

DIAC-IN-CONFIDENCE

FOCUS BRIEF

SRI LANKA

Issue: Child Soldiers

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1 Glossary of Abbreviations

EPDP	Eelam People's Demorcratic Party
GSL	Government of Sri Lanka
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LTTE	Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
SLA	Sri Lankan Army
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (Tamil People's Liberation Front)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

2 Purpose

This Focus Brief provides an overview of the use of child soldiers by the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) and the 'Karuna group' in Sri Lanka during the civil war. The paper addresses matters such as forced recruitment and service, and the issues facing former child soldiers since the conclusion of fighting in May 2009.

3 Executive Summary

The LTTE has consistently recruited and used children in armed combat throughout the 26 year civil war in Sri Lanka. Many children have been taken forcefully from their families by the LTTE – some as young as 12. Others have joined ranks voluntarily, responding to LTTE propaganda, or because of socio-economic reasons. Once recruited, children have undertaken intensive 'basic' training, and then received specialised training to prepare them for various roles within the LTTE – medics, intelligence officers, infantry soldiers and suicide bombers. Those who attempted to escape were often beaten in front of their group, or sometimes shot. At the conclusion of the civil war, the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, announced that children who were forced to take arms with the LTTE would not be prosecuted; instead, those who surrendered to the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) have been housed in guarded 'rehabilitation' centres. Children are taught trade skills and continue their education at these centres, which prepares them for future employment and reintegration to society. However, not all children have surrendered, and according to UNICEF children still remain in ranks of rebel groups within Sri Lanka.

4 Recruitment

4.1 Abductions

During the years of conflict, the LTTE used intimidation and threats to pressure Tamil families in the North and East to provide their sons and daughters for military service, or forcibly took children from their homes at night or whilst they walked in the street¹. During the conflict the LTTE demanded that families provide one child for service. If

¹ 'Tamil Tigers Forcibly Recruit Child Soldiers', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CX107200

parents resisted, the child was usually taken by force. Nor did provision of one child necessarily protect other siblings from recruitment into the LTTE².

From 2003 to the end of 2008, UNICEF recorded more than 6,000 cases of child recruitment by the rebels but the number is thought to have soared in the final months of the war³. According to reports, on numerous occasions between January to May 2009, the LTTE took both male and female children, some as young as 12, to join their cadres⁴. Children were reportedly dragged from their homes by LTTE members, 'kicking and screaming', and forced to join the ranks of the rebel group⁵. Family members would face retribution from the LTTE if they protested⁶.

In March 2009, multiple sources reported that the LTTE rounded up hundreds of youth who were taking refuge in a church from army shelling, and loaded them onto buses destined for training camps⁷. Another report from April 2009 details the forced recruitment of a 17 year-old-girl by LTTE police and cadres. Her mother was beaten with sticks when she argued with them, and the girl was taken⁸.

4.2 Voluntary recruitment, LTTE campaigns

Not all recruitment of child soldiers during the conflict was forced. Tamil children were exposed to war propaganda produced by the LTTE throughout the North and East, including special events to honour LTTE soldiers, parades of cadres, and speeches and videos - particularly in schools. Children who witnessed or suffered abuse at the hands of the Sri Lankan government felt compelled to join the LTTE⁹, and some have expressed an allegiance to the late leader of the LTTE, Prabhakaran¹⁰.

² 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

³ 'Child soldiers in Sri Lanka: Retraining Tiger cubs', *The Economist*, 16 July 2009, CX230510

⁴ 'Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka', *US Department of State*, 2009, CISLIB 17965

⁵ 'Child soldiers fight LTTE ghosts', *The Times of India*, 24 July 2009, CX231256

⁶ 'Dark tales of Tamil ex-child soldiers', *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 27 June 2009, CX228981

⁷ 'Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka', *US Department of State*, 2009, CISLIB 17965

⁸ 'Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka', *US Department of State*, 2009, CISLIB 17965

⁹ 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

¹⁰ 'Dark tales of Tamil ex-child soldiers', *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 27 June 2009, CX228981

The LTTE also ran campaigns to recruit children. In April 2004, the LTTE attacked the Eastern Karuna forces. The Karuna militants, including approximately 2000 child soldiers disbanded. The Vanni LTTE began an intensive campaign to re-recruit Karuna's former forces, including the children:

The Vanni forces have gone from house to house, organized village meetings, sent children letters and made announcements from motorized vehicles to demand that the former child soldiers return.¹¹

4.3 Disadvantaged and poor children

Socio economic factors also played a part in recruitment. The LTTE have claimed that children joined voluntarily due to poverty, lack of educational opportunities or because their parents have died¹².

