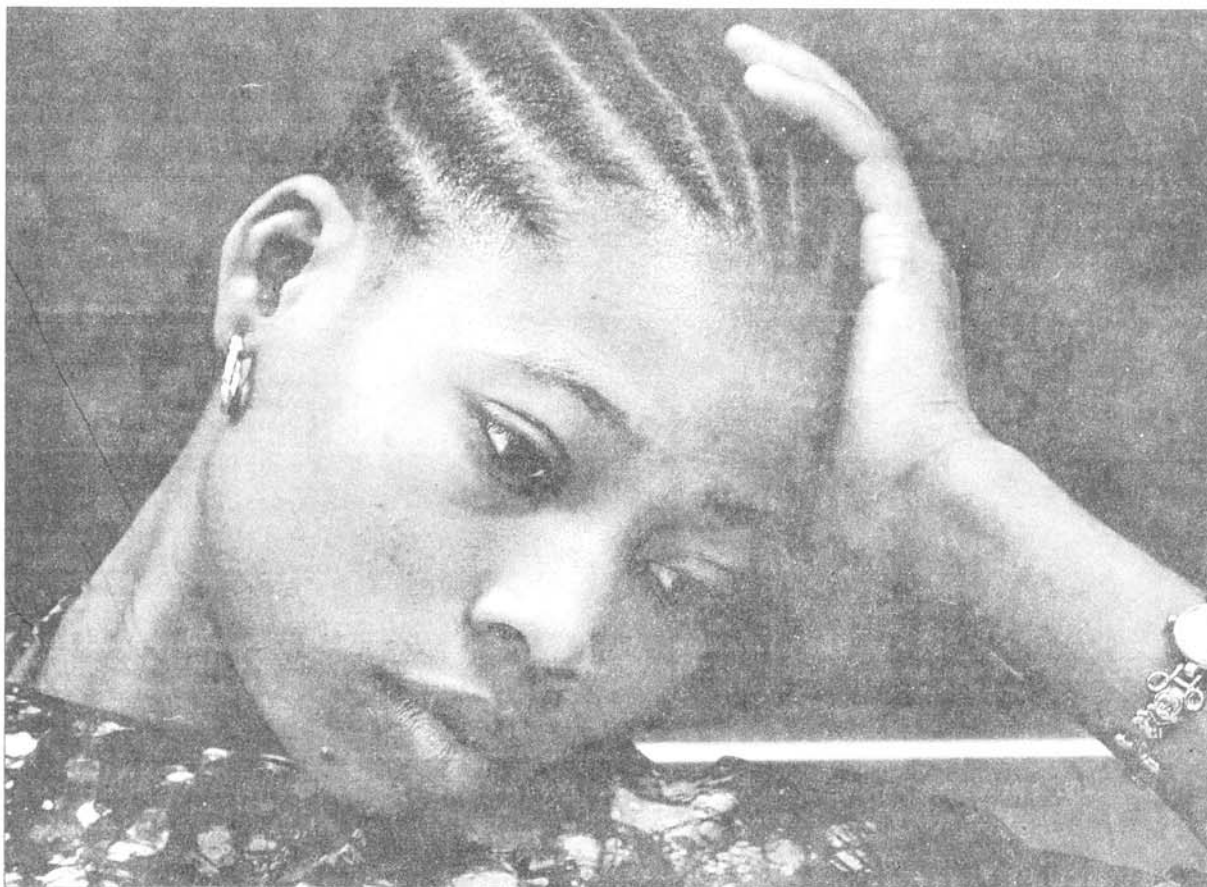


'They killed my elder brother, and they told me to bury him. ... I've been forced to be a child soldier against my wish. They treat you like a slave.' — Emilia Taylor (below), 17, former child soldier from Sierra Leone



Photos for the Tribune by Jamal A. Wilson

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The youngest soldiers

As many as
300,000 children
are engaged in

armed conflict around the world, and now some teenage veterans are campaigning to tell the world about 'one of the worst forms of child labor'

