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## From desperation to Dal

University T-shirt helped shape former child soldier's journey from the doptis

By CHRIS LAMBIE Staff Reporter  
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Former Ethiopian child soldier Elias Mebrate is interviewed at Dalhousie University in Halifax on Wednesday. (TIM KROCHAK / GIST)

Born in an Ethiopian prison, all Elias Mebrate knew by the age of 10 was how to clean the guards' guns.

By 14, he was learning to train his own rifle on the enemy.

"That was the only opportunity I had to survive," he said Wednesday in Halifax. "Instead of just sitting and dreaming of bread, it's better to go and fight and to get that bread."

After spending his first decade behind bars, guards released him on the streets of Bahr Dar, a city in northwest Ethiopia. But they kept his mother, a political prisoner. So he slept in a church and "borrowed" coins people dropped in front of a saint's statue.

Four years later, the homeless boy begged the Ethiopian army to let him enlist. He was told he was too young. "Then I asked them again and again."

Persistence paid off, and a week later he was issued a uniform. "At least I got clothes to cover myself, food."

Several times over the next four years, he fought soldiers from the Ethiopian People's Liberation Army who attacked camps where he was training. Mortar fire and rockets rained around him.

"Compared with Canadian children, I didn't see childhood at all. I've never played soccer outside on the field."

At 16, he ran away from the military and made his way to Kenya. After working as a security guard for an international hotel chain, he wound up in a refugee camp and was sent to Canada a decade later for resettlement.

Mr. Mebrate, now 35, is in the final year of a management degree program at Dalhousie University. His route to the institution was anything but conventional.

At the refugee camp, a Canadian minister gave him a bag of old clothing for Christmas. One of the donated T-shirts said Dalhousie University across the front.

"So I was wearing it but I didn't know what (it was)," he said. "After I came here, the first job I got was at the Purdy's Wharf towers."

He was clearing an office when he noticed a Dal diploma on the wall and realized the university was in Halifax. "I said, 'I am going to have one of these degrees before I die.'"

Mr. Mebrate applied as a mature student and was accepted on the condition of maintaining good grades.

He has an exam in corporate finance today but instead of studying on Wednesday, he participated in a Halifax workshop aimed at finding ways to end the use of children in war. The Child Soldier Initiative, which staged the event, hopes to have a small team working in Africa by next year.

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"The best thing is just to give them the opportunity to be engaged, either in sport or education," said Mr. Mebrate, who hopes to find a career with the United Nations refugee agency.

The UN estimates about 300,000 children are being forced to fight in wars around the world, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa.

"We could be talking about eight-year-olds," said Shelly Whitman, the deputy director of Dal's Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, who teaches a course on children and war.

Ken Eyre of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre put it bluntly. "They're cheap, they're easy to manipulate and if they break, you don't even need to fix them. You just get another one."

Mr. Eyre, a retired Canadian Forces major, said recruiters use drugs to lure children into fighting. In Sierra Leone, he said, child soldiers sniffed a mixture of gunpowder and cocaine while watching Rambo movies.

Mr. Eyre recalled encountering several child soldiers during a trip to Rwanda in late 1994, after the genocide where an estimated 500,000 people were killed over 100 days.

"I met a friend at an airport and I was telling her that I'd been stopped at a roadblock by these young children early in the morning and they had these Kalashnikov automatic rifles and they were drunk, and I admitted to her that I was scared," Mr. Eyre said.

"And she said to me: 'You should be scared. They'd kill you for a Fanta.'"

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COMMENTS (38)

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Hallfax wrote:

Inspirational story, I'm confused by this statement: "After working as a security guard for an international hotel chain, he wound up in a refugee camp and was sent to Canada a decade later for resettlement." How did that happen? What connections were made for this man to be sent to Canada. Who paid for this?

weavary wrote:

Wow! What a phenomenal person! This is a story of perseverance in the face of tremendous adversity, and it's people like Mr. Mebrate who we need to welcome here as immigrants. I hope he stays in Halifax and would love to work with him some day. Talk about determination...

wildrose wrote:

Mr Elias Mebrate, if I could hug you I would and wish you the best. I can't even begin to imagine the atrocities you have witnessed and those poor innocent children. My god, they are so young. They have never known the joys of childhood, of being able to play with friends. This story brought tears to my eyes.

oiseau wrote:

Congratulations to Mr. Mebrate. What an incredible story. What incredible courage on his part.

oldvalleygirl wrote:

Congratulations. Fine story. Glad to see some good news for a change and how someones persistence can pay off. All the best!!!

longlenny wrote:

Great story L&Mble!

LIFE SUCKS wrote: