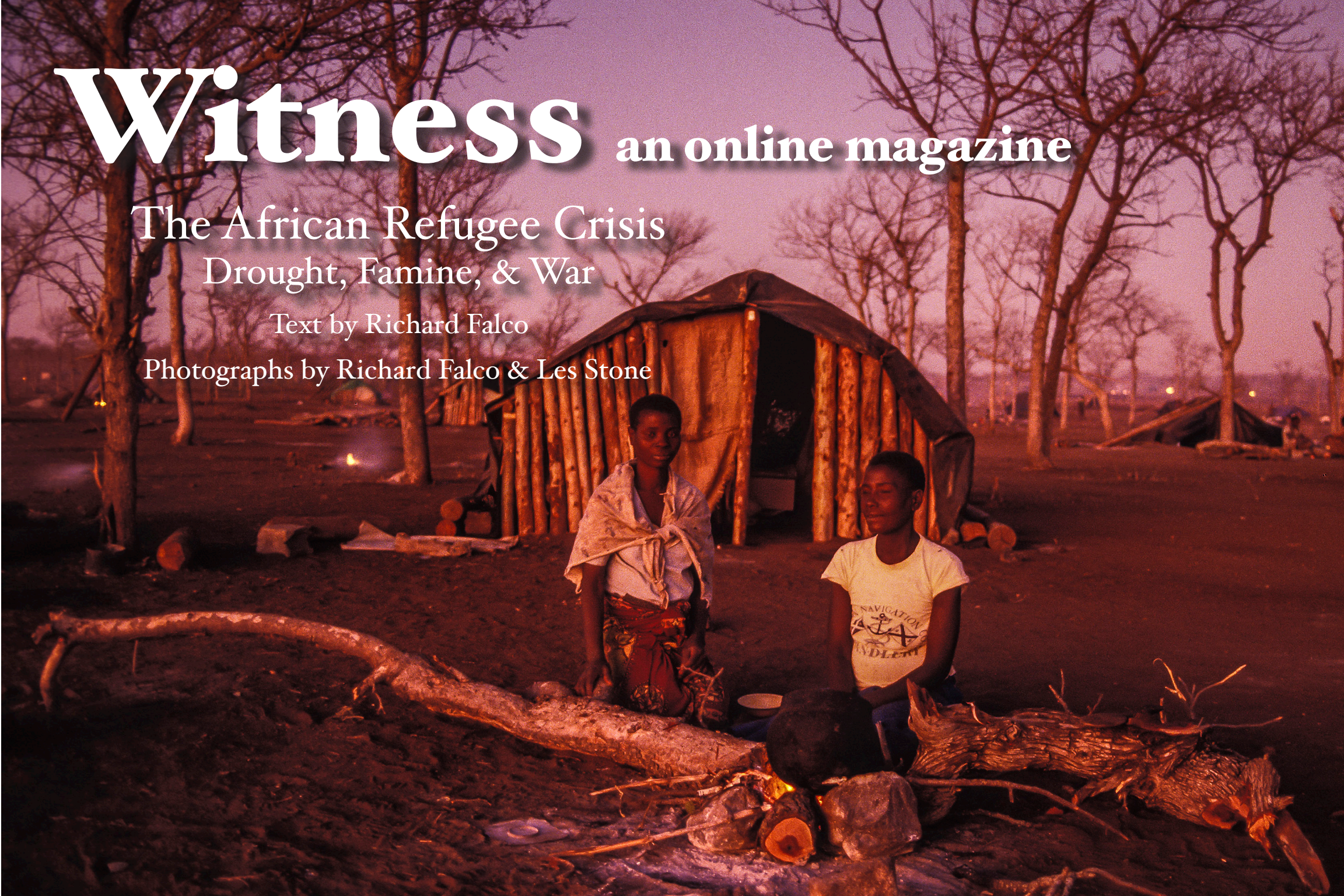


Witness an online magazine

The African Refugee Crisis Drought, Famine, & War

Text by Richard Falco

Photographs by Richard Falco & Les Stone



The African Refugee Crisis

Drought, Famine, & War

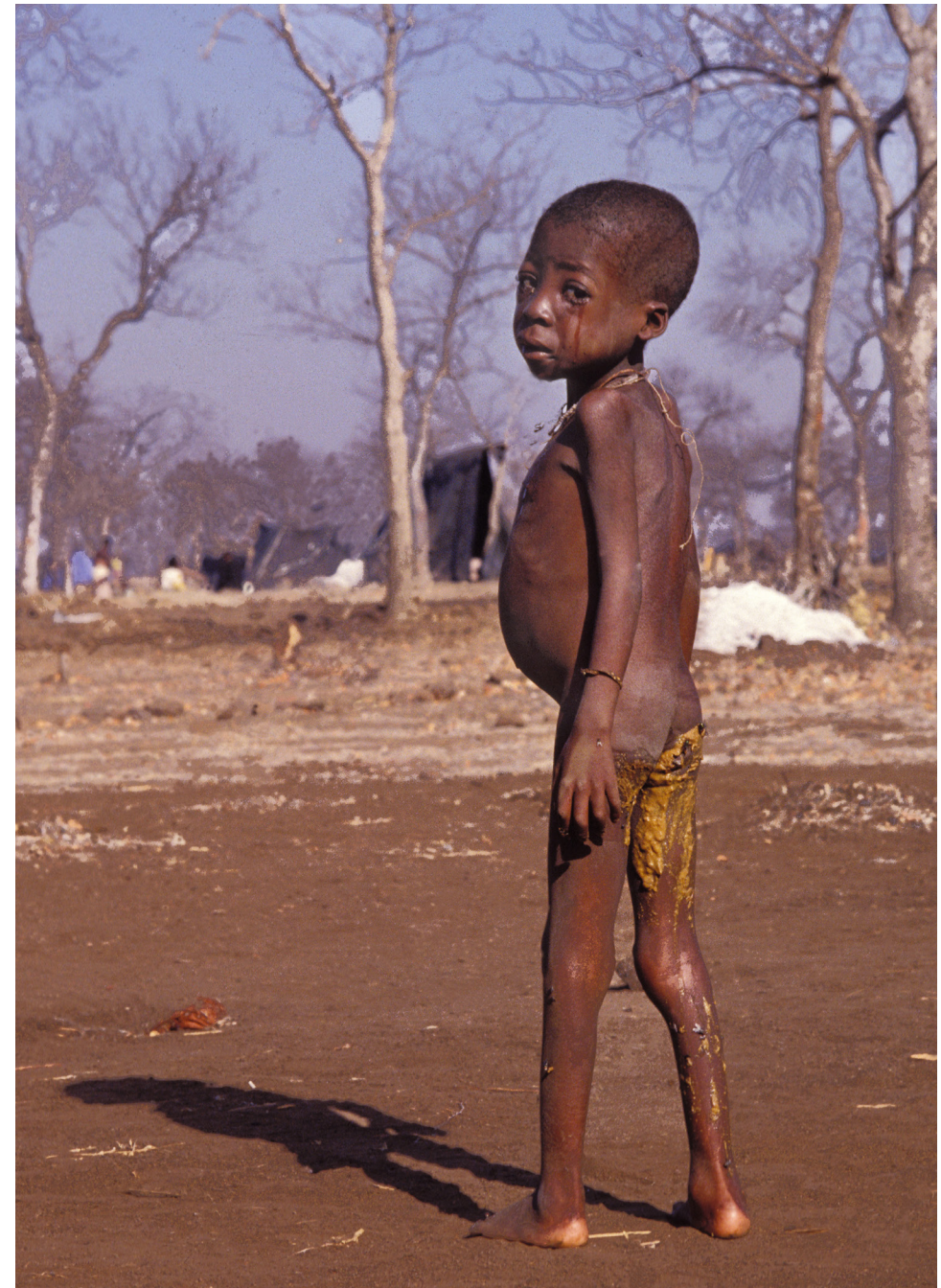
Text by Richard Falco

Photographs by Richard Falco & Les Stone

For decades, Africa has been afflicted by the horrors of war and famine. The last decade has witnessed a steady climb in violence across sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that between 9.2-10 million people have died over the last 10 years due to the effects of armed conflicts. Over 70% of these individuals have been civilians -- mostly women and children.

After the Second World War, many of the European colonies on the African continent sought independence. The situation became exasperating because Africa became the place where the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union played out most violently. Each side sought to shore up their African allies by rewarding them with generous military aid packages or conversely undermining hostile regimes by providing covert military assistance and training to anti-government rebels. The latter tactic led to the rise, and extensive use, of proxy armies by the superpowers or regional allies, which often inflamed longstanding regional tensions, chronic societal and political divisions, or helped to sustain high levels of civil conflict. In what would become the ultimate litmus test of the Cold War, African independence movements and emergent African governments were forced to declare their allegiance to one side or the other. By 1970, more than 35 new countries had come into being courted by either the United States or the Soviet Union. ¹

During this time, the number of states at war or with significant lethal conflicts doubled to 22. Full-blown regional wars grew out of conflicts in the Congo, Liberia, and Rwanda in the mid-'90s; simmering tensions boiled over





A mother and child reach a small military post in Zimbabwe after traveling many miles out of Mozambique. The women have learned that if they can get to one of these outposts, they will be transported to the relative safety of a refugee camp.

between Ethiopia and Eritrea and led to a major interstate war; civil wars in Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, and Sudan have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives; and ethnopolitical hatred in Rwanda led to the genocide of nearly one million people. Currently, over one-quarter of sub-Saharan African states are engaged in either civil or interstate conflict, or both. Several others are threatened by an imminent political, religious, or ethnic division that could erupt into violent conflict at any time.

