

# Congo families leave kids to fend for selves

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process of reconstructing a nation destroyed by 30 years of dictatorship and a decade of civil war.

Peace has brought its own challenges, as refugee families flow into the capital, Kinshasa, and find they cannot feed themselves. Out of survival, many are using witchcraft as an excuse to expel their most vulnerable members: children.

"Witchcraft has been there for a while, but it was never used against children in the past. Families that have old people used to accuse that old person of being a witch, when they were no longer productive," says Javier Aguilar, a child protection officer for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Kinshasa. He says that 70 percent of the 20,000 street children in Kinshasa have been accused of being witches.

"But the perception of children started to change very quickly in the 1990s, when you had child soldiers starting to appear with weapons," says Aguilar. "So the general perception was that children were a threat. Congolese society is using children as a scapegoat."

### Congo's desperation

Only desperation could force families to cast children into the streets, and, as a nation, Congo is one of the most desperate places in the world. With 80 percent of the population earning less than \$1 a day, Congo has one of the poorest populations on the continent. It also has one of the youngest. The average life expectancy is 41. Even though 1 out of 5 children dies before reaching the age of five, nearly half of Congo's population is under the age of 14.

In every marketplace, children are busy, sweeping up stalls, carrying water and soda for sale, shining shoes. They are also prime recruits for gangs engaged in theft, and during the recent election campaign that ended Oct. 29, street gangs were used by political parties to cause civil unrest, pelting cars with stones and burning tires.

The government responded to the violence by rounding up street children in the hundreds. The move provoked an outcry from child advocacy groups — among those arrested were 87 young women with babies of their own — but the government appears ready to go ahead with its plans to round up street kids and send them to government farms, in blue prison overalls, hundreds of miles away.

### Scramble to help street kids

This has forced child advocates like Remy Mafu to move fast. At a recent, hastily called

meeting of aid groups, Mr. Mafu appealed for groups to take in as many street kids as they could, and to come up with a long-term strategy of what to do next.

An Italian priest named Father Guido talked of having taken in 132 children in a shelter in Matete, a rough neighborhood. One aid worker said he barely has enough food to feed the 20 children in his center, let alone take on more. Another worried that taking in unknown children from the street may cause discipline problems among the children who have been receiving training for months.

At the Sante Famille Center, a Catholic-diocese-supported shelter for children, nearly 150 children are crowded into a tin-roofed classroom, while torrential rains fall outside. One worker blows a whistle and gets the kids to sing chants to keep their spirits up. Inside, Heritier Ifaka, the chief educator at the center, struggles to adjust his programs to deal with the influx.

The Sante Famille Center provides children with rudimentary education — reading, writing, and arithmetic — and regular medical checkups. It also provides one-on-one counseling for children who must live with the trauma of war, and worse, the trauma of family rejection.

"This country is a disaster," Mr. Ifaka says. "Parents are abandoning children, and the reasons involve money and food. When we get in touch with the family, they say, 'Look, I already have children here to take

care of, and you want me to take that one, too.'"

### How children get stigmatized

Many of the children at the center are like Frida Tshama. Orphaned at the age of 1, taken in by her grandmother and later, an aunt, Frida is a typical 13-year-old: bubbly, rambunctious, talkative. But when asked why she was thrown out of her house, two months ago, she gets teary and quiet.

"I was staying with my aunt, and one day I was cleaning the house, and a glass that was on the table fell and broke," she says. "My aunt asked me to get out of the house. If I stay, she will poison me."

For months, Frida survived by selling oranges in the Matete market, but came to the center a few weeks ago. An attempted reunification with Frida's family failed. Frida's grandmother said that Frida had stolen from her aunt. Her son-in-law said that if she took Frida back, the entire family would reject

both Frida and the grandmother.

Like Frida, Ntumba Tshimanga will not be going home soon. A shy 16-year-old, wearing a tattered white T-shirt and shorts, Ntumba moved to Kinshasa with his mother because of fighting in his hometown.

Ntumba's father stayed behind. After Ntumba's mother died of an illness, he remained in the care of his grandparents. Even though Ntumba worked on the street to bring food home, his presence was resented, and soon the family started to accuse him of being a witch. If he was late from an errand, they claimed that he was performing witchcraft on the streets. If there was an illness in the family, it was because Ntumba had cast a spell. Five years ago, Ntumba left to live on the streets.

Now Ntumba's family are young street kids like him. "We look after each other. We sleep in a warehouse of a school, and sometimes at the market where I sweep. If I am sick and have no strength, my friends bring medicine to me." Sometimes he thinks of joining an older sister, who, like him, was

thrown out onto the street by their grandparents. But she now has children of her own, fathered by another street

teen. Ifaka hears these stories and shakes his head. "Yesterday, the African family

would fight to keep their children," he says. "Now, they are throwing them away."

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