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## WINTER 2007 UPDATE

Dear friends,

Greetings from the Fund for Global Human Rights! In this e-update, we introduce you to the Fund's Children and Armed Conflict Initiative, as well as to human rights defenders in Guatemala and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Today, tens of millions of children are caught in conflict zones. More than 20 million children have had to flee their homes, and over 300,000 are forced to serve on the front lines—in more than thirty active conflicts around the world—as child soldiers, porters, and sex slaves. Human rights groups like **BVES**, located in the Democratic Republic of Congo, work to keep children out of war and defend their basic rights. BVES' efforts have led to national prohibitions against recruiting child soldiers and to the release of over 1,000 children.

Like BVES staff working in a conflict zone, human rights defenders around the world take great risks. Two human rights defenders in Guatemala were nearly killed in January 2007 by four masked gunmen. Carlos Albacete and Piedad Espinosa of **Trópico Verde** work with Mayan communities to document and expose the impact on their rights of mega-development projects. They have also turned the spotlight on violence and abuses perpetrated by drug traffickers in Guatemala's Peten region. Their tenacious efforts to expose abuse and its perpetrators have brought them threats, and now, this attack on their lives.

In just four years, the Fund for Global Human Rights has awarded over \$7 million to over 160 front-line human rights organizations like BVES and Trópico Verde. We thank you for your continued **support**.



Rwanda, December 1994

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### Grantee Profile: **BVES**

Defending children's rights in war zones

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### The Stories of Nze Ar and Somba Mar

These two children know first-hand the difference a group like BVES makes for children caught up in war

[» Read their stories](#)

### Grantee Profile: Trópico Verde

Environmental rights defenders under fire in Guatemala

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Warm regards,

Regan E. Ralph

**More about the Fund's Children and Armed Conflict Initiative**

In 2006, the Fund launched the Children and Armed Conflict Initiative to provide financial support to efforts to combat the use of child soldiers and protect the rights of children living in or fleeing conflict zones.

**Fund announces \$1.5 million in new grants**

One hundred frontline human rights groups receive critical resources to expand efforts to protect and defend basic human rights

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## Grantee Profile: BVES

When BVES first opened its doors in 1992, its children's center was little more than a metal shack with a tarp roof. Still, it was the only place to go in this part of the Congo for several hundred Tutsi children fleeing the Rwandan genocide just across the river. BVES took these children in, provided food, medical care, and shelter, and a haven from the chaos just a few miles away. Fifteen years later, Bureau pour le Volontariat au Service de l'Enfance et de la Santé (BVES) has become the main organization in the region working on child rights and has become the lead advocate for the release of children recruited by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



In the photo above, former child soldiers hold a poster stating: "Never again these uniforms for children."

Armed conflict in eastern Congo has fractured thousands of families and led to the enlistment of 30,000 children as soldiers, porters and sexual slaves. Ten thousand of these children are in the province of South Kivu, where BVES operates. Nearly every armed group in the region—including government forces—has recruited and forcibly conscripted children. Both boys and girls have been used in combat, and BVES and others have documented cases of child soldiers as young as six years old.

BVES promotes the rights of marginalized children (street children, imprisoned children, and children who are refugees, displaced, or former soldiers) with local authorities and the international community. BVES operates centers that help these children to rejoin their communities after being abducted by armed groups or orphaned by war, and provides psychological and medical services. Many released child soldiers and refugee children may return to their villages as orphans. They often return to a situation where they have no access to health care, social supports, or opportunities to develop a trade or skill. They often have missed years of school, have extreme behavioral challenges, and face suspicious neighbors. Girls face a particularly difficult situation as they may return as new mothers to families who reject them; in many parts of Congo, their rape and/or forced service is considered to bring the families shame.

BVES received its first-ever outside funding from the Fund in 2005. For years, BVES operated its shelters with an all-volunteer staff and with in-kind contributions from UNICEF, the World Food Program, and the International Red Cross. BVES offered relief services with in-kind contributions but was not in the position to tackle the root cause of the children's situation: the widespread conscription of children as soldiers. The Fund's support allowed BVES to increase dramatically their research and advocacy, train other organizations to advocate on behalf of children, and convince military commanders and rural villagers not to recruit children to join military forces.



In the photo to the right, children wear shirts saying: "A ball, not an army for me."

Today, BVES works with the UN and international human rights organizations to pressure the militia and the Congolese national army to stop using children in armed service. Through its shelters and vast local network, BVES gathers and reports timely information concerning the names, locations and activities of armed groups recruiting children. BVES staff members undertake this work at great personal peril. BVES and its extensive network work in isolated rural areas where warlords are dominant and human rights

violations pervasive. By virtue of their activities—gathering incriminating data on armed groups—the staff and volunteers are at constant risk.



