

# THE STOLEN CHILDREN

Young boys dragged into a violent conflict by armed groups in Burkina Faso are regaining their childhoods at a secret care centre

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In the safety of a walled compound, the children are carefully being rehabilitated





**T**he day the gunmen came, Issa was tending the cattle. He remembers only the gunshots and the killing, the burning huts and the chaos. Then the sudden, terrifying understanding that his parents were gone. ‘Everyone had fled,’ says the ten-year-old with a cool, matter-of-fact expression in his eyes, belied by a fleeting frown and a slight stutter. He tries to explain why he was left to his fate. ‘My parents couldn’t take us with them because they had bicycles, not motorbikes.’

Afterwards, as Issa and his friend, Abdou, also ten, tried to run away, they were captured by a group of armed fighters. To this day, the boys’ memories of that time are hazy, a trauma response that makes it difficult for them to remember; their brains’ way of saying, perhaps, that no ten-year-old should live with such things. Yet they speak in low voices of being tied up, of being blindfold and beaten, of being whipped and made to fight each other. ‘We were crying,’ says Abdou.

Amid Burkina Faso’s deepening security crisis, thousands of children like Issa and Abdou are being caught up in the conflict, abducted by armed groups and made to work as soldiers, sex slaves, cooks, porters, spies or lookouts, or simply abandoned to the militants’ clutches by parents gripped by hunger, poverty or downright fear.

According to the UN, the children of West Africa are the most recruited by armed groups in the world – in the five years to 2021, more than 21,000 children had been



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taken. And now, as a devastating humanitarian crisis across the region only worsens, children who are poor, displaced or separated from their families are even more vulnerable to being recruited by armed groups.

Hunger and conflict are ripping Burkina Faso apart, the one fuelling the other in an endless vicious circle. Nearly two million people have been forced to leave their homes due to the conflict and more than 6,000 schools have closed. According to a report by humanitarian NGO Plan International, which focuses on the plight of young people, when children and families don’t have enough food to eat or enough money to buy food, they may resort to extreme coping mechanisms



Football is one of the boys' favourite ways to let off steam

## EPICENTRE OF VIOLENCE

● Violent conflict, exacerbated by climate change and rapid population growth, has been a growing problem across the Sahel region for more than a generation. Burkina Faso has suffered more than most and is now dubbed the world's most neglected crisis by aid groups. Since 2019, it has been an epicentre of armed violence, compounded by a devastating convergence of extreme poverty, food insecurity and environmental change.

With armed groups operating across the country, particularly in the border areas, killing, looting villages and stealing livestock, more than 1.9 million people have fled their homes – half of them children.

The situation is deteriorating. Militias are expanding their areas of influence. An estimated 3.3 million people are facing acute food insecurity and almost a quarter of the population (4.9 million people) was in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022. Last year's humanitarian response was only 42 per cent funded and this year's plan, launched in April, has only received 18 per cent of the US\$882 million requested.

Children are particularly vulnerable during the conflict. Girls are at risk of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, early marriage, abuse and female genital mutilation. Out of school, often separated from their parents, both boys and girls are vulnerable to being recruited and exploited by armed groups, either as fighters, or as support staff such as lookouts, couriers or spies.



Non-state armed groups control 40 per cent of Burkina Faso's territory

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to acquire food, such as family separation, child labour, child marriage, recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, and sexual exploitation. Thus, in some cases, parents are themselves members of an armed group, meaning an even more complex predicament for the children involved.

Eventually, in October last year, Issa and Abdou were rescued from the Sahel conflict zone and brought to a government-mandated care centre at a hidden location. The ten-year-olds were found with walkie-talkies in their hands, sad and withdrawn. It's thought the pair were being used as lookouts for gunmen.

Today, here in the dry cool of a sunny Tuesday

morning, as a gusty harmattan breeze kicks up the reddish dust of the secure compound in which Issa and Abdou now live, life couldn't be further from the violence they've left behind, at least physically. A dozen or so mango trees cast pools of shade across the ground and a small boy is watering tomato and lettuce plants. On a washing line, an assortment of colourful children's clothes dry in the sun. A football match is underway, the children's laughter and shouts ringing out in the tranquil stillness.

Still, this high-security compound is housed within a wall topped with a ruff of spiky barbed wire. A guard stands outside the single entrance. Were the locals in this

town ever to discover that the care centre is sheltering children with links to armed groups, the reprisals could be unthinkable – staff fear lynchings, they tell us, or the destruction of the centre. Meanwhile, the desert fighters who captured the boys still pose a risk, and keeping identities and locations secret is paramount to avoiding any chance the gunmen may try to find the children and bring them back to the conflict zone.

This is brought home only too clearly when we're told that, for reasons of security, we can't identify any of the staff at the care centre, even the director, a kindly looking man in a yellow-patterned bazin-print tunic, whom we shall refer to in this article as 'Ousmane'. We're also using false names for the children.