By Tara McKelvey
Special to the Tribune

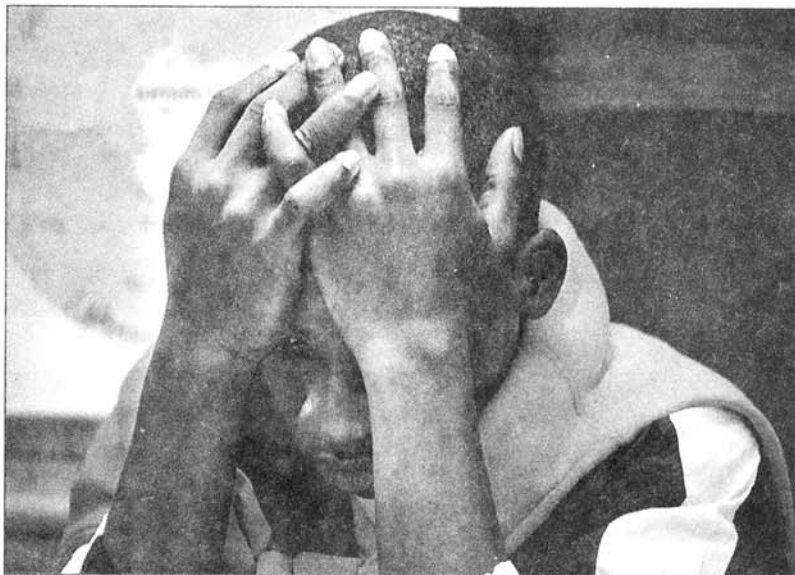
SILVER SPRING, Md. — Emilia Taylor is wearing black beads and gold hoop earrings. She's sitting at the front of a classroom near her friend, Steven Swankay, who is dressed in London club-kid shoes with thick soles and a British flag on his white socks.

Taylor, 17, and Swankay, 13, look like all the other teenagers in the classroom at John F. Kennedy High School. But something sets them apart: They are former child soldiers from Sierra Leone.

U.S. Department of Labor officials have brought them — and three other former child soldiers from Burundi, Colombia, the Philippines and Uganda — to the school to talk about their experiences.

It's part of Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao's efforts to raise awareness of child soldiering, which she calls "one of the worst forms of child labor." In the classroom on this cloudy May afternoon, Taylor quietly explains how her family was destroyed when rebel soldiers with the Revolutionary United Front invaded her hometown of Tongo, Sierra Leone, during the country's 10-year civil war.

"They killed my elder brother, and they told me to bury him," says Taylor. Her father disappeared; her mother died later of disease. Taylor, who was 9 at the time, was abducted by the rebels and made a "wife" of a commander, according to a producer with a non-profit organization, Search for Common Ground, who works with Taylor on a children's radio program in Freetown,



Steven Swankay, 13, says he was 9 when rebel fighters forced him to become a soldier.

Sierra Leone.

Taylor says she wasn't trained as a soldier. Instead, she was forced to fetch water and run errands. "I've been forced to be a child soldier against my wish," she says. "They treat you like a slave. Women — we are raped. If they said, 'We'll beat you till you die,' then they beat you till you die."

At age 14, she gave birth to a son. After she finishes speaking, the room falls into stunned silence. A high school

junior with thick braids, Veronica Lopez, starts to cry.