Despite the challenges, BVES has had astounding results. Due in large part to their documentation and advocacy, child recruitment is now a crime under Congolese military and national law, and armed groups have released hundreds of children. BVES expects to assist thousands more children to reintegrate into society when the Congolese national army accelerates the process of incorporating now-independent militias. As part of the integration, soldiers under the age of eighteen will be sent to child soldier demobilization centers like those of BVES.

In the photo to the left, former child soldiers burn their old military uniforms.

BVES operates with minimal funding, yet maximizes its potential for impact thanks to tireless leaders who actively collaborate and coordinate with other groups to defend the rights of children. The Fund continues to be one of BVES' only funders and is the only one to provide general support, which allows the organization the flexibility to respond to emergency situations, and opportunities, and to lead the formation of the children's rights movement in Congo.

» **DONATE NOW to the Children and Armed Conflict Initiative**

You can help support these front-line, local groups working to keep children out of war. By donating today, you can help the Fund respond to great need in areas devastated by conflict.

» **Read more: The Stories of Nze Ar and Somba Mar**

These two children were forcibly conscripted by armed factions fighting in the Congo, whose lives were changed due to the remarkable and persistent work of BVES.

## **The story of Nze Ar and Somba Mar**

The following first-person accounts come from two children assisted by Fund grantee Bureau pour le Volontariat au Service de l'Enfance et de la Santé (BVES), which operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Thanks to efforts by the international community and local organizations like **BVES**, over 18,000 child soldiers in the DRC have been released and demobilized since 2002. Nearly 6 percent of these (1,050) were released as a result of **BVES** intervening with commanders and negotiating releases.

### **Nze Ar (not his real name)**

In his own words (translated from French):

"I was enlisted into the army (RCD/Goma) on May 20, 2000. After a military training that lasted two months in Kitutu/Mwenga, I was sent to Kakolokelwa to serve in the military unit of Commander Dumu. After three months, I escaped and I went to hide in my village. But my father and my mother could not take care of me; I am the sixth of nine children. After third grade, I could no longer afford to go to school.

In June 2002, our village was attacked by the Mudundu 40 (a rebel group) who took all of the children in our village aged eight to eighteen for their militia. They took us to Ngweshe/Walungu to initiate us into their army. They taught us the techniques of combat and taught us about the magical amulets that would protect us.

We fought several times against the Rwandan army and against the Mai Mai militia. Other kids died from illness, snake and insect bites, and enemy fire. I, because I was young and very well trained, was chosen as "chief of escort" for the commander. I cannot give you the commander's name because I am too scared. He also chose me to guard his magical amulets.

In November 2002, we were transferred to the Ruzizi area. I received an additional week's worth of training. During these training sessions, they would send me to get water five kilometers away in the bush, totally naked, and at midnight. We met devils who would speak to us. We would bring back the water in banana tree leaves to drink the day of the fight. I suffered terribly; thank God I survived.

On December 22, 2002, **BVES** came to our military camp, and, as a result of the awareness session, my seventeen friends and I were released and we went to the BVES reintegration center. There, I received psychological and social support for three months, but the magic in my blood remained.

BVES found a family for me in Bukavu. I couldn't go back to my village, or else I would have been re-recruited into another army. I was able to go to school in Bukavu.

Unfortunately, in July 2003, as I was taking a walk, my former commander took a hold of me and forced me to go the private militia in Bukavu that was preparing a new war. I couldn't escape, and I thought that life was very disappointing. But, once again, by chance I was in a military camp close to a city where BVES was and when BVES came to visit, they convinced the commanders to release all the children. I was saved. That was in February 2004.

As soon as I arrived in the reintegration center, BVES found me a family in Bukavu, and the school accepted me again. So I was able to attend the same school again as a result of BVES's help. I am very lucky. I plan to continue my studies and go to university.

February 2007

**Somba Mar (not her real name)**

In her own words (translated from French):

I was born in 1989 in Walungu, the youngest of six children. Two boys and four girls. In 2001, my father was killed by Rwandan soldiers while he was on his way to tend his fields. My mother was raped and beaten by my fathers' murderers. My oldest brother was killed in a motorbike accident three months later.

Insecurity ran high in our village. The Mudundu 40 (a rebel militia) was coming both day and night to abduct girls. In June 2001, the Mudundu 40 grabbed me and six other girls in Mushinga. That night, we were victims of sexual violence. We cried and screamed, but no one listened, not even God. The following morning, we were asked to choose between death and the army. We all said yes for the army.

After three months, four girls including me were pregnant. The commanders brought a midwife to the camp; she was a witch brought there to provoke an abortion with sour substances and fingers in our genitals. Two of the girls died as a result of blood loss. I came very close to death, but thank God, by the third day, the blood had stopped though it was still painful. After nine months of military sexual servitude, one day I was listening to a radio broadcast run by BVES that called on military leaders to release the children in their ranks. I decided to run away and to hide with an old woman in the village. I could not go to the city (Bukavu) because of military roadblocks. The old woman got in touch with a local order of religious sisters who agreed to help me and they successfully got me back in school.