'Burkina Faso has been facing a security crisis for some time now,' Ousmane explains, glancing up at the sky as a helicopter rumbles overhead, 'marked by attacks and killings by armed groups, and major population displacements. Unfortunately, these children fall into the hands of different groups, who use them as they please for their own barbaric purposes.'

Ousmane and his team have pledged to find and take in any child associated with an armed group in Burkina Faso, and their mission is slowly making headway, supported by humanitarian agencies including Plan International, and the country's Ministry of Humanitarian Action and Gender, which follows the strict guidelines laid out by UNICEF for the recuperation and protection of so-called CAAFAGs, or children associated with armed forces and armed groups. Plan International has implemented CAAFAG programmes in countries including Cameroon, Nigeria, the Philippines and Central African Republic, supporting boys and girls to go back to school and offering them life skills and vocational training so as to enable them to reintegrate back into normal life.

At present, there are 11 vulnerable children living here at the care centre, aged between six and 17 years old – Issa, Abdou and nine other boys. 'I don't have the right words to tell you how I feel when I meet these children,' says Ousmane, shaking his head, hands on hips. 'I feel so angry. Imagine a child with a gun, asked to shoot a person... It's hard to understand, but a child who manages to do that is marked for life. These are situations that traumatise children in the extreme, which means they won't be able to live their childhoods normally and won't be able to truly blossom. They have lost their childhoods.'

Over the last few months, the team has welcomed some 34 children, including a few girls, all of whom have now been moved to other care centres. Plan International was particularly closely involved in the rescue of Issa and Abdou, explains Olivia Ouedraogo, child protection adviser at Plan International Burkina Faso, ensuring that they were taken care of in an interim care centre before being moved to this location. 'We ensured that the children were safe in the interim care centre,' says Ouedraogo. 'We addressed their basic needs, such as food, clothing and dignity kit, and they also received psychosocial help from our partners, whom we train and offer guidance to. You see, it's not just about theory and strategy – we are living this reality.'

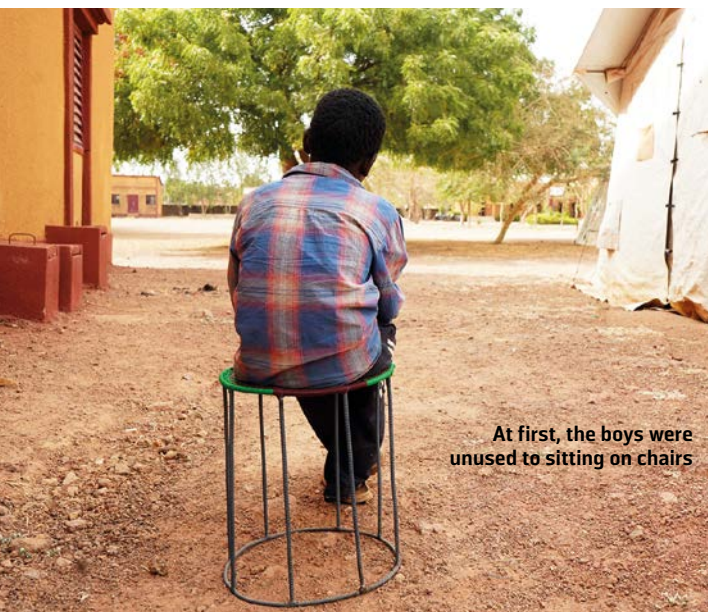
With this in mind, the care centre is at once a home, a school and a place of peace and therapy for the rescued



Sweets are a novel treat for the war-scarred boys

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children. A carefully structured, gently nurturing routine is intended to construct lost childhood normalities: nutritious meals, lessons, playtime, chores – and early bedtimes. These are all things these children haven't known or have forgotten. When the boys first arrive, says Ousmane, they are unused to sitting in chairs and



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tend to lie on the ground or put their feet on the tables.

‘In the morning, the teachers wake us up and we go to wash,’ explains Issa while devouring a lunch of fish and dry bean benga with the gusto typical of ten-year-old boys. ‘We clean our classroom, have breakfast and meet for the raising of the flag. Then we go to class, then lunch. We play together and watch TV. Our day ends with a shower, dinner and stories. Then we go to our dormitories.’

At night, staff keep careful watch over the sleeping or wakeful children, many of whom simply lie still and awake, staring into the dark. Sometimes a child’s cry echoes through the dorms and the other children stir, many crying too.

‘They have nightmares,’ explains Brigitte, a social worker at the care centre. ‘A child might cry out, shouting

or saying the name of a person, screaming. We try to reassure them, encourage them to go back to sleep.'