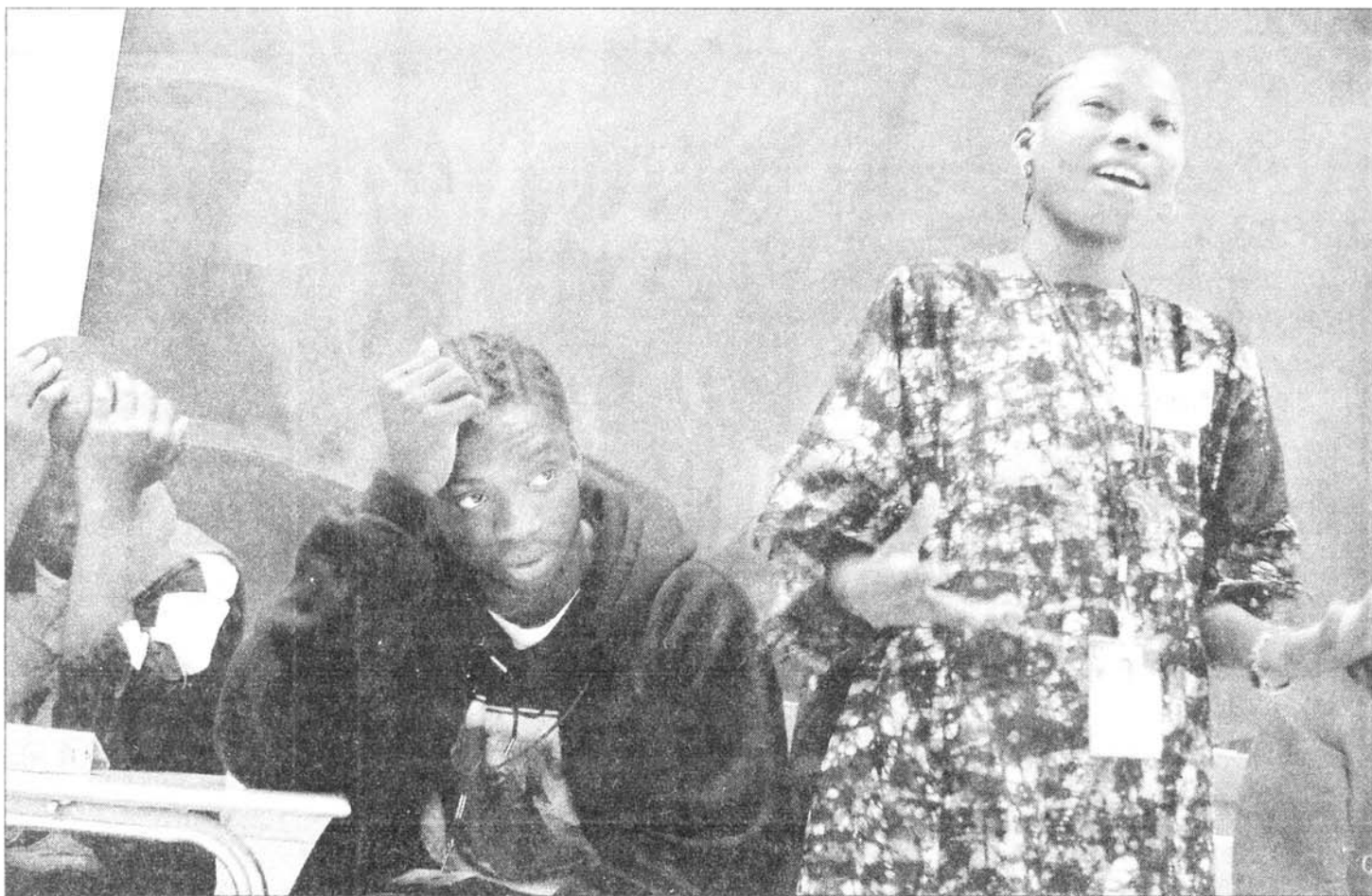
"Have you been hearing about war in African countries?" Taylor asks.

The students shake their heads.

"This is terrible," says Taylor, clutching her hands. "How do we explain ourselves to you?"

Besides visiting local high schools, Tay-

PLEASE SEE CHILDREN, PAGE 8



Emilia Taylor tells Maryland high school students about her days as a child soldier as Steven Swankay (left) and Pelu Thomas listen. Photo for the Tribune by Jamal A. Wilson

CHILDREN: Ex-soldiers issue plea for help

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

lor, Swankay and the other "international youth delegates," as they're known, spend hours in "team-building" workshops in the Caucus Room of the Washington Hilton. They drink Coke and try to come up with ways to help former combatants.

They have their work cut out for them.

Child soldiers have been around since war began, spying on enemies, fetching firewood and acting as messengers, but their numbers escalated in the early 1990s. At the end of the Cold War, guerrilla fighters in Asia, Africa and other regions started finding it easier to get their hands on AK-47s, pistols, hand grenades and other light weapons.

