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Forum 3, Children in conflict



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Note: photos available upon request

Rwandan refugee brings first-hand knowledge of children in war zones to UCFV forum

Jean de Dieu Hakizimana could pass himself off as an average mature student at UCFV. He recently turned 40, and realized that while he was motivated, smart, and 'could get things done,' he had no formal education or credential to his name. He signed up for the Bachelor of Arts in degree Adult Education at UCFV and quickly became immersed in his studies.



Jean de Dieu
Hakizimana

De Dieu Hakizimana, however, is a long way from your average student. His eyes have seen more terrors than anybody would like to imagine: he has witnessed savagery when man turns against man, has seen children murdered, and has been arrested, beaten, and tortured.

He is a survivor from the horrors of the genocide in Rwanda. When the violence of the early 1990s began, he was a student in neighbouring Tanzania. While many were fleeing Rwanda, he rushed home with the hopes of helping his family escape. It was too late and his entire family had been murdered, his village burned to the ground.

Millions of refugees began a fight for survival, many of them orphaned or abandoned children. De Dieu Hakizimana believes that much of the grief in today's world comes directly from "unaccompanied children" left to survive on their own.

"Somehow, because of AIDS, or war, or famine, these children are alone," de Dieu Hakizimana says. "Our society has broken the unwritten commitment to these children that they should be loved and cared for. We have all broken this promise as these children need a hand, but there is no one there.

"People ask why a child in Africa would become a soldier. Because soldiers can find food and with food there is belonging. These unaccompanied children search for food and they need to belong to something. They find both when they become soldiers."

As part of its Child-friendly World series, UCFV is hosting a special forum called Children and Conflict: Children in War Zones, on Friday, Feb. 1. Event organizer Ahseea Ahmed has lined up four speakers who will discuss the struggles children face when living in war zones.

"Children are usually the first casualties of violent conflict and more than two million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict over the last decade," Ahmed says. "At our forum we will learn more about the struggles that children faced in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Bosnia/Herzegovina. We'll also discuss the work that Canadians are doing abroad to address these complex and multi-faceted situations."

Along with de Dieu Hakizimana, guest speakers include Wendy van Tongeren Harvey, who will speak about Sierra Leone; and Naghmeh Sobhani along with Stacey Makortoff, who have both worked extensively in Bosnia/Herzegovina. Van Tongeren Harvey is a prosecutor who has specialized in cases involving sex crimes and crimes against vulnerable people and children, and she will speak about child soldiers. In 2006, she joined the Office of the Prosecutor at the Special Court of Sierra Leone in Freetown, Sierra Leone. She has published extensively and lectured around the world about this issue.

Meanwhile, Sobhani and Makortoff will discuss the innovative Education for Peace program, introduced to the war-torn country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Initiated in 2000, Education for Peace is now in all 2,200 schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reaching some 1.5 million students and 110,000 teachers.

Sobhani, a consultant with several United Nations agencies in New York, the Ukraine, and Africa, is the director of the Education for Peace Institute of the Balkans. She, along with Makortoff, will speak candidly about how they

helped the children, parents, and teachers of war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how they were able to bring peace to these warring communities.

De Dieu Hakizimana will speak about the children of Rwanda and his personal experiences. It is the abandoned children, he says, who are the greatest tragedy of any war. Desperate, starving, alone, and terrified, they willingly team up with people who befriend and feed them. When that person then puts a gun or grenade in their hands, and tells them to use it, they often do because they are obliged to whoever gave them their last meal. The cycle is vicious and hard to break.

“It is so simple because children have basic necessities and if you take care of them they will trust you. But when the social structure is destroyed by a corrupt government, or by war, or famine then there is no security.

“In Canada, while you have desperate people, you still have security. You know the people on the lower east side of Vancouver may be desperate but they will probably never pick up a gun and shoot a government person. You know the mayor can go down there and not get shot. That is not the case in places like Rwanda where the people are truly desperate and society has been broken.”

Ahmed says the goal of the three-hour forum is to examine the impact of armed conflict on children, explore ethical issues surrounding the imprisonment of child soldiers, and learn about the possibility of developing a peace curriculum as part of the educational system in post-conflict societies.

“The battlefield of the 21st century is very different from the past,” she says. “Around the world, young children are being forcibly recruited by both armed forces and armed opposition groups, and exploited as combatants. More than 300,000 children under the age of 18 are believed to be fighting in conflicts. Join us for a thought-provoking afternoon that will challenge your notion of what contemporary warfare looks like.”

The three-hour event is sure to be unsettling and enlightening, says Ahmed. UCFV, along with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and SAPEF, is working to improve awareness, understanding, and involvement of Canadians in international development issues, she says. Ahmed is also hoping to establish a “child-friendly” network within in the Fraser Valley to strengthen UCFV’s international network and expand opportunities and programs for people to work in development assistance.

The Child-friendly World forums, which began in November, showcase how development assistance has improved the lives of many children through programs in health, education, nutrition, access to water and sanitation, and

enhancement of family incomes. However, children continue to be marginalized by armed conflict, natural disasters, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and HIV/AIDS.

The Children in Conflict forum takes place Friday, Feb. 1 at the lecture theatre (room B101) on UCFV's Abbotsford campus, from 2 to 5 p.m. This event is free and open to the public. Pre-registration is preferred. Contact Ahseea Ahmed at 604-504-7441, ext. 4752, or email ahseea.ahmed@ucfv.ca

UCFV's upcoming forums:

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Global Phenomenon, Local Implications

— February 25, 6 to 8 p.m., University House, UCFV Abbotsford. Free event; open to the public.

Cities for Children and Youth: Child-friendly Development in Canada and Globally

— March 11, 9 a.m. to early afternoon, Matsqui Centennial Auditorium. Free event; open to the public.

Stephen Lewis and Hugh Brody — March 8, time, location, and ticket information to be announced.