A report in *The National* describes the effectiveness of the infamous 'Leopard's Brigade' – a brigade drawn mainly from LTTE run orphanages. The article reports that many members of this brigade saw Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, as a father figure, and accepted orders unconditionally¹³.

Ganeshalingam Thayalan's parents died when he was two years old, and he describes the rebel orphanage in Kilinochchi that he grew up in:

Every school holiday, he was trained in the use of weapons, psychological warfare, combat skills, and other military activity. After his ordinary-level exams he was taught to be a human bomb. The Tigers showed him how to wear and activate a suicide jacket. It was a compulsory lesson: other friends from Sencholai also had to learn it.

The LTTE subsequently deployed Thayalan in Vavuniya and ordered him to continue studying until they found him a target. He was living with a friend when, acting on a tip-off, the police arrested him. Would he have

¹¹ 'Tamil Tigers Forcibly Recruit Child Soldiers', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CX107200

¹² 'Tamil Tigers Forcibly Recruit Child Soldiers', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CX107200

¹³ 'Tamil Tigers' child conscripts bid farewell to arms', *The National*, 4 June 2009, CX237406

exploded himself when told to? Yes, he says, because the Tigers were watching. If he had disobeyed, they would have killed him anyway.¹⁴

4.4 Karuna Faction and government complicity

The Karuna faction that broke from the LTTE in March 2004 has been found to have forcibly recruited children in government controlled areas in the East, particularly Batticaloa¹⁵, and operated with the assistance of government security forces:

Throughout 2006, Karuna forces abducted boys and young men from their homes, work places, temples, playgrounds, public roads, camps for the internally displaced, and even a wedding. While the group primarily targeted males between 15 and 30, the youngest confirmed abduction was of an 11-year-old boy. In only two known cases did the Karuna group abduct a girl. It generally targeted poor families, and often those who had already had a child recruited by the LTTE¹⁶.

In November 2006 a UN special advisor on children and armed conflict “found strong and credible evidence that certain elements of the government security forces are supporting and sometimes participating in the abductions and forced recruitment of children by the Karuna faction”¹⁷.

The areas where [the abductions] have taken place are firmly under government control, with myriad military and police checkpoints and security force camps. No armed group could engage in such large-scale abductions, and then hold and train the abductees for combat in established camps, without government knowledge and at least tacit support¹⁸.

¹⁴ ‘Child soldiers in Sri Lanka: Retraining Tiger cubs’, *The Economist*, 16 July 2009, CX230510

¹⁵ ‘Statement from the Special Advisor on children and armed conflict’, *United Nations press release*, 13 November 2006, CX236278

¹⁶ ‘Complicit in crime - State collusion in abductions and child recruitment by the Karuna - Summary’, *Human Rights Watch*, 24 January 2007, CX169605

¹⁷ ‘Statement from the Special Advisor on children and armed conflict’, *United Nations press release*, 13 November 2006, CX236278

¹⁸ ‘Complicit in Crime: State Collusion in Abductions and Child Recruitment by the Karuna Group’, *Human Rights Watch*, January 2007, CISLIB 15126

The Sri Lankan Government has been repeatedly condemned for tolerating the aiding and abetting by its security forces of child recruitment by the Karuna group¹⁹. After pressure from several human rights organisations in 2007, the government initiated an investigation into elements of the armed forces suspected of complicity in the forced recruitment of children by the TMVP²⁰. As at July 2009, the investigation remained incomplete.

5 Training and Roles within the LTTE

5.1 Training camps

According to a Human Rights Watch report former child soldiers undertook basic training in LTTE camps which usually lasted 4 to 7 months, including physical exercise, weapons training, and military strategy. They were required to wake at very early hours of the morning to begin exercises, and survived on little food and water, a tactic that was used to instil endurance in the young recruits. Children also learned war tactics – how to plan and attack enemy camps and dig bunkers. Children as young as 12 or 13 were required to undertake the same training as the older recruits²¹, and were reportedly assaulted when they asked for rests or could not train because of illness²².

Nirmala, a former child soldier, describes the punishment for children who attempted to escape the training camps:

Lots of people tried to escape. But if you get caught, they take you back and beat you. Some children die. If you do it twice, they shoot you. In my wing, if someone escaped, the whole group was lined up to watch them get beaten. I saw it happen, and know of cases from other groups. If the person dies, they don't tell you, but we know it happens²³.

