**TNA FO 10/730/66557**

**Vice-Consul Bannister to Pickersgill**

**24 January 1894**

COPY.

Vice- Consul Bannister to Consul Pickersgill.

British Vice-Consulate,

Boma,

January 24, 1894.

Sir,

I have the honour to transmit the following for your information with a view that such steps may be taken as to prevent a continuance of the practice herein complained of.

It is the custom of the Authorities of the Independent State of the Congo to employ agents in Antwerp and elsewhere to undertake the recruiting of men and boys in British Colonies for service as soldiers. These agents employ sub-agents at Sierra Leone, Elmina, Accra and Lagos. It is understood that these agents receive so much per head for every person sent to the Congo. They do not hesitate to send boys of fourteen years of age.

The people are engaged before a District Commissioner for two or three years service. They generally receive an advance of two months pay, which ranges from 50/- per month for headmen down to 20/- per month for boys. Sometimes it is stipulated in the agreement that good and sufficient food will be provided. In other cases 3d per day is put down as subsistence money. Everything seems regular: the men being engaged as “labourers”, and being described as such in the body of the agreement; and they leave their homes fully persuaded that they are to be employed as labourers.

Here comes the whole trouble. As soon as the men arrive at Boma, officers of the State proceed on board the steamer; the men are bundled ashore, and in a few days time are put into uniform, when they realise, for the first time, that they are soldiers and not labourers.

I have had hundreds of these poor fellows at the consulate complaining bitterly. One batch of 146 Elminas came by the Wiermann steamer “Gretchen Bohlen” from Elmina on September 4 last, and as their papers showed they were engaged as labourers for the State, they were forced on shore. They one and all averred that they were engaged to work on the railway, and said they would prefer to be shot rather than go ashore at Boma. I ultimately got the Governor to allow them to go to Matadi and work on the railway.

Since then, 64 Elminas arrived by the Woermann steamer “Lulu Bohlen”, in November. They absolutely refused to quit the Consulate until I procured the Governor's promise in writing that they should be employed as labourers and not as soldiers.

They all say the same thing; “If we want to be soldiers we can join the British regiments on the coast in our own colonies, where we should be better fed, housed and clothed than the Congo people can do for us.”

I have stated two instances where my interference has, so far, prevented men being made soldiers…

[end of transcript]