

Hello and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English!

I'm Bob Doughty.

Today we have two reports from Africa.

We hear about claims by the human rights group Amnesty International that "education is under attack" in northern Nigeria.

And, we tell about how the government in Rwanda has returned thousands of child soldiers to civilian life. But at the same time, the United Nations says Rwandan children are being forced to fight with rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But first, we turn to attacks on Nigerian school buildings – with teachers and children inside.

The rights group Amnesty International says "education is under attack" in northern Nigeria. It says as many as 70 teachers and more than 100 students have been killed there since the beginning of 2012. Some parents say they are afraid to send their children to school. George Grow has the story from reporter Heather Murdock in Abuja.

In the past, schools in northern Nigeria were attacked at night. The school buildings burned to the ground while students and teachers were in their homes. But now, the attacks often take place in daylight. The attackers kill teachers and students before the buildings are destroyed.

Makmid Kamara is with Amnesty International. He says the attacks have turned deadly because teachers are special targets. School children and older students also suffer and die in the violence.

The attacks are usually blamed on the militant group Boko Haram. It is believed responsible for thousands of deaths since 2009. The group says it wants to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. It calls itself "The People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." But it is better known by the name Boko Haram, meaning "Western education is a sin."

In May, the Nigerian government declared emergency rule in much of northeastern Nigeria. It deployed thousands of troops to fight Boko Haram. The military usually reports success in battle. But attacks on schools continue.

Gunmen recently killed more than 40 people in student housing in the Nigerian state of Yobe. The attack took place not far from a secondary school where almost 30 students were killed in July.

Amnesty International's Makmid Kamara says the government is not doing enough to stop it.

"The Nigerian government has a duty and a responsibility to prevent these attacks by taking lawful and effective measures and we think those who are responsible should be held to account."

He says suspected Boko Haram members are also known to frighten teachers by standing with weapons outside classrooms.

Amnesty says as many as 80 percent of the students in northern Nigeria have stopped attending classes. More than 1,000 teachers have fled the area as gunmen warn parents to send their children only to Islamic schools.

Abdullahi Bego is the spokesperson for Yobe State Governor Ibrahim Gaidam. Mr. Bego says the military must increase security around schools. And he says teachers and parents must let children go to school. If they do not, he warns, they are giving control to criminals and terrorists who do not want children to become educated.

You are listening to As It Is, in VOA Learning English. I'm Bob Doughty.

We turn now to the issue of child soldiers in central Africa.

In the past 16 years, the government in Rwanda has returned about 3,000 child soldiers to civilian life. These efforts are continuing. But at the same time, the United Nations says the government has been helping a Congolese rebel group, the M23, train children in Rwanda as fighters. The UN says the rebels are sending the children to fight with M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo. June Simms has more on this report from VOA's Margaret Besheer in Kigali.

About the time their son Nizeymani learned to walk, his parents left Rwanda for the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo. The parents died there when he was four years old. Soldiers from a Rwandan Hutu group, the FDLR, kidnapped the boy from a refugee camp when he was 12 years old. Nizeyimani was taken to live with the rebels. He says life was very hard. And he says those who attempted to escape were caught and killed.

After a time, a relative helped Nizeyimani make his way to a camp of the United Nations peacekeeping group MONUSCO. The group works with the government of Rwanda to help disarm its citizens who fight in the eastern DRC.

Former FDLR fighters are first sent to the Mutobo demobilization camp, where they stay for three months. The camp is where Nizeyimani has started his return to civilian society.

Former child soldiers are then sent to a rehabilitation center where they meet with mental health experts and receive medical testing. The former soldiers begin studying again. And efforts are made to find their relatives.

But, sadly, that is not all of what is happening. Dee Brillenburg Wurth heads MONUSCO's child protection section in Kinshasa. While Rwanda is working to help its own children come home, she says the country is also systematically recruiting children to work for the M23.

MONUSCO cannot work outside of Congo. But Ms. Brillenburg Wurth says the group has evidence from witnesses that Rwanda is actively pressing children into service.

"We know from children -- and this is corroborated by other children and by adults -- that children are being recruited. For example, we had an example of a football coach, of a police officer. At the beginning they told us they had this system in place, \$5 for every child that was recruited."

She says 122 children were questioned. Of those, 37 were Rwandan. Some were recruited in their country. Others were recruited in Congo. Some thought they were being asked to join the Rwandan army. Others did not even know they were in the DRC.

Ms. Brillenburg Wurth says children were often taken from their villages. Many of the children started life as an M23 child carrying supplies from the Rwandan border.

Rwandan Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo, however, strongly denies that the country recruits children. She adds that once the crisis in the eastern Congo is settled and armed groups are removed, recruitment of child soldiers will end.

The United States has pressured Rwanda about pressing children into service. It recently blocked military aid to the Rwandan government over its recruitment of child soldiers. I'm June Simms.

And that's our program for today. I'm Bob Doughty.

Join us again for another As It Is from VOA Learning English. Be sure to stay with VOA for world news at the top of the hour, Universal Time.