The post-Cold War decade, which held out the promise of an “African renaissance,” deteriorated rapidly into severe instability across the continent and shows no sign of abating.

The United Nations estimates that there are some 29 million internally displaced people and 6.6 million refugees in Africa. As the drought and war rage, the majority of people who become refugees are women and children. Women comprise about half of the refugee population and children under the age of 18 constitute 57% of all refugees in Africa.²

In these conflicts, men are usually caught up in the fighting and are on one side or another. It is the women and children who are caught in between. It is they who seek out safety and stability from the chaos and ensuing famine. Often, they will travel great distances under harsh and dangerous conditions to refugee camps that have been established at the peripheries of the conflict.

Complicating the situation is the fact that 80% of the refugees have migrated to countries that are classified as least developed. These countries have over-stretched their inadequate resources and are least capable of handling the influx of the crisis.

Refugee children undergo a terrible childhood. Many will become sick or die. Others will lose their parents to death or kidnapping and become orphans. The ones that survive live a harsh existence, continually witnessing the tragedy that surrounds them. Every day millions of children will wait in line for hours for a plate or can of pasty gruel. They are completely dependent upon the United Nations, NGOs, or other government agencies to feed them.





A child clings to life in an Ethiopian refugee camp. Ethiopia will host over 1,600,00 refugees, mainly from South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia.





Refugees wait at the induction center at Chambuta Refugee Camp.

AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES		Top Ten African Countries of Origin for Forcibly Displaced Persons		
Country	IDPs	Refugees	Asylum Seekers	Total
DRC	5,512,000	912,691	135,325	6,560,016
South Sudan	1,665,815	2,255,071	5,636	3,926,522
Somalia	2,648,000	775,484	48,039	3,471,523
Nigeria	2,624,723	292,510	106,028	3,023,261
Sudan	2,134,000	734,944	71,982	2,940,926
Ethiopia	1,414,000	95,688	84,000	1,593,688
CAR	697,337	617,025	15,955	1,330,317
Cameroon	976,773	58,151	19,904	1,054,828
Burkina Faso	921,471	10,551	4,967	936,989
Eritrea		505,134	71,083	576,217

Data from: UNHCR, IDMC, IOM

Today unprecedented numbers of children are undereducated, malnourished, unemployed, and marginalized from major social, economic and political processes. Many children are finding it difficult to pursue academic and vocational education and livelihoods that would enable them to become economically independent and make an orderly transition into adulthood.³

The life of a refugee is a perpetual state of waiting. Their prospects of returning home grow dimmer and dimmer with time. War brought not only displacement but also massive destruction of social and economic infrastructure, including housing, health clinics, and schools.⁴

Refugees are often continually on the move until they can find a relatively stable situation. They will periodically seek out places where rest, food, and safety exist. But as soon as the fighting closes in, fear drives them onto the road again. Though some of the resettlement areas provide relative safety to their inhabitants, they also create an equal number of other problems, such as food, sanitation, disease, water, and housing.

In a number of the camps throughout Sub-Saharan Africa the population are as high as 50,000 people. All of these individuals are totally dependent upon the world's aid organizations for survival. The continent must find a way to create lasting social, political, and economic stability, otherwise the camps will become only temporary answers to problems that require permanent solutions.



Somalian refugees wait on endless lines for food.
To this day, the country is still torn apart by rival warring factions.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FOA), 28 countries in Africa depended on food aid.





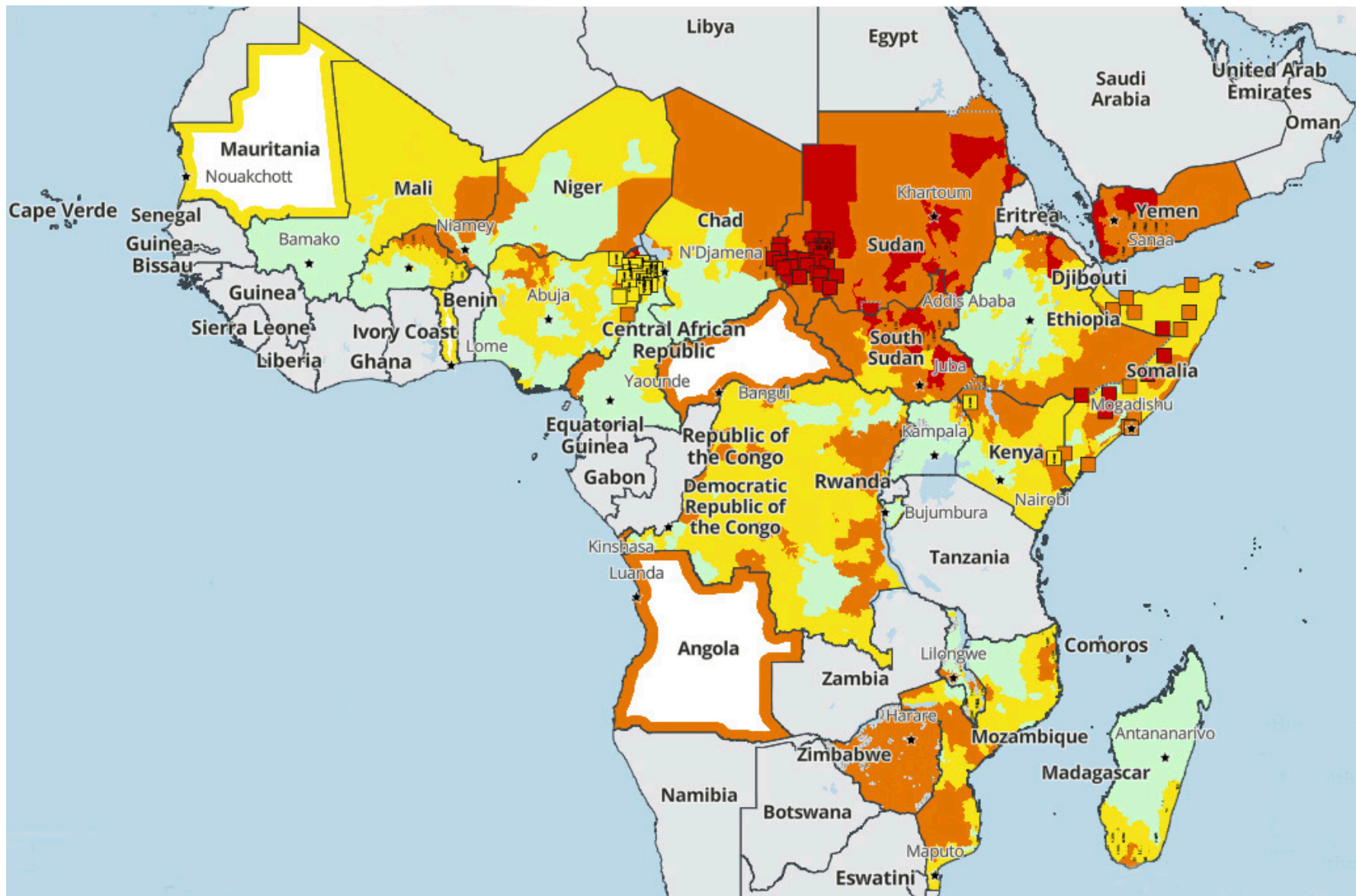
Without the intervention of NGOs and other donor organizations, survival for many would be impossible.



According to the USDA, sub-Saharan Africa received 136,000 tons of food aid per year during the last 20 years.







**October 2024 - January 2025
Near Term Projection**

IPC 3.1 Acute Food Insecurity Classification

The Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) acute food insecurity scale classifies areas according to a five-phase scale of increasing severity.

Presence Countries

- 1: Minimal
- 2: Stressed
- 3: Crisis
- 4: Emergency
- 5: Famine

Outcomes may be worse than mapped, but limitations on information reduce the ability to confirm or deny

- Not mapped
- National Parks/Reserves

Remote Monitoring Countries

Highest IPC classification in areas of concern within the country

- 1: Minimal
- 2: Stressed
- 3+: Crisis or higher

Symbols

- Settlement of displaced populations
- Would likely be at least one phase worse without current or planned humanitarian food assistance

**The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET)
Acute Food Insecurity Area Classification**

More than 30 million people in southern Africa will need significant food aid through the upcoming lean season, according to a new report from the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). This represents an increase of 50 percent from the 2023-2024 lean season.

Conflict and extreme weather are the major drivers of the region's growing humanitarian needs.⁸



Once individuals have been integrated into the camps, they are given a weekly food ration. In many cases this includes a cereal, some pulses, vegetable oil and some salt and sugar. When the shipments arrive, refugees are told to come to the distribution area to pick up their allotment.



After receiving their ration, they must walk it back to where they have settled within the camp.



In 2023, the World Food Programme (WFP) distributed nearly 3.1 million metric tons of food to people in need, including refugees in Africa. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, sub-Saharan Africa hosts more than 26 percent (over 18 million) of the world's refugees.



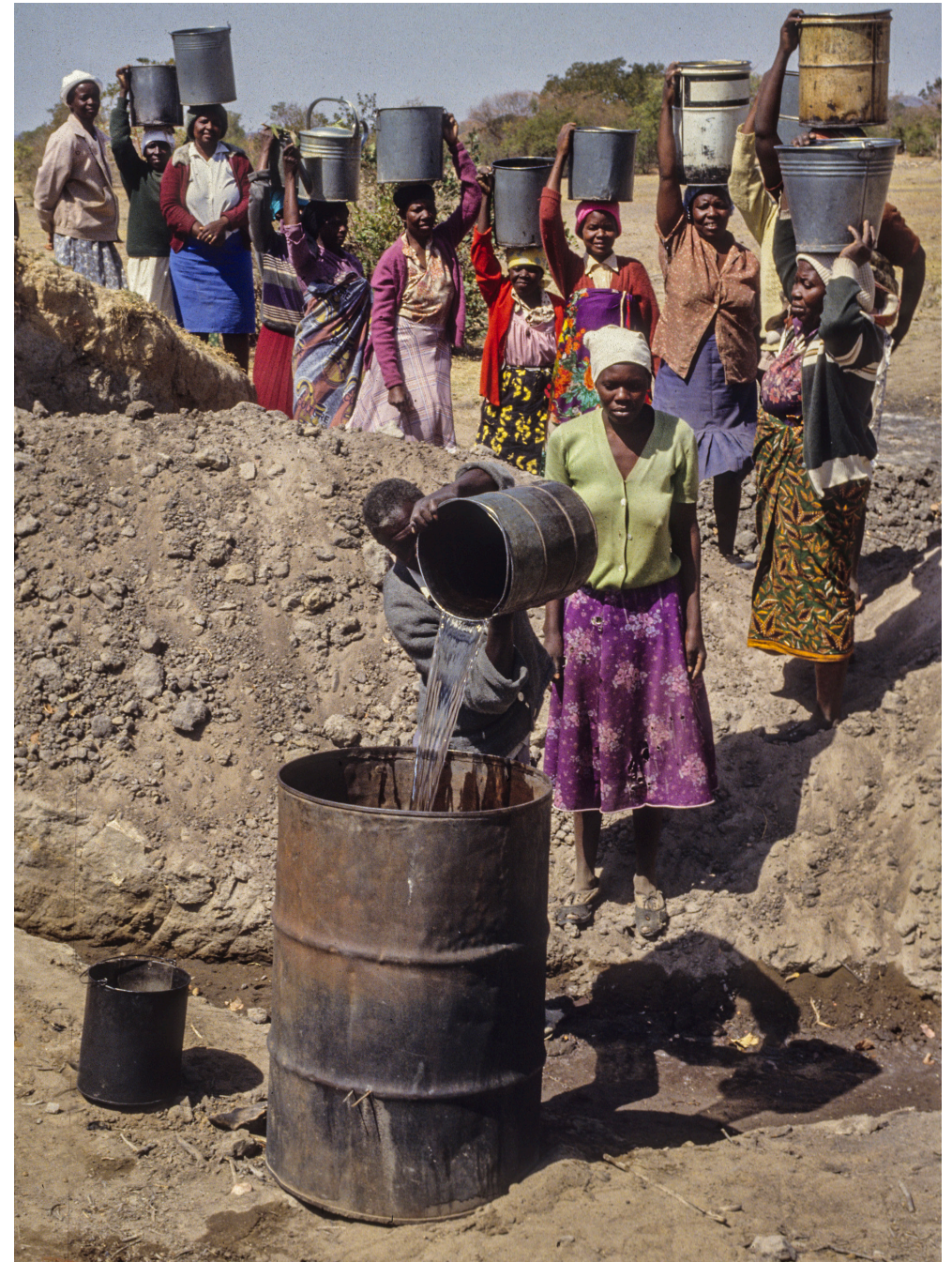
In many of the camps, refugees were supplied with a pasty gruel that is mixed with water and heated. They eat this two times a day. Chambuta Refugee Camp







Children under the age of eighteen constitute 57% of the refugees in Africa.



Without water, no one would survive.



For the youngest, survival is the most difficult.