Indeed, the presence of adult women in the boys' lives is essential, adds Brigitte. 'These are little boys of between six and ten years old. They often need the teachers and social workers, especially the women, to take care of them. Some are glued to the women and it's to us that they try to tell their stories, their experiences, as if they see in us the image of their mothers.'

That the role of stand-in parents is one taken most seriously by all the staff here is more and more evident as the day plays out, and the children can be seen laughing and joking with their new protectors, sticking close. At one point, Issa slips his hand into Brigitte's palm. 'We can't replace their parents,' another social worker, Souleymane, confides with a warm smile, 'but when we are paternal towards them, this does them good.'

Football and gardening are particularly important aspects of the children's therapy, according to Souleymane, who believes such activities give the boys an opportunity to learn something new, have fun, feel safe and gain confidence.

'Issa and Abdou particularly like to do gardening,' he explains. 'Compared to when they arrived, we can see a huge and positive difference in them. They are so much more confident and I think that they feel okay – not totally fine – but they're okay. Having other children around like them means they can have fun, talking, making friends. This reassures them.'

As the clock approaches lunchtime, as the shadows thin and the noonday sun beats down on the boys' heads, Issa and Abdou retreat to the shade, using a watering can to sprinkle a garden divided into neat sections of tall maize, lettuces, onions and tomato plants. The water brings forth the smell of the soil from

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the earth, thick and fragrant as warm summer rain. It's clear why such a soothing pastime would bring to these hurt children a deep sense of peace, of growth and hope and the prospect of renewal.

'We have our garden that we take care of,' says Abdou, glancing around with a smile. 'We do sports and crafts, and we also play. I have a friend I play with and he and I often go to the garden, and afterwards we watch TV or play table football.'

Issa agrees: 'We play all the time! Between friends sometimes it happens that we get angry, and then we argue, but the days we get along well, it goes well, we play together.'

In another part of the compound, two of the boys are hanging out washing their clothes. It's another comfortably domestic task that seems, somehow, to bring a pleasant, peaceful sort of humdrum to their lives; the blossomy scent of soap, the children's quiet chatter as they reach to peg the clothes onto the line, the sound of a radio.

'We teach the children to wash the laundry themselves,' says Brigitte. 'With a bucket and a basin they take out the dirty laundry and they try to wash it. We see if it's clean, help them put it out to dry.'

There is fun here, too, of the lively, boisterous kind these boys so badly need, but have perhaps only properly experienced back in their village, back during peacetime – or, as the pair of ten-year-olds refer to that time: 'before.'

The boys soon get used to having regular meals





‘Before, I used to have fun,’ confides Issa. ‘Before, everything was calm in the village, but it heated up when armed men came.’

Now, Abdou tells of a party organised by the teachers one day. ‘We really liked it,’ he says with a laugh. ‘There were cookies, drinks... I wish there were more parties like this.’ More than anything, Issa wants to see his parents. ‘Would it be possible to go back to the village?’ he asks at one point in a small, serious voice. ‘I want to see my mama and my papa.’

But nearly seven months on from the boys’ rescue, it’s not looking as if Issa’s parents will be found anytime soon. Little Issa himself came up with the theory, or so staff suspect, that his mama and papa were unable to take him with them because they only had pushbikes. In the face of untold trauma, Issa’s childish mind is comforted by such a logical answer, a way of grieving his parents’ loss and all too stark abandonment. Parents usually flee with their children, even if they have to walk, says Ousmane with a sigh. The boys will be cared for indefinitely at the care centre, he adds, while family tracing and reunification efforts are ongoing.

‘We have problems identifying these children because we have no information about their parents,’ Ousmane explains. ‘There’s no trace of them. For children like these, reintegration is very difficult.’

‘Over time, we hope they will gradually forget the past and be able to fully integrate into the life of the centre,’ agrees Brigitte.

‘We want all children to live with their parents in peace,’ adds Souleymane. ‘In quiet and total peace.’

There’s no getting away from the fact that Issa, Abdou and their friends here at the care centre are the lucky ones. But the helicopters hovering overhead, delivering food, delivering guns, are testament to the continuing crisis that will see thousands more children continue to be caught up with armed groups in Burkina Faso, dragged into a conflict they can’t even understand. Like Ousmane, it’s difficult not to feel angry that there are other children out there, small and frightened, wondering where their mamas and papas have gone.

As dusk falls, hot and heavy, the boys gather around a palm-oil lamp for story time, a chance for the adults to weave new stories in these children’s heads, stories of love and hope and happiness. Tonight, Brigitte tells a traditional Burkinabè tale of a wise hare and his friend the hyena, using animal noises and an array of funny voices. The children listen, rapt, eyes fixed on Brigitte, giggling as the darkness gathers around them and the night moths play around the lamp, spindly silhouettes hinting at ghosts less visible, at the lingering wounds behind the smiles. ●