

# Orphans of the storm

By **JIMMIE BRIGGS**  
*Special to the AmNews*

For six years, every day of survival was a victory for Celestine. His mother died in the 1994 Rwanda genocide, and after his father took a new wife with whom he constantly fought, the 10-year-old went to the streets of Kigali. Life was bad, and tenuous.

"The first challenge was finding somewhere to eat, then somewhere to sleep," he recalls now. "You could never find a good place to sleep at night. During the night, you had to struggle for food because it would be taken. You had to fight," he states matter-of-factly.

By day, they roam the streets of Rwanda's capital, from dawn to dusk, hunting for any form of subsistence or money. By night, they may go home, return to a shelter or find uneasy rest behind a garbage bin. Many were not yet born when the genocide happened here in 1994, but the street kids of Rwanda may be its most visible and tragic victims. They and their parents faced the hundred days

of massacre together, but too often the children must deal with its legacies of trauma, poverty and HIV/AIDS, alone.

According to the Rwandan government, approximately one million children are considered "vulnerable," meaning they are at risk of being displaced from their homes, not attending school, being exploited in some fashion, living in poverty, or sick with disease. Unfortunately, not even the state authorities know where all of these youth are living. In the last decade, upwards of 400,000 children have been forced to survive without one or both parents, according to a recent report by Amnesty International. Nationally, there are 24 centers in Rwanda for so-called "unaccompanied children," a number of whose families were internally displaced, or refugees from neighboring countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Uganda. Currently, there are 3,500 children in these centers according to the International Rescue Committee, a New York-based relief group. In fact, there are less institutions now for these children than before the genocide. Seven years ago, the government instituted a "one child, one family" policy to place orphans or unaccompanied children with foster families or community care situations. The traditional response for children without identified relatives was to house them in centers, but

thankfully that attitude is changing.

Unfortunately, the dilemma of street children has been more problematic. About one-third of these wayward youths are "socio-economic" cases. They have families and may even go to a home in the evenings but do not attend school and must beg, steal or scavenge for food or survival items.

Of course, there were street kids in Kigali and other major towns of Rwanda before the genocide, but their numbers were smaller than now and their presence less noticeable. Government and police officials believe there are about 7,000 street kids countrywide, nearly half in Kigali alone. There are eight centers specifically designated for street children in Kigali, a fourth of

which may or may not be true," says Marie Louis Uwineza, coordinator of Volet: Enfants de la Rue-CPAJ, a transit center for street kids which is sponsored by the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda. Located in Kucikoro, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Kigali, CPAJ also receives assistance from Catholic Relief Services and Handicap International. Since opening its doors in 1998, 5,000 boys and girls have been helped. It is one of the hopeful success stories regarding street children. During the genocide, the area was heavily populated with Tutsis, so losses were extremely heavy.

"The problem with kids surviving on the streets was so big after the war," recalls Uwineza. "Some of the kids we were seeing had parents killed or raped, leav-



**LEFT** — Rwandan President Paul Kagame lights an eternal flame in front of a recently built genocide memorial.

**RIGHT** — Celestine, a former street child, now has an education and hopes to go to college and become a computer engineer.

(Damaso Reyes photos)

whom are from the city. Again, with the presence of transit centers, institutions and kids returning home at night, those numbers are probably too low.

In the capital, police do regular roundups where kids are taken off the streets and placed in centers in other parts of the country, such as the Gitagata Re-Education Center, which solely dealt with former child soldiers in the past. Unfortunately, the youths are not given individual case files in an initial police action, so authorities have no way of tracking them or assessing their individual needs. Genocide orphans are thrown in with economic hardship cases and AIDS sufferers, indiscriminately. More often than not, the youths manage to make it back to their regular street haunts in short time.

"The police say they do roundups because of security,

ing them with HIV or AIDS."

CPAJ is a transit center, which means kids are not housed at its facility, at least not in large numbers. The small staff of eight works with the surrounding community to place kids in homes or find places for older youths to share living space. "We want the kids to be living in the community, rather than at the center," explains CPAJ's director. "If possible, a child and surviving relatives are identified and re-united, or we introduce kids into the area."

Of the 150 kids coming for assistance, about 45 stay at the center on occasion. There are vocational programs for the youth to learn candle-making from honey, furniture building, postcard and T-shirt design, as well as baking. Following six months of this professional training, CPAJ organizes the individual classes into mini-professional



As part of their vocational training, young boys learn crafts like candle making, selling what they produce. Many of the materials they use have been culled from the Kigali dump, where many of them once lived.

associations, provides seed funding and sets them up with government work. Students attending secondary school and a university have their fees covered as well.

Celestine is one former street kid who's been coming to CPAJ

their freedoms by coming to us."

Across several acres and down a sheer drop-off, several dozen children sift through stinking mounds of refuse. On a breezy, humid afternoon, Mary Louise Uwineza escorts two foreign visitors on a brief tour of the dump.

Flies swarm incessantly onto human flesh, but the youth, dressed in tattered clothing and mismatched shoes, seem oblivious. "They develop their own immunities," explains Uwineza.

Surrounding the fields of human waste, broken furniture and food



for the last three years. Today, he's a secondary school student and lives with another former street youth in a house. "At first, when I was in the dustbin, I didn't know how to speak English, obey people or wash clothes," he observes. "Now, I have the knowledge to separate the good and the bad. In my future, I want to do something with technology, putting things together."

The "dustbin" is in fact the mammoth Kigali trash dump located a bumpy ten minute ride from CPAJ. "The center was intentionally built here so we could have access to the young people," explains Uwineza. The dump sits atop a muddy, craggy hill against a backdrop of lush green mountains. "We're constantly trying to get the kids at the dustbin to the center, but many of them are high on marijuana, glue or cigarettes," she notes. "They don't want to give up

scraps are large green containers. When the rain falls heavy, they young people sleep inside of them. There is one small girl searching for pieces of charcoal and potatoes to cook. She is the only female among the group of older boys.

Her name is Chantal and she has gone to the dump every day for the last four years. Like most of them, she is not homeless and lives with her mother and younger siblings in a nearby shanty. The father died in the genocide, and never having gone to school a day in her life, Chantal cares for her family by scrounging for food and charcoal with which to cook it. Taking a few brief minutes to explain her story and allow pictures to be taken, she returns to a small mass of trash to dig with a stake, and her hands if necessary. "This," observes Uwineza, sadly, "is her everyday job."

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