the programme is to give a voice to the children of DR Congo. That’s unheard of here. Adults don’t usually listen to children at all here.

“I’m hoping that I can help BVES to save more children in future, just like Murhabazi saved me. He saved my life.”

Bahati, 17, 3 years as a child soldier

“Every Saturday and Sunday at 5.30 in the evening I talk on the radio about children’s rights, mainly about how brutally girls are being exploited in the war in DR Congo,” says Bahati.





“Murhabazi is like a father to me!”

“One Sunday a year ago, my two sisters and I were in church when our village became a battleground between two rival groups. The soldiers were shooting with machine guns and they threw bombs right by the church, so we couldn’t get out. My whole body was shaking with fear. I didn’t know at the time that mum and dad were fleeing for their lives out in the forest. A few days later, when the shooting had ended, the Red Cross and UN came to the church and drove us to a refugee camp. I lived in the camp for five months. It was hard. The food was watered down and the mattresses were on the ground. And we didn’t get to go to school. One day Murhabazi came and asked if I wanted to live at his home for girls instead. I was overjoyed because I’d heard such good things about him. We went with him, 29 of us. I’m happy to be here and it feels like home now. Murhabazi looks after me like a father. But every night I dream that mum and dad are alive and that I can go home again. Murhabazi is still looking for my parents”.

Valentina, 12



Valentina’s day at

Murhabazi’s home for vulnerable girls sits atop one of the hills in the city of Bukavu. Many of the girls were abducted by armed groups. 47 of the 68 girls who live here have been subjected to sexual assault.

“I’m happy to be here and it feels like home now. Murhabazi has become like a father to me,” says Valentina, 12.

08.00 Lessons

“I didn’t go to school when I was living in the refugee camp. I know that it’s every child’s right to be allowed to go to school, even for those of us living with war and who are refugees. Suddenly I wasn’t able to, and it felt terrible. Like I’d lost time to learn important things. I was so happy the first day I got to go to school here at Murhabazi’s! You have to go to school if you want to learn things, so that you make good decisions in life and so that you can get a good job to support your family.”

“When I’m older I want to learn to sew here at BVES and be a seamstress. But most of all I’d like to be a teacher. My teacher Ndamuso is not only my teacher, she’s also really kind and looks after me. She gives me advice, like a mother. I want to be like her when I’m older.”

The girls who are too young to go to school go to nursery.



06.00 Time to get up

“We brush our teeth and wash. We are given soap, toothpaste and hair and body oil here. I’ve lost my toothbrush and haven’t managed to get a new one yet, so I use my finger instead. It works quite well actually!” says Valentina, laughing.



07.00 Breakfast

Breakfast is a kind of maize flour porridge called Buyi.





**12 noon
Lunch**
Rice and beans
on the menu
today.



13.30 Rest
It's nice to rest for a bit during the hottest part of the day. The girl sharing Valentina's bed is called Noella and she is ten years old. "There are often many children sharing the same bed. Sometimes it can be a bit of a squeeze, but at the same time it's nice not to be on your own," says Valentina.

Murhabazi's girls' home



14.30 Play
"I love playing with my friends. You feel happy and it takes your mind off things. And you get to move about, use your muscles and get fit! We skip, do song and dance games and play different ball games."



15.30 Laundry
Valentina shares a wash-tub with Donatella.



16.30 Homework
"We often do our homework together so that we can help each other," says Valentina.



Valentina's wardrobe



18.00 Dinner
Rice and beans for dinner as well.



19.00 Evening assembly

"Every evening we sit together and talk about our day. We sing and tell each other stories. The assemblies are really important to me, because they make me feel calm. I forget to think so much about where mum and dad are. During assemblies it feels like we're a real family. We look after each other and the older ones take care of the younger ones. The adults here care about us. There's always someone to listen when I'm feeling down. Murhabazi, my teacher, the nurse or the psychologist. Just like it should be in all families."

20.00 Bedtime

After brushing their teeth, the girls climb into their beds, snuggled up close, and go to sleep.



"All my clothes are in a bag in the room."

"I wear the pretty white dress every Sunday when I go to church."



"The nicest thing I have is my necklace with the Virgin Mary. When I'm wearing it I feel safe. Sort of like I'm protected."

"This yellow fleece top is my favourite!"



"I managed to take my clothes with me in a bag when I went to the refugee camp, and I'm really glad I did because I got my clothes from mum. I love my clothes. They are beautiful and they remind me of mum."

▶▶▶ We're going home!

Wants to laugh and play



Dreamed of school

"It was school that I missed most of all. When I was a soldier it always felt like I was in the wrong place, that I should be in school instead. Now Murhabazi is going to help me start school again when I get home, and it feels like a dream come true. I love school! School is important."