After a year, the mother superior was transferred elsewhere and the sisters' financial support disappeared. So [without much choice,] I decided to reenlist in the military, disappointed by life. I went to the local police of the RCD/Goma (a military group) in Sept 2002. I suffered in this police group as much as I suffered with the Mudundu 40. My suffering is difficult to explain . . .

Then, a local human rights defender I met advised me to run away to find refuge in the **BVES** center in Bukavu. BVES welcomed me, gave me clothes, medical care, and after three months, I was reunified with my sister. I went back to school. Thanks to BVES financial support, I am now in my sixth year of school and I am working hard to get my diploma. I want to go to the university one day to become a lawyer defending children and women's rights around the world.

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» [Read more about BVES' frontline work defending children's rights in war zones](#)

## Profile: Trópico Verde

### *Environmental rights defenders under fire in Guatemala*

Attacks on Guatemalan human rights defenders have increased dramatically in recent years. Circumstances surrounding many of these attacks strongly suggest they represent a deliberate attempt to intimidate human rights defenders. In a recent, serious example of this trend, on January 10, 2007, four unidentified gunmen opened fire on environmental rights activists Carlos Albacete and Piedad Espinosa, directors of the Guatemalan organization, Trópico Verde. Carlos and Piedad were returning home from the Guatemala City airport in a taxi at the time of the attack. The assailants, who wore bullet proof vests, were dressed in black clothing similar to Guatemalan police uniforms, but without any identifying insignia. The taxi driver managed to speed away as the attackers continued to fire on the car. Astonishingly, Carlos, Piedad and the taxi driver escaped with only minor injuries sustained when the windshield was shattered by bullets.

Although it may seem difficult to understand why activists defending the right to a healthy environment would be targeted for such a brutal attack, Carlos and Piedad's work to defend the rights of indigenous and rural villages who oppose environmentally and socially destructive development projects on or next to their land directly challenges the interests of powerful people who benefit financially from these projects. Some seem to be willing to resort to violent threats and intimidation to silence their critics. For example, when Trópico Verde successfully pressed the Guatemalan government to establish a moratorium on oil exploration near indigenous and rural communities in the rainforest of the Petén region, Carlos and Piedad received death threats.



The local communities supported by Trópico Verde face a number of threats to their rights. In a poor, rural country like Guatemala, most indigenous and rural people provide for their families' basic needs by working the land. When farmers are forcibly displaced from their land, or the natural resources on which they depend are depleted, they become unable to provide food for their families. In Guatemala's jungle region of the Petén, the government is planning a series of development mega-projects – dams, highways, and powerplants – that threaten to destroy the fragile ecosystems and natural resources on which poor families depend for their livelihoods. Indigenous and rural communities lack information about how these infrastructure development projects would affect them, and are often excluded from participating in making decisions about the future of their rural homes.



Founded in 2000, Trópico Verde collaborates with community partners to gather information about possible on-the-ground effects of development mega-projects and to supply the communities with current information on these proposed projects through workshops and popular education materials. Trópico Verde has conducted extensive research on how development plans would affect the local population, and shares this analysis with affected communities to use in local and national campaigns. Carlos and Piedad also educate decision-makers at the national level and have successfully elevated the concerns of local grassroots organizations in local and national media.

In the Petén, Trópico Verde has documented and exposed how local government officials have illegally allowed alleged drug traffickers to enter the protected rainforest of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and cut it down to make way for cattle ranches. The resulting open



spaces also serve as landing strips for the drug traffickers' small planes.

Guatemalan human rights groups suspect that the recent violent attack was in response to Carlos and Piedad's public statements on the links between suspected drug trafficking activity and the destruction of natural resources in the Petén. This was not the first time Carlos and Piedad have received serious threats. A series of threats forced Trópico Verde to close its Petén office for part of 2005 before re-opening in a more secure location in the center of town.

The Fund for Global Human Rights provides Trópico Verde with the necessary funding to maintain its office in the Petén to monitor the situation and work more closely with local partners. In response to the recent violent attack, the Fund worked with another Guatemala funder, the Moriah Fund, to provide Carlos and Piedad with security protection, help report the attack to Guatemalan and international authorities, and enable them to leave the country until their safety can be assured. These kinds of attacks are intended to intimidate human rights activists and deter them from exposing rights violations. This latest incident, however, will not slow Carlos and Piedad down. While outside of Guatemala, they will raise with the international community concerns about the rights of indigenous and rural people in Guatemala and press for international action to defend the rights of poor communities in the rainforest. As soon as they feel it is safe to do so, Carlos and Piedad plan to return to Guatemala to resume this fight.

February 2007