

October 6, 2005

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## Sri Lanka: Recruitment of Child Combatants Remains a Threat

As political problems persist in Sri Lanka, recruitment of child combatants by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is rising.

In the wake of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, there was a brief interlude of harmony as Sinhalese and Tamils worked together to rescue survivors of the tsunami and rebuild damaged coastal areas. Fears that the LTTE might capitalize on the tragedy by forcibly recruiting orphans of the tsunami did not come to pass and while recruitment of child combatants did not end, it remained low. In recent months, however, recruitment has increased, and children and adolescents remain vulnerable to forced conscription.

The eastern coastal district of Batticaloa, which was hard hit by the tsunami, is an area of political tension and LTTE child recruitment remains a constant threat. The figures of UNICEF, which monitors the child recruitment situation nationally, show that recruitment in July was at the highest level since before the tsunami, with 135 under-age combatants known to have been recruited. A local agency staff member told RI, "Recruiting is going on in the tsunami shelters in the un-cleared [LTTE-controlled] areas. At temple festivals, we see the LTTE openly trying to recruit children. They tell them to 'Come and see a video program' and sometimes they forcibly abduct them." International humanitarian agencies have been able to provide a measure of protection for children by increasing their presence in areas where recruitment is rife, such as temple festivals.

In 2004, Colonel Karuna led a faction that separated from the LTTE in Batticaloa and Ampara. The Karuna faction unilaterally demobilized almost 2,000 child combatants, but without the assistance of a formal demobilization process. The number of former combatants exceeded the capacity of the child protection agencies in the east. Further, the split itself has led to an increase in daily violence in the east, with repeated attacks and assassinations, making children more vulnerable to violence and possible re-recruitment.

While UNICEF and child protection agencies were previously able to intervene when parents reported suspected recruitment of their children, in the current

environment people are becoming increasingly reluctant to report incidents to humanitarian agencies. RI interviewed teachers and school officials who acknowledged that people are afraid to become too involved in working with child combatants. "Aiding and assisting runaways from the LTTE could put our staff at risk. We have to be careful." Another school official acknowledged, "Many are reluctant to identify as former combatants now because that could identify them as candidates to be re-recruited." Additionally, as no one knows who supports which LTTE faction, even acknowledging that one is a former combatant could mean a risk of retaliatory violence by the other faction.

The LTTE maintains that it is complying with its international commitments, first made in April 2003 in the Action Plan for Children Affected by War, to eliminate its recruitment of child soldiers. The LTTE spokesperson interviewed by RI was critical of the international aid agencies for failing to provide adequate livelihood and psycho-social activities for the 5,000 children that he claims have been demobilized. Further, he insisted that adolescents continued to volunteer due to lack of economic opportunity in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

In much of the LTTE controlled areas there is an all-pervasive environment of Tamil nationalism and political control in which many families feel an obligation to give at least one child to the LTTE. Many former combatants maintain that they volunteered. In the context of the total control exercised by the LTTE at the community level, the act is often not truly voluntary. It is undeniable, however, that the war has in effect created two countries: the south, with its relative wealth and economic opportunity, and the north, where the landscape is harsh and there is little economic investment. Thus, the LTTE culture of martyrdom and sacrifice, coupled with the lack of economic opportunity, suggests that physical intimidation and force are not always necessary to convince young adolescents to join the LTTE.

While prevention of child recruitment is an essential element to working with children affected by the conflict, it is also important to address simultaneously the reintegration of former combatants back into society. Many programs focus on vocational training and education. These are crucial elements to a successful reintegration but there are psycho-social and cultural issues that may also arise. Former combatants, particularly young adolescents, are often traumatized upon their release from the military. An educator for a program that works with former combatants explained, "Their lifestyles have completely changed because of the fighting. They now have to learn a new way of life. The [former combatants] don't act like the others. They can get angry and very aggressive. We have to take special care for them – sometimes we need to counsel them to help them understand what they went through."

The split in Batticaloa has made it increasingly difficult to identify former combatants and assist them. "It is dangerous to keep all the ex-combatants together. It was a challenge to find homes to board ex-combatants because of the fears of the Karuna faction and the peace process breaking down," said a director of a vocational training program. "Since the Karuna faction is in Batticaloa, there are lots of ex-combatants. Some want to rejoin the LTTE and some don't. The ex-combatants in the classrooms are also impacted by this factionalism. They can't talk about their experiences because they don't know what the others support. It could put them at risk."

To ensure that former combatants' needs are not ignored, many child protection agencies have attempted to implement community-based programs that work with all children affected by the conflict. This effort must be supported and increased. "An unfortunate side effect of paying increased attention to former combatants is that they might inadvertently benefit from the attention," acknowledged one group in Sri Lanka. "We don't want to see them rewarded for joining the LTTE. It might give them an incentive to join so they can benefit from leaving." As RI has seen in the controversial decision to pay cash to former child combatants in Liberia, specialized attention can actually put former child combatants at risk. It can provide an incentive for families to allow recruitment and it can encourage the propaganda that serving with the LTTE will benefit you and your family.

The dilemma is that some former child combatants, especially females, may benefit from special attention. While male former combatants can easily physically pass as civilians, female former combatants are physically branded as different due to the requirement that female combatants in the LTTE cut their hair. The particular philosophy of gender neutral training and treatment within the LTTE has led to many conflicting notions in the international community around the vulnerability of female combatants. "Many of the girls

come out of the LTTE and are qualified in non-traditional skills like motor mechanics. They return to their communities and can't use their skills. How can we help the girls use their skills in a productive way?" asked a child protection officer.

While female combatants do not face the stigma of sexual abuse that those in African armed forces must confront, there are definite gender differences in the ways that former combatants reintegrate into society. A teacher told RI, "The girls are aggressive but also shy. Since their hair is cut they are shy. They don't want to go out or travel – they want be hidden until their hair grows and they can blend in." Many female combatants initially feel stigmatized by their physical appearance and do not wish to further call attention to themselves by acknowledging or using the non-traditional skills that they may have developed in the LTTE. However, this may make them further vulnerable and difficult to reach, as they then feel unable to capitalize on the positive aspects of their time in the LTTE. Rather than encouraging these young women to feel like victims, they must instead be allowed to feel as if they can become positive additions to society.

## REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- The LTTE respect their international commitments and cease their recruitment of child soldiers;
- Donors address the imbalance in international assistance to the north and east of the country compared to the south, and increase investment in long-term development programs in conflict-affected regions;
- International agencies increase their presence in areas where children are impacted by conflict;
- Donors and agencies that provide programming for children impacted by the tsunami in the north and east expand programs to include children, especially adolescents, impacted by the conflict;
- UNICEF and local and international child protection agencies review their programs to ensure that the particular needs of female combatants are addressed;
- Donors fund non-traditional skill training to women in Sri Lanka, both those who are former combatants and those impacted by the tsunami.

*Sarah Martin and Joel Charny recently returned from a three-week humanitarian assessment mission to Sri Lanka.*