

Sex slaves of Renamo's child soldiers

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By CHRIS MCGREAL: Maputo

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ANA is aged 14 and has what she describes as a husband. After he raped her two years ago, he said they were married. Ana had little choice but to accept her enslavement for the next year or so, until she and her child were freed from the Renamo rebel enclave in central Mozambique.

She left behind other young women who remain little more than sex slaves, some still to reach puberty. The rebels, embarrassed by their victims' tales, are continuing to hold the girls months after the peace accord to end Mozambique's 16-year civil war.

A subsistence diet has combined with the abuses of Renamo life to retard the growth of Ana's frail body, but age her face beyond its years. To look at her, you would not imagine she gave birth to the child playing a few metres away in the dust. Ana thinks the father is probably about her own age. She says he did not talk to her much.

"He held my throat the first time," she says. "After that we were married. He was a soldier but he was there a lot of the time, in the village. I couldn't leave. I didn't even know where I was, so how could I know where to go?"

Only since Renamo signed the peace accord

last October and gave international agencies access to its camps has the extent of child abuse become clear. Besides the 6 000 or more boy soldiers United Nations officials estimate were recruited to fight, thousands of girls and young women were seized and held.

Some aid workers, such as Abubakar Sultan of the Save the Children Federation from the United States, are attempting to prise the young women from Renamo's clutches.

"In order to have access to food, and not to get killed, the girls had to have the protection of someone powerful, like a soldier," Sultan says. "Sex brought protection, so the girls allowed themselves to be sexually abused. It's a serious problem. You have young, unaccompanied girls with babies. In most cases, the father is not identified."

Other aid agencies are reluctant to discuss the issue publicly, for fear of being refused continued access to Renamo camps. But one agency reports a disturbing incidence of syphilis in girls as young as eight.

Renamo has never admitted to using child soldiers and it is even more embarrassed by the abuse of girls. Rebel commanders are uncertain how to deal with them as demobilisation of Renamo forces approaches.

Some drive them into the bush away from population centres. If their families can be found, some are returned to their homes. Others are still held. In each case, the intention is to prevent the victims revealing their suffering to the world.

Says Sultan: "People are not allowed freely out of the camps. We're allowed to go to collect information but, when the time comes to take them out of the camp, they say we must wait."

Ana was more fortunate. Renamo freed her after the ceasefire because she became seriously ill and they feared she was going to die. She was taken along with families and young children released by Renamo and eventually made her way to a township near Maputo.

Many of the males responsible for rape and other sexual abuse are no more than children themselves. "Usually these young soldiers have serious emotional and behavioural problems because they were forced into violence," Sultan says.

"Most had feelings of guilt, because they attacked their own communities and killed people. But for some, with the guilt came violence. They might turn on anyone. Violence is all that some understand." — The Guardian