Everyday children die as their mothers quietly mourn.



Death is an everyday occurrence throughout the refugee camps across the sub-Saharan. The highest toll is among the children. The majority of the deaths are attributed to starvation, disease, and violence.



Life at the camps is a slow crawl until sundown.

Blood Diamonds



Sierra Leone

Much of Africa's ongoing violence and conflicts are financed by the exploitation of the region's natural resources. These resources include oil, gold, cobalt, coltan, and diamonds. State, Non-State, and rebel groups seek to control and mine these resources to sell them on the international market to buy weapons. The United Nations has created the term for these resources:

"Conflict resources." Conflict resources are resources that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the Security Council.

Over the past few decades, seven African countries have endured brutal civil conflicts fueled by diamonds: Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, the Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rival groups also fight with each other to control diamond-rich territory. The tragic result is bloodshed, loss of life, and shocking human rights abuses – from rape to the use of child soldiers. Diamonds that fuel civil wars are often called "blood" or "conflict" diamonds. Past wars fueled by diamonds have taken about 3.7 million lives.⁵

Conflict diamonds are used by rebel forces to purchase arms and facilitate other illegal activities. These forces will often smuggle their diamonds out of areas they control and trade their diamonds in neighboring countries. In doing so, they make it quite difficult for others to trace the origin of these diamonds once they hit the market. Once the rough diamonds are polished, it is no longer possible to trace them back to their source, and they can therefore no longer be distinguished from legitimate diamonds.⁶ Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, is believed to have taken 90% of Sierra Leone's diamond resources. These diamonds were smuggled into Liberia, which at the time was controlled by another notorious warlord, Charles Taylor. Together, they used the money to finance their wars and atrocities.

In the Central African Republic, coltan is another mineral used to fund regional conflicts. Coltan is a vital ingredient in the production of cell phones and computers. Approximately 80% of the world's supply of coltan is found in the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁷ In Nigeria, the main conflict resource is oil. Gold, cassiterite, wolframite, tin, bauxite, cobalt, uranium, platinum, copper, iron ore, vermiculite, and zirconium are other natural resources eagerly sought after. These conflicts do not just affect the country where the resources are mined, but entire regions, often engulfing many countries at the same time. In many situations, it is more than just one resource that fuels the violence.





Many warlords and rebel groups use their captured or kidnapped prisoners as slave labor.





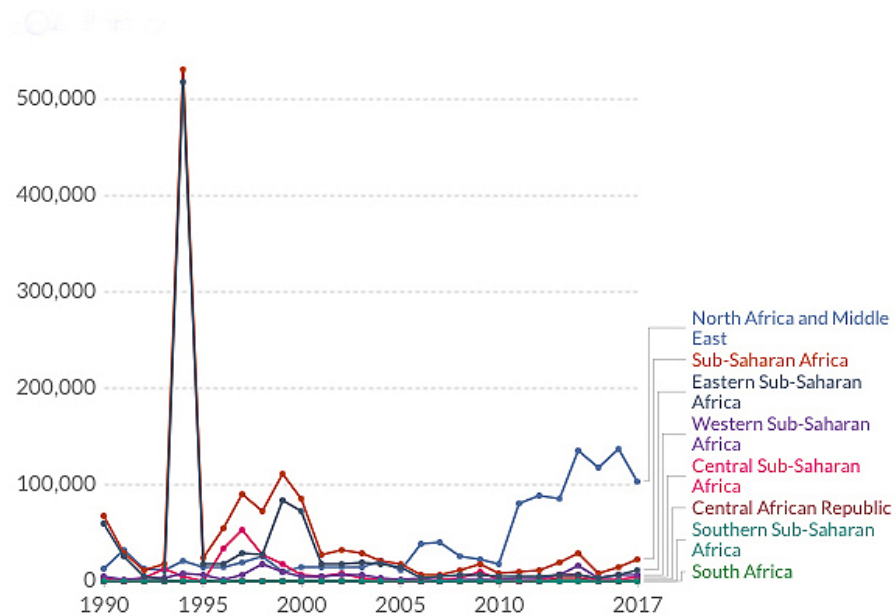
Diamonds are one of Sierra Leone's most lucrative exports. They account for 63 percent of the country's total exports, yielding over \$240 million annually. However, Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

Child Soldiers & War

Deaths from conflict and terrorism, 1990 to 2017

Total combined number of deaths from conflict (civil conflict and war between states) and terrorism.

Our World
In Data



Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)

CC BY

1990 2017

Deaths from conflict and terrorism, Central African Republic, Central Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Middle East, South Africa, Southern Sub-Saharan Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Sub-Saharan Africa IHME,

Another tragic consequence of these conflicts is the use of child soldiers. According to a recent report released by The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 serve as child soldiers with government armed forces and armed opposition groups worldwide, with over 120,000 of them located in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.

