

Laudatory speech for Junior Nzita Speaker: Renke Brahms

Dear Ladies and Gentleman, and in particular, dear Mr Junior Nzita,



today, the *schwelle* Foundation would like to honour Mr Junior Nzita by presenting him with the Bremen Peace Award. It is a great pleasure and honour for me to explain the reasons for this choice.

I have to admit that this was no easy task although it is indeed of the utmost importance to me. Which words could tell in just a few minutes the story of Junior Nzita's life, which words are worthy of his courage and commitment? They can only ever be allusions – but they are sufficient to make it clear to everyone that he more than deserves this peace award.

Let me start at the beginning. Junior Nzita was born in 1984 in Kiondo, a town on the eastern border of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he grew up. He was 12 years old when, in 1996, the Congolese Liberation Army kidnapped him and his fellow classmates from their boarding school. For ten years, he was forced to live the life of a child soldier until he was demobilized in 2006.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the second largest African state and is more than six times bigger than Germany. The rule of the Belgian King Leopold II was one of the most brutal colonial regimes. After independence in 1960 and the subsequent years of domestic conflict, Mobutu Sese Seko governed the country as a dictator. In 1997, Mobutu was overthrown by the rebel leader Laurent- Desire Kabila. The change of power was followed by a further civil war, also known as the African World War because of the involvement of a significant number of African states. Although a peace treaty was signed in 2002, there is still fighting today in the east of the country.

Rebels and government troops used approximately 30,000 child soldiers during the fighting in the Congo. In 2015, this number was merely estimated to be 3500.

One of them is Junior Nzita. He was mercilessly subjected to brutal command structures and learned only violence. Child soldiers are forced to kill their families, relatives and friends as a way of severing all ties to their previous lives. A 3000 km march and having to kill in order to survive: these were the experiences of Junior Nzita. In his lectures and reports, he has often talked about the „de-humanisation“ of this time. Every sense of sympathy for other people was systematically driven out.

What is special about the story of Junior Nzita is not the fact that he was demobilised in 2006, but that he has transformed this time and his experiences into a remarkable strength and a remarkable commitment. He was able to finish his school education and obtain his Higher School Certificate. In 2011, he founded the organisation “Paix pour l'enfance, which campaigns for war orphans and former child soldiers. Moreover, as a voluntary UN ambassador within the

framework of the campaign “Children not soldiers”, he campaigns for a worldwide ban on the recruitment of child soldiers.

Meanwhile, “Paix pour l’enfance cares for 140 children and youths, as well as over 100 war widows, who live in simple houses. Access to school education helps to keep young people in the country. The work so far has mainly been funded by the sale of his book, which has been published in English with the title „If my life as a child soldier could be told“.

The traumatic events experienced during the years spent as a child soldier are the reason why many former child soldiers later fail in life. His own experiences and work, together with the Swiss branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, have given rise to the project “Trauma Healing and Creative Coalition”.

As the situation in the Congo became increasingly dangerous for Junior Nzita, he sought asylum in Canada - and it was granted. Today, he travels to many countries to tell his story and, in doing so, moves many people - in particular many school pupils. He also tells that he has found strength in his faith, and especially through those who have accepted him, accompanied him and supported him. He has also told his story at events here in Bremen, and is doing so again this week, even after the award ceremony today. He talks in schools, communities and to interested parties in other parts of Germany.

When we honour Junior Nzita this evening by presenting the Threshold Foundation Peace Award, we honour his life, his story, his remarkable strength and his commitment. At the same time, it is also a warning to us all and to our commitment. Junior Nzita says: “We were fighting with your weapons”. Exporting small arms to regions in Africa exacerbates the conflicts; they are actually today’s weapons of mass destruction. We must therefore brand the export of these weapons to the region as a scandal and campaign for a restrictive export policy in these countries.

Thus, with the award we present today, we honour the story of Junior Nzita’s life and his commitment.

Renke Brahms