"I really miss my friends at home. We haven't seen each other for over four years, and I really hope they remember me. I also hope that they aren't afraid of me now because I've been a soldier. I'm a bit worried about that. Because I've really missed my friends. Just being able to chat and play football and play. There was no place for laughter and play when I was a soldier."

Longing for peace

"When I was a soldier, there was war every day. Never peace. Apart from my mum and dad, it was peace that I missed most of all. I suffered all the time. It was terrible. I'm happy to finally be able to go home. I'm hoping that my life will be good now. That I'll be able to go to school again and make lots of friends. But my parents are old and not very well. I'm afraid of what will happen to me when they die. When it happens I'll contact Murhabazi straight away, because I know he'll give me good advice. I love him, he saved my life. I'm going to miss him."

Amani, 15, spent 2 years as a child soldier



School gives you lots of opportunities in life. I'd like to be president when I grow up. The first thing I'd do would be to free all children who were forced to be soldiers. I would help them to find their families and let children start school again. My biggest fear now is that I will be taken by soldiers and forced to fight again. I would be devastated if that happened."

Assumani, 15, spent 2 years as a child soldier

Misses his mother

"I'm longing to see my mum! I thought about her all the time during the war. I used to help her in the fields and fetch the water before I was forced to be a soldier. I was always worrying about how she would cope while I was away, because my dad died when I was little. I talk to my mum a lot, and I love her. I feel calm and safe when I'm with her. Now I just want to get home and be near her again. What worries me is leaving all my friends here. We've been able to talk to each other about our terrible experiences, and that's been great. It won't be like that at home. The boys in the village who haven't been soldiers will never understand what I've been through."

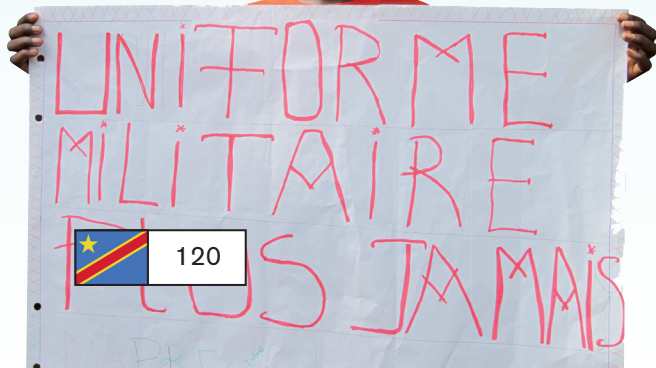
Obedi, 15, spent 2 years as a child soldier



"I'm happy to be able to go home. It doesn't matter what happens, if my friends are afraid of me or not, nothing scares me anymore. Nothing can be worse than what I experienced as a soldier. Nothing."

Aksanti, 15, 4 years as a child soldier

**Military uniform
– never again!**



**School – Yes!
Military camp –
NEVER AGAIN!**



Who is Murhabazi?

Three girls at the home for vulnerable girls describe Murhabazi:



He protects girls

"I was kept prisoner by the soldiers and Murhabazi saved my life. It is Murhabazi who makes sure that we live in safety and security here. He gives us everything. Women and girls have a terrible time in our country. We suffer. Many are raped and abused by soldiers and other grown men. Murhabazi looks after us girls as though we were his own daughters or sisters. Many girls would have had a much worse time in DR Congo if it hadn't been for Murhabazi. He protects us."

Donatella, 13



I love him!

"My family was split up in the war because we became separated as we fled. Murhabazi and the Red Cross are still looking for my parents. I don't even know if they're still alive. But for the meantime, Murhabazi is my dad. I love him and I know that he loves me, because he helps me with everything. I'm always thinking of mum, dad and my brothers and sisters. Terrible things happened, but despite it all, life is a bit easier now that Murhabazi takes care of me."

Vestine, 15

He is my father!

"Murhabazi looks after me. He gives me a place to sleep, soap to wash, food to eat and a chance to go to school. And if I'm sick, he helps me to see a doctor. Murhabazi is just like a parent should be. He is like my father! My life would have been very difficult without him. I love him!"

Josepha, 10



Children in Murhabazi's homes and schools

There are 68 girls living at Murhabazi's home for vulnerable girls in Bukavu. A further 297 girls come to the home during the day to attend the BVES school. They used to live at the home, but have now moved back to live with their families.

"The families are often so poor that they can't afford to send their children to ordinary schools. This school is free, and they can stay as long as they need to," says Murhabazi.

At the moment there are 71 boys at Murhabazi's boys' home in Bukavu for former child soldiers.

Murhabazi has 35 homes and schools all over DR Congo. A total of 15,284 children are currently receiving some form of support from BVES. For example, 8,138 children receive help so they can go to ordinary schools, and 37 young people are being supported at university.



Sisters Benon, Vestine and Valentina live together at one of Murhabazi's homes.