¹⁹ 'Child Soldiers Global Report Sri Lanka 2008', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 20 May 2008, CX222328

²⁰ 'End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 28 July 2009, CX230840

²¹ 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

²² 'A former child soldier speaks out', *World Press*, April 2004, CX233523

²³ 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

5.2 *Roles within the LTTE*

Children would assume specific roles within the LTTE – decided by their superior officer according to the child's strengths²⁴. The children would then receive specialised training to prepare them for these roles:

Further training can include combat operations, use of specific weapons systems (including landmines, bombs, or heavy weapons), security (including providing personal security for senior cadres such as Karuna), intelligence, or non-military skills, including first aid or administration. Children with little education are frequently assigned to combat units, while children with more years of schooling may be more likely to be trained in medicine, intelligence, or administration.²⁵

Sometimes the LTTE sent children to the front line to fight the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). Major-General Jagath Dias of the Army's 57th Division was quoted saying that his men had been fighting girls as young as 11:

It's very difficult [to shoot at children] but when someone has a weapon and is firing it at you, it doesn't matter what age, you have to shoot.²⁶

6 **Fate of the child soldier post conflict**

6.1 *Children not released*

According to UNICEF, of the 7 000 registered cases of forced recruitment of child soldiers in Sri Lanka during the period 2002 to 2008, approximately 1 400 of these recruits were unaccounted for at June 2009, though many would be over the age of 18 now²⁷.

UNICEF has also reported that, as at 31 May 2009, 107 people recruited as child soldiers were still within the ranks of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP),

²⁴ 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

²⁵ 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, 11 November 2004, CISLIB 14218

²⁶ 'Issues Concerning Protection of Children Post Armed Conflict', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, July 2009, CISLIB 17737

²⁷ "Tamil Tigers' child conscripts bid farewell to arms", *The National*, 4 June 2009, CX237406

30 of whom are under the age of 18, and 77 who are now adults, but were underage at the time they were recruited. The TMVP rejects this allegation, claiming ‘other groups’ operating in the East may have recruited these children²⁸.

6.2 Prosecution

At the conclusion of the civil war in Sri Lanka in May 2009, President Rajapaksa announced that child soldiers recruited by the LTTE during the time of conflict would not be prosecuted for their crimes.

“Our hearts are not vicious. We will not prosecute children who are 12, 13 and 14 years of age and were forced to take up arms. We need to integrate them into society after rehabilitation²⁹.”

The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) has consistently indicated in its public statements that it views child soldiers as victims rather than perpetrators. In collaboration with UNICEF, the GSL has established centres for former child soldiers, where they receive vocational and other training opportunities³⁰.

6.3 Rehabilitation camps

According to the Sri Lankan Government, approximately 11 000 former child soldiers who surrendered after the civil war are under state protection within rehabilitation centres. There are currently 14 rehabilitation centres operating across the country, and another 7 are under development³¹.

The Bureau of the Commissioner-General of Rehabilitation administers the Protection and Rehabilitation Centre in Ambepussa, with the assistance of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). This centre, and others like it in the North,

²⁸ ‘Sri Lankan Tamil party denies UN charges of holding child soldiers’, *Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka)*, 24 July 2009, CX230588

²⁹ ‘Sri Lanka not to prosecute child LTTE soldiers: Rajapaksa’, *Times of India*, 20 July 2009, CX236344

³⁰ ‘Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka’, *US Department of State*, 2009, CISLIB 17965

³¹ ‘Rehabilitation of LTTE child soldiers accelerated’, *Sri Lanka: Government of*, 10 November 2009, CX236255

accommodates approximately 300 children and youths³² who were identified as child soldiers, with the aim to help them turn their lives around and become civilians³³.

“The rehabilitation centre provides children and adults with vocational training, and education in maths, computer science and languages, including Sinhalese, the tongue of the majority Sinhala Buddhists they had once been coached to kill. There are cultural and sporting events and occasional field trips. But the children are chaperoned on all excursions and, while parents and relatives may visit, the centre is not open to outsiders³⁴.”

These former child soldiers are taught a range skills like cooking, plumbing, and electrical works with the aim to make them employable³⁵. A group of 168 former LTTE child soldiers were recently transported to Colombo to continue their studies at a Hindu college as part of their rehabilitation program³⁶.

By court order, children are to be held for 12 months in these guarded rehabilitation camps. Earlier release may be permitted after a review that takes place every 3 months³⁷. However, some children are not confident to re-integrate into society after their rehabilitation, as they fear they will be targeted by rival armed Tamil groups³⁸.

Concerns have been raised regarding the current framework that the government has established to support children leaving armed groups. These include the inadequate access that the children have to their families, the incomplete separation of children from adult former child soldiers, and the security at the centres³⁹.