The United Nations counted a large number of African countries recruiting and using child soldiers in state forces or armed groups: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Their ages range from 6 to 18. Many are kidnapped by rebel groups and are forced to join or die. Rebel leaders notoriously force the children to take drugs and alcohol to control and manipulate them, as well as making them conduct brutal acts of terror and rape. Many of the soldier's civilian victims have had their limbs, noses, and ears amputated. This is used as a tool of intimidation.

In Mozambique and Angola, large numbers of children were used as soldiers. The rebel group, RENAMO, in Mozambique exploited at least 10,000. In Angola, 36 percent of the children had accompanied or supported soldiers and 7 percent were actual fighters. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel movement in Uganda, notoriously used child soldiers. Children as young as eight were kidnapped, abused to the point of submission, and turned into merciless killers. Other leaders who utilized child soldiers to fight and commit atrocities were Charles Taylor of Liberia and Foday Saybana Sankoh, the founder of the Sierra Leone rebel group Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

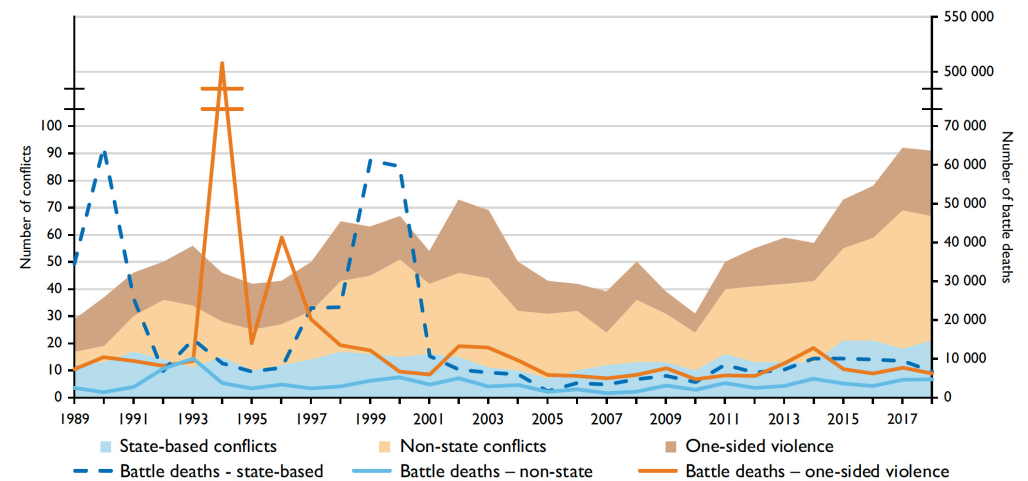


Figure 1: Conflict types and battle deaths (trends over time). Source: UCDP/PRIO database



High on drugs and adrenaline, a child soldier shows off his weapons.



Ethiopia



Ethiopia



Ethiopia



Liberia

Continually forced to take drugs, many of the child soldiers believed they were invincible. Manipulated by their leaders, they fight mercilessly, committing brutal acts of torture and rape.



A mother and daughter wait to be allowed into a UN refugee camp. Separated from the rest of their family, they did not know who was still alive or dead.

Some of Africa's most notorious rulers and warlords

All have been accused of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Idi Amin ruled Uganda for eight years. He came to be known as the “Butcher of Uganda” for his brutality. His regime was characterized by rampant human rights abuses, including political repression, ethnic persecution, and corruption. Under his rule, 500,000 people were massacred and countless others tortured.

Omar Hassan Ahmad Al-Bashir became president of Sudan in 1989 and almost immediately started his assault on non-Arab Africans and his regime was designated a state sponsor of terrorism. In 2009 he was indicted for the mass killing, mass rape, and pillaging of the civilians of Darfur. The war in Darfur caused between 200,000 and 400,000 deaths. It has displaced millions of people.

Afonso Dhlakama was the leader of the rebel group RENAMO in Mozambique. He used thousands of child soldiers in a civil war that lasted 15 years. Over one million people were killed or died of starvation across the region.

Charles Taylor was a Liberian politician and guerrilla leader who served as Liberia's president from 1997 until he was forced into exile in 2003. For the next seven years, the armed factions fought a brutal civil war in which more than 150,000 people were killed and more than half of the population became refugees. Charles Taylor was convicted of war crimes in 2012.

Jean Kambanda became president of Rwanda at the beginning of the genocide in that country and remained president for the entire 100 days of the conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus. When the conflict ended, 800,000 people were murdered. He is the first person ever to admit to committing genocide.

