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FAREWELL, AFRICA

Beggar, Serf, Soldier, Child

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DAKAR, Senegal — They stand at my taxi window, scrawny and unwashed, holding up empty tomato tin cans. They scratch their scabby arms. They wipe their running noses. Listlessly, they chant verses from the Koran. More often, they dispense with the formalities and beg: "Cent francs, ma tante, cent francs, cent francs."

These are the talibes, or beggar boys, of Senegal, dispatched onto the streets by religious leaders, called marabouts, and ordered to collect a daily quota ranging from 250 francs to 650 francs (50 cents to \$1.30), along with whatever else is dropped in their tin cans: sugar cubes, biscuits, milk powder, kola nuts. If they fail, they face a beating.

From Bombay to Mexico City to Bangkok, child beggars are a banal fact of life: Unicef reported last week that half the world's children, a billion people, face extreme deprivation. But there are degrees of misery even among the miserable, and the talibes who greet me every time I return home to Dakar are a troubling reminder that West and Central Africa, which I am leaving after two years, can be an appalling place to be a child.

Of the 27 countries with the worst child mortality rates, 26 are in Africa, most in this part of Africa. Children here not only reflect all that ails their countries, but they also pay the dearest price. AIDS has orphaned them, poverty has driven parents to sell them as cheap labor. And everywhere, warlords turn them into soldiers.

Moses Vanery, who was 20 when I met him last year in Monrovia, Liberia, had spent the last 10 years of his life fighting for two factions in two countries.

Richard Maki, whom I hired as a translator in eastern Congo because he spoke four languages by the age of 18, had not taken the bait to fight, but other fighters ruined his chances for a college education. The cattle his father had set aside for his tuition were stolen when rival militias battled for control of his hometown.

I have met fathers who have sent away their boys to break stones in another country - something they couldn't imagine their own fathers doing. I have met girls who will never go to school because their mothers rely on them to fetch water and firewood, one reason girls' education rates in sub-Saharan Africa remain the lowest in the world. Only 56 percent of girls were attending school between 1996 and 2003, according to Unicef.

In fact, in the roughly 40 years since these countries have freed themselves from Europe's colonial rule, the plight of children in Africa has only grown worse. In the 20 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the average citizen is poorer than she was a decade ago, according to the United Nations Human Development Index. In 11 countries in the same region, more people go hungry today than they did 10 years ago. And children now represent the majority of Africans today; in sub-Saharan Africa there were 340 million, representing 51 percent of the population, in 2003.

What has gone wrong? Students and leaders of Africa point to a mixture of man-made disasters, from unscrupulous rulers to international economic policies, including American and European trade barriers that stunt African producers, and an unrelenting cycle of conflict.

The last, says Kayode Fayemi, the director of the Nigeria-based Center for Development and Democracy, has at least had the unintended virtue of forcing many African leaders to pay some attention to their countries' children - and not just out of pity. Poor and restive youth can be a ruler's worst nightmare, as the child soldiers of Sierra Leone and Liberia amply illustrate.

"It's out of fear," Mr. Fayemi said of the newfound interest in children evinced by some African leaders. "This is something that could consume them if they don't take a decisive step in reversing the clear inequality."

He pointed to the example of Olusegun Obasanjo, the Nigerian president with an imperious reputation, who met in October with the youth militias that have

wreaked havoc in the oil-rich Niger Delta.

"It wasn't for any altruistic reasons," Mr. Fayemi said of the meeting. "He can see the crisis that's confronting his government."

The statistics associated with child welfare in Africa are stunning.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 3.8 million people have died as a result of a war that began six years ago, according to an annual study published Thursday by the International Rescue Committee, a charity based in New York. Nearly half of them were children under 5, most of whom fell victim to malnutrition and other preventable diseases.

In Sierra Leone, where a decade-long war ended in 2002, 3 of 10 children will die before their fifth birthday, according to the Unicef report.

Unemployment among the young is rampant, and many onetime child soldiers in the war now dig for diamonds in exchange for a daily bowl of rice. Some Sierra Leoneans wonder how long it will be before frustration boils over again into violence.

In Nigeria, the world's sixth largest oil exporter, fewer children - just 13 percent in 2003 - were immunized against chronic childhood diseases than in 1990. Nigeria also famously put polio back on the map, when Islamist politicians in the north, egged on by their clerical allies, accused the West of plotting to sterilize their children with polio vaccinations.

Many in the region listened to their leaders and kept their children from being vaccinated, with predictably tragic results. In May, I stumbled upon a tiny boy in a hospital in the northern city of Kano, unable to move his lower limbs, staring blankly at his mother. His mother said her imams had persuaded her not to vaccinate her baby.

Thanks to Nigerian politics, polio cases have now cropped up in 11 other African countries.

Children, here as everywhere, are always the most vulnerable. They are the ones who most need what their rulers have not been able to offer - a functioning government that provides teachers, health clinics, a clean water supply to keep them from dying of diarrhea.

Helping them will require huge amounts of international aid, said Dr. Rick Brennan, the author of the International Rescue Committee's mortality study of Congo, but first there must be a long-term commitment to peacekeeping. In short, he said, end the fighting and fewer children will die of hunger and disease.

Even well-meaning governments in the region, and there are some, are stymied in their ability to invest in their own people. Take Mali, which is almost entirely dependent on cotton exports. In 2001 alone, American trade barriers, along with a fluctuation in world cotton prices, cost the country the equivalent of three years of education spending, according to research by Oxfam, the humanitarian agency. School enrollment rates in Mali are among the lowest worldwide.

Charity, in other words, will hardly be sufficient to help the children of sub-Saharan Africa.

When it comes to the talibes here in Dakar, the exploitation of children is also being justified by tradition. In Senegal, poor children have long been sent to Koranic schools, where they worked on their marabouts' farms to earn their keep, or collected charity from the local community to feed themselves and their teachers. But today, in an economy with few viable options, begging has turned into a booming business, and armies of tomato tin can boys have proliferated across Dakar.

They weave in and out of rush-hour traffic. The wiliest among them plant themselves on the edge of town, where they know commuters in rickety, accident-prone public buses are calling on God to keep them safe.

The talibes offer prayers for a safe journey, and the Senegalese, devout Muslims who take the Koranic injunction to give alms seriously, pour candles and sugar cubes into the talibes' tin cans. White symbolizes purity. Candles make the road bright. The young, who haven't yet sinned, are thought to be the best emissaries to the divine.

On the bedrock of tradition, then, greased by the perils of modern life and the upheavals of the global economy, the talibes, or rather their keepers, thrive.

"There are many, many more, and they are much more wretched," said

Malick Diagne, a Koranic school alumnus and now the deputy director of Tostan, a group working to reform the talibe system. "It is a strategy - to make them as wretched as possible to inspire sympathy. That wretchedness you see, it's a racket."

This morning in downtown Dakar, a short stroll from my office, half-brothers named Abdoulaye and Moussa Balde were halfway through their 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. shift. Two days a week, they come to the city, where their quota is 650 francs a day. The other days, they are on a road out of town, with a quota of 250 francs.

They must manage to feed themselves, and when they fall sick, care for themselves. It would be unthinkable, said Abdoulaye, who claims to be 17 but looks several years younger, to use the alms to buy food or medicine.

"We'd get a kick in the rear if we did that," he said, eyes wide open.