



War disrupts the lives of people of all ages. However, war is particularly devastating for children. Children in war-torn countries are direct and indirect victims of violence. They are exposed to hunger, loss and death on a daily basis. Many children are orphaned or separated from their families because of war. Young girls and single women in refugee camps are exposed to sexual and physical abuse. During and after conflict, children are exposed to the dangers of land mines and millions of unexploded bombs, shells and grenades that fail to detonate on impact.

War-affected children often exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This condition seriously affects a child's mental, emotional and physical health. One of the symptoms is avoidance or numbing. Children will repress feelings and avoid situations that remind them of traumatic events. Many suffer from nightmares and

flashbacks. Some, especially former child soldiers, exhibit aggressive behaviour. Former child soldiers may also suffer from withdrawal symptoms from drugs they were given to overcome their reluctance to kill others. In treatment centres, some beat their heads or fists against the wall until doctors inject them with tranquilizers. Others remain mute for days, their eyes darting around like frightened animals. Sadly, those former child soldiers who return home may receive death threats from their neighbours.

Currently, children are experiencing terrifying wars in 50 countries. In the last decade, war has killed two million children, disabled six million children, left 12 million children homeless and orphaned one million children. Many carry psychological scars. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE Canada,

UNICEF, Save the Children, Doctors without Borders and the Red Cross-Red Crescent Society, provide aid to war-affected children. Canadians, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), provide financial support to these and other NGOs.

Despite the distressing statistics, children can play an important role in keeping communities together and in helping to build peace. For example, with CIDA's support, war-affected youth are designing, organizing and participating in community-based projects to prevent conflict and build peace in nine African countries, the Americas and Southeast Asia. They are developing a global network that includes Canadian youth. This network promotes the rights of war-affected children and supports young people in peace-building.

SOS Children's Villages, the world's largest international charity for orphaned and abandoned children, offers ongoing trauma treatment for war-affected children and women in Darfur. One camp houses around 80 000 refugees.

Children are offered school lessons. Others are trained in brick making, handicrafts and carpentry. They have group therapy and individual meetings with counselors.

In Sierra Leone, CIDA is helping to reunite families torn apart during almost a decade of civil war. In Northern Uganda, CIDA provides food aid, basic health care, clean water and sanitation for 800 000 displaced people, many of whom are children. CIDA also provides counselling and vocational training to help former child soldiers return to their communities.

In Sri Lanka, the Butterfly Peace Garden provides counselling and support to children traumatized by the long-standing civil war. The Garden is a model worldwide for its programs in which games are used to help children deal with the emotional trauma of war. CIDA has been one of its supporters.