Joshua Blahyi used the alias, General Butt Naked. He was one of the most feared generals during the Liberian civil war of the 1990s, where he would charge into battle wearing nothing but shoes. He brutally slaughtered over 20,000 people.

Joseph Kony is the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. Kony kidnapped over 66,000 children, forcing them to become child soldiers and sex slaves. Another 2 million people were displaced because of his actions. Kony was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court but evaded capture. The LRA no longer operates in Uganda, but sources say they may be operating in other parts of Africa.

Foday Saybana Sankoh was the founder of the Sierra Leone rebel group Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which was supported by Charles Taylor. He is notorious for using children soldiers during the Sierra Leone Civil War, who used the amputation of limbs against civilians as a terror tool. An estimated 50,000 people were killed during the war, and over 500,000 people were displaced in neighboring countries.

Thomas Lubanga was the founder of the Union of Congolese Patriots (UCP), a group that fought for control of gold reserves in the DRC. He is notorious for recruiting child soldiers, ethnic cleansing, and 60,000 murders. He was convicted of war crimes in 2012.

Bosco Ntanganda helped overthrow the Hutu-led government in Rwanda during the civil war, and then the government in DRC after which he was made head of the DRC armed forces. He was given the name, The Terminator. He is responsible for 800,000 combined deaths and countless human rights abuses.

Robert Mugabe started out as a rebel during the Rhodesian Civil War. Mugabe was responsible for the death of 20,000 members of the Ndebele tribe. After overthrowing the government, he became the president of the new Zimbabwe. For three decades, he oppressively ruled over a broken nation.



One of the most brutal tactics of these conflicts was the horrific amount of amputations used against the civilian population. It was the greatest source of terror. Sierra Leone



Zimbabwe



Ethiopia



Sierra Leone



The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that over 120,000 child soldiers were used by both government armed forces and armed opposition groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Ethiopia



Ethiopia



Ethiopia



Somalia



Sierra Leone



A woman watches as American troops arrive in Mogadishu, Somalia



The greatest tragedy is that this crisis has gone on for decades. The regional conflicts that continue to evolve are the root cause of the problem. Today, too many individuals are still living in refugee camps that they settled in many years ago. Most are dependent on the UN and NGOs for their daily survival. As long as ethnic and religious tensions remain high, poverty and corruption are endemic, natural resources are continually exploited, and political systems fail to address the needs of their citizens, there will be no peaceful resolution. Africa has become a destabilized collection of failed states. Although direct international involvement or intervention has resolved several regional conflicts, the world will watch these humanitarian crises shift from one region to another. Dreadfully, this will leave millions languishing in misery, continually on the verge of starvation, fearful for their lives, and with little hope for the future.

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Footnotes

- 1 Stephen Emerson, "Mozambican Civil War, Marxist-Apartheid Proxy," *Pen & Sword*, 1988
- 2 United States Institute of Peace & United Nations reports (2020)
- 3 Alcinda Honwana, "*Child Soldiers in Africa*," University of Pennsylvania, (2006)
- 4 Alcinda Honwana, "*Child Soldiers in Africa*," University of Pennsylvania, (2006)
- 5 "Brilliant Earth," <https://www.brilliantearth.com/conflict-diamond-trade>
- 6 "Diamonds Finance Wars Throughout Africa," <https://www.voanews.com/archive/diamonds-finance-wars-throughout-africa>
- 7 "Diamonds Finance Wars Throughout Africa," <https://www.voanews.com/archive/diamonds-finance-wars-throughout-africa>
- 8 Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), 2024, <https://ssa.foodsecurityportal.org>

Richard Falco

Richard Falco is President of Vision Project. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/ September II*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back the Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University and the director of all of Vision Project's educational programming.

Les Stone

During the last two decades, critically acclaimed photographer Les Stone has chronicled the human cost of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Kosovo, Liberia, Cambodia, and Haiti, among other war zones. The winner of several *World Press Photo Awards* and *Picture of the Year Awards*, Stone worked with the SOROS Foundation on stories related to child soldiers and conflict diamonds in Africa. His work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Life*, *Paris Match*, *Stern*, *Fortune*, and many others magazines. There are several books of his work: *The Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, *Haiti: Dangerous Crossroads*, and *A Day in the Life of the United States Armed Forces*. Stone has exhibited at galleries in New York, and in 2006, the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Scotland presented a large show of his photographs focusing on voodoo. He has given seminars on photography at: The International Center of Photography, Empire College, Sacred Heart University, and The New School for Social Research. In 2008, he joined Vision Project.

This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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