"Small arms make the use of child soldiers very attractive," says Rachel Stohl, a senior analyst at the Washington-based Center for Defense Information. "They're lightweight, easy to use and widely available. You can just hand a child a gun and send them to the front line."

It's also a way of bolstering ranks in places where decades-long civil wars have taken a toll on adult populations, explains Michael Shipler, an associate with Search for Common Ground.

As many as 300,000 children are engaged in armed conflict around the world, according to Jo Becker, children's rights advocacy director with the New York-based Human Rights Watch. In countries such as Uganda, Sierra Leone and Colombia, up to one-third of the child soldiers are girls.

The numbers have remained steady in recent years, she says. As soon as the number of child soldiers goes down in one place — as they've done in Sierra Leone after the truce in January 2002 — they go up in another. Five thousand children, or one-fourth of the 20,000 children pressed into military service since the conflict in northern Uganda began in 1986, were abducted in the past 10 months, she explains.

Responsible for some of worst

Worldwide, the effect has been devastating. Child warriors have been responsible for some of the worst butcheries in the Sierra Leone civil war, known for the penchant of its rebel soldiers to hack off the arms, legs and noses of civilians, Shipler says.

"It's an adult-designed campaign of terror. Eventually, they're no longer seen as children," he says. "They're seen as threats. Or as hopeless, lost causes."

That's when people have heard of them. Many don't even know they exist. JFK High student Veronica Lopez says she

'Small arms make the use of child soldiers very attractive. They're lightweight, easy to use and widely available.'

— Rachel Stohl

has seen plenty of poor children in her native Peru. But she had never heard of them being used in battle until she was introduced to part of the Department of Labor's "child-soldiers curriculum" at school.

"When she talks about losing her parents and her brother, it kills me," says Lopez, opening a bag of potato chips after hearing Taylor speak in the classroom. "You know, I have three brothers and three sisters. I lose one, I lose the whole world."

In some ways, Taylor is lucky. She spends several hours a week volunteering for a popular, twice-weekly radio program, "Golden Kids News," that is supported by Search for Common Ground, and is raising her 2½-year-old son, Moses. She's a sophomore at a high school in Freetown, and she says she wants to be a doctor.

The following day, Taylor watches Chao walk on stage at the Grand Hyatt. Chao says the Department of Labor will invest \$13 million in programs "to educate, rehabilitate and integrate" former child soldiers, including a \$3 million, three-year grant in Afghanistan.

Afterwards, the Afghan program's project officer, Ibrahim Sesay of UNICEF, says, "Every former child soldier in Afghanistan will benefit from the program."

And, yes, that would include the handful of 13- to 15-year-old Afghan boys now being held at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. According to National Public Radio, they've been detained since February. It's not

clear when they'll go home.

"These are dangerous enemy combatants," explains Pentagon spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Jeff Davis.

Meanwhile, Taylor is wandering the hyper-air-conditioned hallways of the Grand Hyatt, trying to let government officials, human-rights workers and journalists know about the millions of children who've been affected by war — and weren't able to make it to the Grand Hyatt.

Dealing with the shock

Privately, some participants wonder how Taylor and the other "international youth delegates" are handling the shock of leaving their homes in faraway countries and finding themselves at the conference.

"Can you imagine? People are throwing \$13 million on the table. This fancy hotel," says International Rescue Committee's Marie de la Soudiere as she glances around the room.

"It must be overwhelming," she says.

Yet Taylor looks serene. She appears on stage in the afternoon for a "roundtable discussion" with two other former child soldiers, Chao and Jane Lowicki, a director with the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

Taylor introduces herself. Her hands float through the air as she explains how she escaped from the rebel forces. At times, her voice breaks.

"The commander I was staying with was killed. It was during an attack," she says. "Everybody was fighting for his life. I decided to run."

"My own contribution is you have to pay attention to these African countries to see their needs," she says. "We have these problems because of a lack of education and job opportunities. I will get educated to take care of my family. But there's more to be done. Please, you really have to pay attention to Africa."