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Journey of a former child soldier

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Former child soldier, now human rights activist, Ishmael Beah spoke to UCCI's graduating class this summer on the pursuit of life-long education and the importance of believing in one's self.

By Kathy Miller

Rarely do we receive a chance to hear a first-hand experience on the atrocious wars taking place in African nations. Rarely do we really get to hear about just how many innocent men, women and children are brutally slaughtered, burned, raped, tortured, shot and dismembered, all in the name of corrupt, political pursuit. Rarely, do we get to hear about the transformation of human life and the strength of the human spirit that has endured and survived the cruelties of genocide and civil war.

For 26-year-old Ishmael Beah, barely a decade has passed since he escaped war-torn Sierra Leone and his tragic, former life as a child soldier. During a visit to the Cayman Islands as a guest speaker for UCCI's graduation ceremony, Ishmael shared his experience with the students, faculty, parents and guests. His transformation from a child soldier to an educated human rights activist provided an inspirational message for all of those who had the chance to listen to him speak.

In his riveting book, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Ishmael recounts his life in Sierra Leone, particularly between the ages of twelve through sixteen, describing his horrendous years spent as a child soldier, and bringing to light the darkness which has prevailed in a resource rich nation.

At the age of twelve, when the civil war reached his village in Sierra Leone, Ishmael Beah wandered the country. While searching for his family, he tried to avoid crossing the rebels- the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)- for fear of being recruited or shot. He would sneak into villages at night and steal a bit of food and water to keep him alive. He slept deep in the forest, ate strange fruit and ran from wild pigs that tried to devour him.

"The hope of finding my family is what I think kept me going. But then after I found out what happened to them, it was difficult to go on. My immediate family was killed in the war. Even though I knew what the possibility was, I didn't want to think that at all," shared Ishmael.

Eventually, Ishmael met up with some boys in the forest. Although they didn't immediately trust one another, they realised that they were on the same mission - trying to avoid the war and rebels, and survive to see another day.

“At this point everyone distrusted everyone so much in this country that even young people’s innocence was braced against this tremendous fear that people wanted to hurt you,” he described.

At the age of thirteen, Ishmael and his friends were picked up by the government army, taken to a camp and recruited as child soldiers. He was stripped of everything. His old clothes and cassettes were thrown into a fire, burning away the only possessions and connections he had to his home, which he carried with him since running from the war.

Replacing his old possessions were semi automatic machine guns, AK-47s, bayonets, RPGs, and G3s. Ishmael was trained in combat to kill anything and everything that moved. He killed hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. “Too many to count”, he admits. He was force-fed drugs, and would stay awake for up to two weeks at a time. His diet became a mixture of marijuana; brown-brown, which is a combination of cocaine and gunpowder or heroin and gunpowder; and mysterious white capsules. His music became the echoing blasts of machine guns and the tortured cries of suffering people.

For three years Ishmael Beah committed senseless acts of killing until he was chosen by his commander to accompany a UNICEF truck, which had come to rescue some of the child soldiers. Following his placement in a rehabilitation camp, Ishmael spent eight months recovering from the traumatising effects he endured since the age of twelve.

It was at the camp where he began his next journey in life, relearning how to trust people and connect with humanity.

“It took a while for me to really learn how to trust people again and how to trust myself with people.

Coming from that experience I’ve come to believe, to think very badly about people relating to each other...taking advantage of each other in the most horrible way,” Ishmael disclosed. “So because of that, I think I’ve learned to trust people more but that doesn’t mean I’m naive and go around and trust everyone. I just don’t distrust anyone. When I meet someone I come with a clean slate; what they do determines how I go about trusting them or not.”

After being chosen to speak at a United Nations seminar in New York City on child soldiers being successfully rehabilitated, Ishmael made contacts with people that are very much a part of his life today. After fleeing Sierra Leone once the war reached the capital Freetown, Ishmael took refuge with his now mother, Laura, in New York.

“My family now is my mother, she’s Jewish. Then I have her friends, who have become like my aunts and uncles. One thing that they all share is that they are people who deeply care about other human beings. So my sense of family has become that, and not necessarily a blood tie, an ethnic tie or nationality, but rather a human connection,” he described.

Ishmael attended the United Nations International School in New York and graduated with a degree in Political Science from Oberlin College in 2004. He actively speaks around the world as a member of the Human Rights Watch Children’s Rights Division Advisory Committee, and also for the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Centre for Emerging Threats and Opportunities.

On describing his current situation, Ishmael reflected, “Once you’re alive, as my father said, there’s hope for a better day. You never know what the next corner might bring. I think that has been very much my life. Who would’ve known that I would live in the United States and have an education or write a book?”

His inspiration comes from his experience, and for the simple fact that he is alive today. Although writing his memoir was a difficult experience, as a human rights activist, Ishmael knows he has a bigger part to play in informing the world of child soldiers.

“What this book really came of is frustration. Most people (in the US) didn’t know Sierra Leone was a country. Even these days when I travel people look at my passport and say: ‘Where is that’? So for me, people are so far removed from what it is that how can you know the humanity of the people that are there,” Ishmael described.

“Also, when people learn about these places it is through the war, so their perception of it only becomes a violent country, and nothing more. So I really want this book to change that because I feel once you have people connect all of people’s humanity, they can’t turn away from the problems and then become more interested, exposing themselves to the world generally.

“For example, when people read this book and think of all the kids there, we cease to become just Africans, we are just human beings going through extremely difficult times because of the circumstances we are faced with. Also people think that could be my brother or my cousin, that could be me and so those walls collapse immediately.

“For me, I want to expose people to the war because once people are exposed to the war they get educated, they are informed and know how people live elsewhere and they care about it more.

Although there are theories today that explain the civil war in Sierra Leone being largely based on the struggle for mineral resources, specifically the diamond trade, Ishmael says, "The war started because of political corruption, but the diamonds later on fuelled its continuance. They played a large part in bringing in weapons into the country."

External factors such as the arms trade "do not contribute to starting wars, but definitely make wars continue on longer than they could without the arms and ammunition. Also because of the arms, more destruction to human life comes about and it is done at a larger scale and at a quicker pace. The unfortunate thing about this is that these arms dealers are not held accountable at all so they continue to exacerbate wars," he informed.

Even though in January 2002 the civil war was officially declared over, the unrest in Sierra Leone is far from over. "People should be empowered to rebuild their communities, their lives, and start living a decent life. Schools should be provided for young people and generally, the civil population in Sierra Leone needs a government that deeply cares for them and is interested in bringing about change by getting rid of corruption, and bringing about sustainable development for the people," concluded Ishmael.

Ishmael Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, has spent 24 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. He has travelled the world speaking on his experience and the situation of child soldiers in Africa.

Currently, it is estimated that over 300,000 children under the age of 18 are forced to be soldiers. Some never escape their cruel fate; but others, such as Ishmael Beah have survived. Their words, and the power of their existence, are weapons to wield against the inhumane and mindless battles of the knife.

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