

UNICEF South Sudan Update

More than 200 children were released by armed groups in South Sudan on April 18, 2018. This was the second release of children in a series, supported by UNICEF, that will see almost 1,000 children released from the ranks of armed groups in the coming months. The 207 children released (112 boys, 95 girls), were from the ranks of the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) - which in 2016 signed a peace agreement with the Government and is now integrating its ranks into the national army - and from the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO).

An upsurge of fighting in July 2016 stalled the original plans to release children, but momentum is now building for further releases in the future. This latest release of a further 207 children continues that effort and took place in a rural community called Bakiwiri, about an hour's drive from Yambio, in Western Equatoria State. During the ceremony, the children were formally disarmed and provided with civilian clothes. Medical screenings are carried out, and children receive counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration program, which is implemented by UNICEF and partners.

When the children return to their homes, their families are provided with three months' worth of food assistance to support their initial reintegration. The children will also be provided with vocational training aimed at improving household income and food security. Being unable to support themselves economically can be a key factor in children becoming associated with armed groups. In addition to services related to livelihoods, UNICEF and partners will ensure that the released children have access to age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centers.

Despite this progress, there are still around 19,000 children serving in the ranks of armed forces and groups in South Sudan. Here is the story of Marie, one of the girls who was recently released.

Marie's Story

Marie, 16 years old, has just been playing a volleyball match with the other children at the center, wearing shorts and a sports jersey. She is sweaty and full of bubbly energy. Marie is a strong, healthy looking young teenager. She smiles readily and she seems happy, confident. But Marie's smile disappears quickly as she recounts her story.

When she and her younger brother, who at the time was only eight years old, were fetching water one day, they were abducted by gunmen. Marie had no idea who these men were or why they were taking them away. The first seven days, they were imprisoned, she says, surrounded by a thorny fence to make sure they wouldn't escape. A week later they had no will to flee, she says, although she kept thinking about her father,



and how worried he must be when they hadn't returned home.

Marie says they stayed in the bush with the armed group for three long years. Her brother was taken to the home of one of the soldiers to do chores, and Marie was trained in the use of small handguns. Soon she joined units as they ambushed villages, looted, and killed. She remembers the first man she shot and killed. But the memory that haunts her most was the family they caught one day, a father, mother and children. "They forced the mother to kill her own children, then the father to kill the mother, and then they told me to shoot the father and I did." Marie weeps.

"One day I will become president," she says forcefully, wiping away tears. "I want to make a law that forbids people from forcing children into war."