

# 5

## How children leave fighting forces

### SUMMARY

Work to prevent children from being recruited and efforts to secure the release of other children already in fighting forces often take place at the same time. Just as agencies need to know how and why children enter fighting forces, they also need to be aware of the various ways in which they can leave.

This short chapter summarises the possible routes out of fighting forces that children can take.

Sometimes children find their own way out of fighting forces, are captured or are released, at other times they are able to leave only as a result of direct intervention. Agencies need to know what the possibilities are so that they can decide how best to intervene to secure the release of children and to protect those who do get out.

The summary below lists separately the possible exit routes for children during the conflict and those during a formal demobilisation. In practice though, this distinction is rarely clear-cut since a host of different factors influence how children leave fighting forces and what happens to them subsequently. This summary is chiefly intended as a guide for agencies in their planning and analysis.

The practical implications for programmes are explored further in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

### ***Exit routes taken by children***

The possible exit routes for children (when there is no formal demobilisation), include:

- Escaping. Children may then find their own way home, be captured by other forces, make contact with a care agency or be taken into state custody.
- Being released. This may be because of sickness or shortage of food, or for tactical military reasons including a decision to reduce fighting. The children may be handed over directly to a child protection agency, hospital or local organisation – or they may find their own way home, be captured by other forces, make contact with a care agency or be taken into State custody or care.
- Being captured by government forces. They may be detained or transferred to the state judicial or care system. What happens to them depends on the legal status of children involved in armed conflict and on what child protection and judicial guarantees exist (see Chapter 11).
- Being released as a result of political agreement, or as a result of agreement with child protection agencies (see Chapter 6).

During a formal demobilisation which is part of a negotiated peace, children may:

- Be released into the formal disarmament and demobilisation process.
- Be released (before or during a demobilisation) into their communities – for example, because commanders want to prevent them from going through the formal process in order to conceal the actual number of children used.
- Demobilise themselves – and make their own way home, be captured by other forces (if the peace agreement breaks down), make contact with a care agency or be taken into state custody.

Sometimes children remain with the armed group: for example, if they choose to, or if security or confidence in the demobilisation process break down. Commanders sometimes release children on the covert understanding that they will go back or be called up when next they are needed. This happened in both Liberia and Sierra Leone.