



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

What Future?

Street Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Turned out of their homes and without family care and support, tens of thousands of street children in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) endure routine physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by law enforcement personnel and ordinary civilians. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, adults employ street children in hazardous child labor and deliberately recruit them in political demonstrations that have in the past resulted in dozens of street children killed or wounded. With national elections tentatively scheduled for June 2006, street children remain at risk of further manipulation and abuse.

What Future? details the lived experiences of nearly eighty street children from four cities in the DRC. Although the DRC is a party to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, testimonies from these children reveal persistent and regular abuse by law enforcement personnel and the failure by authorities to protect them from violent adults. Boys and girls report physical and sexual abuse, manipulation, and exploitation by older street youth, police, and soldiers. Police periodically roundup hundreds of street children, guilty of nothing more than being without a home, and hold them for extended periods in overcrowded and unsanitary lockups together with adult criminals.

The civil war in the DRC, which has claimed the lives of some four million Congolese, has contributed to an estimated doubling of the number of street children in the last decade. A growing number of children orphaned by war are accused by surviving family members of practicing sorcery. Blamed for their families' misfortunes, accused children are severely abused in their homes and in churches where they are sent to rid them of "possession." Children affected by or infected with HIV/AIDS are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Extended family members who take in their relatives' children orphaned by AIDS, often blame them for their parents' death and accuse them of transmitting the disease through sorcery. These children are frequently beaten, neglected, and thrown out of their homes.

Human Rights Watch calls on the government of the DRC to protect street children during the electoral period and begin to address the many violations of human rights experienced by them.

Children outside of a center for street youth
in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.

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