

1. My name is Lendo.

I was born in the province of Lubumbashi on October 30, 1987.

2. I was born into a family of six children, where I was the youngest. My father's name was Kalenda, and my mom was called Beya.

3. My dad was an air pilot and mom was a shopkeeper.

4. I tell my story with a lot of pain. How I became a child soldier and how I started to become a child of the streets ...

5. First, I did not join the armed forces group, but was rather forced to join, by the rebels.

6. I was a child like all children, I lived in the family with my parents, brothers, sisters. The atmosphere was very good towards my family, and I respected everyone. Even in the neighborhood, I was the most loved child because I was kind.

7. I was a smart kid, I loved school since I was a child, I loved my parents and I didn't even think about ever becoming a military man, or touching arms, those ideas were far from my thoughts.

8. Everything started with the entry of the AFDL (Liberation Force Army) of Laurent Desire Kabila. It was war, no one knew about the massacres; everything started suddenly around nine o'clock in the morning.

9. No one was informed of what was happening that day, otherwise our parents would not have authorized us to go to school. The day of the incident (of the war) there was no information or news even on TV or Radio, so no one knew about this war. It was a surprise to everyone.

10. It was morning when I woke up; as I was a student, I was to go to school at 7 in the morning. I took a shower, I prepared to go to school because everything was calm without any suspicious movements and the neighborhood atmosphere was the same without any signs of things going bad in the schools or other places.

11. I also arrived at the school calm, where everyone was there, such as students, teachers ... everyone was in the classrooms according to the order of the class of each one, then I heard gunshots, everyone panicked, but the school authorities tried to calm us all down, but unfortunately that did not last a long time, as the rebels surrounded our school with heavy weapons. There was no way to even escape, because there were gunshots everywhere, and even the school authorities who were adults were shot in front of us and the girls were raped.

12. As we were minors, the rebels took us hostage to give us the training to shoot weapons, to fight the former president of Zaire, Mobutu. We were small children, we were called the Kadogo, and we walked a lot, for thousands of kilometers on foot to arrive in Kinshasa. We climbed great mountains, we spent several nights in the jungle (forest), we crossed many rivers ...

13. There was no way to escape or to run, because we were monitored, and the instructions were to shoot anyone who tried to escape, just as they had shot the children among us that were killed.

14. We were led like dogs, animals, we were not even allowed to ask the question of where we were going? The only right we had was to carry out their orders.

15. We served the army with a great deal of suffering in the rain, we did not even a place to hide, and there were clashes even during the day and at night, they were the same, there was no retreat, only to move forward.

16, I was taught to fire a gun, but I did not shoot at anyone or kill anyone, because my role was just to carry the ammunition boxes.

17. While in the army, I was not paid because at the young age I was, I knew nothing, I did not understand anything, and I had not signed a contract or anything.

18. We served the army in the great war without knowing our goal, our ambition. Several among us died during the war, but I was safe and sound, by the grace of God. There was no promise from the government to pay us.

19. Unfortunately, in the army I learned to smoke hemp, cigarettes, but no drugs. I smoked because I was forced to do so.

20. When I arrived in Kinshasa, we had won the war. I was living in a military camp. In Kinshasa I had no family, and I had no news of my family for two years.

21. And when the United Nations Mission came to the Congo, they told the President of the Republic to release all the minors who were part of the armed groups. I was already thirteen years old, and so I found myself in the streets because I did not have a place to go.

22. When I found myself in the streets, I was a beggar, I ate from garbage cans the leftovers food that people threw in the garbage cans.

23. But my regret was to have stopped my studies because of the war. I wanted so much to continue my studies, but no one supported me, and I was neglected by everyone.

24. After a few months of being in the streets, I met a gentleman who called himself Mike, it was he who gave me food every time he entered the pastry shop and he introduced me to a lady, "Mrs. Haydee".

25. Together they drove me to an orphanage center to further my education. "Mrs. Haydee" enrolled me in a good school together with other children. I found joy, because I was at ease, I was no longer traumatized, because in that center I had my bed, blanket, there were all kinds of entertainment games, bookstores, showers, and we also ate well. All was provided by "Mrs. Haydee".

26. After, life went on in a good way, we were taken to school. After a few months all the stress was forgotten because I was happy, thanks to "Mrs. Haydee".

27. Then "Mrs. Haydee" created a Center named, Little Okapis, and together with other children, the goal was that we be really very comfortable.

28. It was in the Little Okapis that I grew up, I followed my studies, and I found my family in Kinshasa. I found my mother, my big brother, my two older sisters, the others were killed during the war, and even my dad had gone missing, so far without news, and my mother died in 2004 from an illness.

29. My mom lived with my big brothers, sisters in a family house. When I was in the Center of the Little Okapis at one point, the center was closed, following a decision of our government. By then I had made the decision to join my family. The supervisors of the Center had helped me to find my family, after I searched for them for several years.

30. But, after mom's death her family chased us all out of the house and that's why I went back to the streets again, because my older brothers did not have the means to help me, because of their commitments to their children, and women ...

31. Then I worked as a vehicle cleaner in the city, but they did not pay me at the end of the month because I did not work for a company. So, I worked with individuals, and I did not have a fixed place to work. I move from time to time to look for vehicles to clean, this really was not easy.

32. Every day I walked around with a bucket full of water, with soap in my hand, and asked the drivers to give me permission to clean the car so that they would pay me a something at the end.

33. I have two children, Beya and David, a wife and I rent a small studio for fifty US Dollars each month to sleep with my children.

34. I have a diploma in education and was trained as an electrician. I know how to do electrical installations and if I find work, I would be able to do the work.

35. I will give a big thank you to “Mrs. Haydee” because, if I am a man today, it is thanks to her, without her I was going to be a delinquent in life. It is thanks to her that I found my way again to school and found friends who mean more to me than family.

36. Today I am very happy because Okapis continues to take care of my children because I could no longer afford the school fees for them as the financial situation here in Congo is very complicated.

37. Thanks to the help of Okapis we can mention many of us who have become great personalities, such as Pierre, Diego, Irel, and there are others who are abroad. We are the fruits of Okapis.

38. Myself, I am a witness, I have testified what I have lived. I come from far away, I went through the most difficult moments in my childhood while being a child soldier at the age of ten. I continued suffering at twelve years of age when I became a child of the streets. I have known suffering, and I will always remain a witness until my death.