

**UN probes child prostitute ring**  
**The United Nations is investigating allegations that some of its peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo have used child prostitutes.**

It said there were reports that a child prostitution ring was operating in the east, close to a large concentration of UN troops and government soldiers.

A UN probe last year found that peacekeepers in DR Congo had sexually abused girls as young as 13.

Afterwards it banned its troops from having sex with locals.



Some 17,000 UN troops are serving in DR Congo

The investigation revealed that UN peacekeepers had used food and money to pay girls to have sex with them.

There are some 17,000 peacekeepers serving with the UN mission in DR Congo (Monuc).

It is the world's largest peacekeeping contingent charged with overseeing last month's elections, the results of which are due by this weekend.

In the latest allegations from South Kivu province, the girls involved are reported to have said that most of their clients were government troops and civilians, but that they also included peacekeepers.

"Monuc takes these allegations very seriously and has expressed extreme shock at the testimonies of the victims of this illegal activity," it said in a statement.

**Bleak future for Congo's child soldiers**

By Karen Allen  
BBC News, Masisi, Democratic Republic of Congo

**He looks not much older than 10.**

**But the boy in the baggy green uniform, eyeing us up suspiciously as we move through the village, represents one of the Democratic Republic of Congo's ugliest of legacies - the use of child soldiers.**



Innocent was abducted when he was 10 years old

Estimates put the number at 30,000.

Easy to train and even easier to hide, these children are too young to vote but old enough to carry a gun.

With historic elections just around the corner, these boys and girls - a third of those recruited are young girls - represent the enormous challenge that lies ahead, to stabilise a region that's long been rebel territory.

### **Soldiers' wives**

Many militia groups have nothing to gain from these elections and uncertainty about the future is making it harder to persuade them to surrender the young back to the community.

Only last month a minibus was ambushed as it tried to take demobilised youngsters home; some of the victims of that incident are now in hiding.

In Masisi, in eastern DR Congo's north Kivu region, a range of militia, including remnants of Rwanda's Hutu patrol the hills around here and despite the presence of UN peacekeepers, the recruitment of children into armed groups continues with impunity.

“ They asked me if I was ready to sign, so what could I do - I didn't want to die.”  
Ndungutsa, former child soldier

Most of the children who have swollen the ranks of the militia and the fragmented Congolese army have been abducted from their villages.

Ndungutsa was taken when he was just 13 years old, forced to make a choice between the militia or death.

"When they came to my village, they asked my older brother whether he was ready to join the militia.

"He was just 17 and he said no; they shot him in the head.

"Then they asked me if I was ready to sign, so what could I do - I didn't want to die".

The youngsters are either taken on as fighters, porters or guards.

For the girls, many end up as "soldiers' wives" or sex slaves, some as young as 10.

Try to speak to them and they respond in monosyllabic hushed tones.

These are youngsters who had their childhood innocence knocked out of them.



Many children in DR Congo remain at risk of abduction

Quite literally.

A third of DR Congo's child soldiers will never be reintegrated back into their communities.

In some cases because of the shame, others simply because their families can't afford to take them on, but there are also the ever-present threats and intimidation.

### **Fresh hope**

I accompanied 12 year-old Innocent as he made his way back home.

He was a fighter battling against the Mai Mai militia.

In his village, his mother and siblings embrace him but on the fringes of the celebrations the same militia that abducted him are looking on.

In a part of DR Congo where virtually all Innocent's fellow children are severely malnourished and in tattered clothing, a life with the rebels offers food, power and some status.

A sad reality is that all too often children like Innocent return.

So do elections bring fresh hope?

"Not at all" says Simon Muchanga from a Catholic mission in Masisi which seeks to rehabilitate child soldiers.

"The rebel groups are unlikely to alter their position because of the election.



Boys are seen as potential soldiers

"Maybe if a real, responsible government is elected with the capacity to bring about change and improve the prospects of these people, maybe then we can see some real progress".

It's an issue that has been largely ignored - recruiting juveniles is a breach of international law.

The world's biggest peacekeeping force has made some inroads into trying to disarm the rebels.

The vast scale of the country and years of insecurity makes it a painfully slow task.

With elections just days away, there is little incentive for the militia to hand over their children, not least because most armed groups will see their power eroded.