³² ‘Dark tales of Tamil ex-child soldiers’, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 27 June 2009, CX228981

³³ ‘Child soldiers in Sri Lanka: Retraining Tiger cubs’, *The Economist*, 16 July 2009, CX230510

³⁴ ‘Child soldiers in Sri Lanka: Retraining Tiger cubs’, *The Economist*, 16 July 2009, CX230510

³⁵ ‘Dark tales of Tamil ex-child soldiers’, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 30 June 2009, CX228981

³⁶ ‘Former LTTE child soldiers reach Sri Lanka capital to attend school’, *Colombo Page*, 21 October 2009, CX235371

³⁷ ‘Child soldiers fight LTTE ghosts’, *The Times of India*, 24 July 2009, CX231256

³⁸ ‘Dark tales of Tamil ex-child soldiers’, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 27 June 2009, CX228981

³⁹ ‘End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses’, *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 28 July 2009, CX230840

6.4 Disappearances from IDP camps

Whilst the highly publicised rehabilitation camps may provide some protection for a number of former child soldiers, disappearances of predominately male Tamil youths from internal displacement camps continue to be reported. Human rights activists, Sunila Abeysekara, stated that credible reports had been received of regular abductions in IDP camps, claiming 20 to 30 youth were disappearing daily⁴⁰. According to a report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in July 2009:

In one case in June 2009, a group of four or five girls and boys from a camp in Menik Farm were reportedly detained and questioned by members of the Sri Lankan military. One of the girls admitted that she had been with the LTTE for two days. The children were subsequently taken away and there has been no news of them since⁴¹.

Tamilnet recently published a similar report, stating that on two separate occasions, Tamil boys and girls, including teenagers, living in the Cheddiku'lam IDP camp were called by name over the announcement system. They were taken away in SLA vehicles, and their families have lost all contact with them⁴².

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers report also refers to the vulnerability of ex-child soldiers held in IDP camps to paramilitary groups:

Unverified reports indicate that young boys in rehabilitation centres in Vavuniya have been forced to join pro-government armed groups including the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and Tamil People's Liberation Front (TMVP). They are now reportedly collecting protection money from merchants and traders in Vavuniya town. There are also sporadic reports of child recruitment in Batticaloa district by the TMVP and cadres loyal to the former TMVP leader, V. Muralitharan, known as Karuna.⁴³

⁴⁰ 'Youth disappear from IDP camps', *BBC Sinhala*, 15 June 2009, CX237331

⁴¹ 'End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 28 July 2009, CX230840

⁴² 'SLA abductions of Tamil youth continue unabated in camps', *Tamilnet*, 30 November 2009, CX237029

⁴³ 'End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 28 July 2009, CX230840

Armed groups such as the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) apparently have unhindered access to IDP camps, with support of the security forces⁴⁴. It is reported that children have been abducted from camps, usually at night, in relation to their alleged links with the LTTE or for ransom money⁴⁵.

6.5 Social stigma

Before the military defeat of the LTTE, hundreds of child soldiers were recruited into their ranks in contravention of international law. Some joined voluntarily, others were recruited by force. A World Press report in April 2004 summarised the difficulties faced by those who managed to escape:

As a runaway, she now lives in fear of her life and has no education, no job, and no prospects for the future⁴⁶.

For these people, return to daily life was precarious and fraught with concerns of ridicule.

More recently, following the military demise of the LTTE and the development of centres to rehabilitate some 11 000 former child soldiers⁴⁷, signs of other options are emerging. However, Hiranthi Wijemanne, a consultant to the Commissioner-General of Rehabilitation has reportedly said that most of the inmates want to leave the country after rehabilitation. Social stigma will not permit them to return to their own villages or to mingle with the population in the Sinhala-dominated south. More than 50 reformed fighters have already gone abroad⁴⁸.

Some former child soldiers are being presented with opportunities, coordinated by the Government of Sri Lanka, to travel to Malaysia or the Middle East for employment,

⁴⁴ 'End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, 28 July 2009, CX230840. 'Issues Concerning Protection of Children Post Armed Conflict', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, July 2009, CISLIB 17737

⁴⁵ 'Issues Concerning Protection of Children Post Armed Conflict', *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, July 2009, CISLIB 17737

⁴⁶ 'A former child soldier speaks out', *World Press*, April 2004, CX233523

⁴⁷ 'Rehabilitation of LTTE child soldiers accelerated', *Sri Lanka: Government of*, 10 November 2009, CX236255

⁴⁸ 'Child soldiers in Sri Lanka: Retraining Tiger cubs', *The Economist*, 16 July 2009, CX230510

utilising the training in construction that they received at rehabilitation centres⁴⁹, though the longer term planning and future directions for this program are not clear at this time.

⁴⁹ 'Malaysian jobs for reformed LTTE youth', *Daily News*, 9 September 2009, CX235609