



## **Thailand: Preventing children's association with village defence militias in southern Thailand**

**Bangkok, 3 March 2011**

Children under the age of 18 are exposed to significant risks due to their association with *Chor Ror Bor* (village defence volunteers), the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and the Justice for Peace Foundation (JPF) said today. At the Thailand launch of their new report, '*Priority to protect: Preventing children's association with village defence militias in southern Thailand,*' the Coalition and JPF urged the Thai government to prioritize the protection of children in the south.

*Chor Ror Bor*, one of the government-established village defence militias, is a national institution, but particularly prevalent in southern Thailand, where they form a part of the government's counter-insurgency efforts against armed groups. Children's contact with weapons, including through training and informal association with *Chor Ror Bor*, poses significant risks to their physical safety and wellbeing. It also exposes them to more serious injuries, including the risk of attacks by armed groups or their involvement in military operations against armed groups, the two organizations said today.

The Coalition and JPF base their report on mid-2010 field research in 19 villages in southern Thailand. In over 65 per cent (13) of the villages visited, the Coalition and JPF found that children were formal members of the village *Chor Ror Bor* unit or, if not actual members, were performing some or all of the duties associated with membership.

Members of the *Chor Ror Bor* described their role as protecting the village against a range of threats including attacks by armed groups. They patrol the village, man checkpoints, and guard sites vulnerable to attack. They may also be required to assist the local police or the military to identify suspects, including suspected members of armed groups, and on occasion are required to participate in military operations in the surrounding area.

*Chor Ror Bor* members interviewed by the Coalition and JPF explained that several members under the age of 18 had attended training on weapons handling and use. It also appeared to be common for *Chor Ror Bor* members to provide unofficial training, including firearms training, to children who were informally associated with the units. More generally there appeared to be a high level of familiarity with firearms among children in the villages visited by the two organizations.

"The government has been willing to discuss issues of concern raised by us in the report and has taken some steps to prevent formal association of children with the *Chor Ror Bor*, including issuing directives to local officials to ensure that under-18s are not recruited," said Angkhana Neelapaichit, chairperson Justice for Peace Foundation. "However, the lack of clear prohibition in law, the incomplete implementation of existing policy and the absence of effective oversight and accountability mechanisms, result in a situation where children may still enlist or otherwise provide support to their local *Chor Ror Bor* unit," she added.

"The problem of children's association with the *Chor Ror Bor* stems from the government's lack of attention to the many challenges of protecting children from the human rights abuses related to armed violence in southern Thailand. Children have suffered greatly because of the armed

violence in the south and a more comprehensive strategy is needed to protect them,” the Coalition’s Director Dr Victoria Forbes Adam said.

In their report, the two organizations also raise concerns relating to the administrative detention of children suspected of association with armed opposition groups as well as the urgent need for key measures to protect children from involvement in armed activities and related abuses. If implemented these measures would significantly strengthen child protection. They would also contribute to ensuring that Thailand’s obligations under international human rights law are upheld. The Coalition and JPF call on the government of Thailand to:

- Prohibit and explicitly criminalize the recruitment and use in hostilities of children under 18 years by the armed forces, paramilitaries, village defence militias and any other armed groups;
- Review and amend the 2008 Ministerial Regulation on *Chor Ror Bor* to explicitly prohibit recruitment of under-18s into the *Chor Ror Bor* as well as the informal association of children with the *Chor Ror Bor*;
- Ensure that children are not criminalized solely for having being recruited or used by armed groups and ensure that children are not administratively detained under Martial Law or the Emergency Decree in southern Thailand.
- Establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that measures and policies to protect children from involvement with all armed forces or groups are implemented effectively.

## **Background**

Thailand has a long history of using paramilitaries and village defence militias for policing and counter-insurgency purposes. The most significant expansion of these groups in recent years has been seen in southern Thailand, where they have formed a key element of the military strategy against armed groups in the region since 2002. Four separate paramilitary or village defence militias operate in southern Thailand: the military-established *Thahan Pran* (Rangers); the provincial-level, Ministry of Interior-established *Or Sor* (Volunteer Defence Corps); the village-level *Chor Ror Bor* (Village Defence Volunteers), also under the control of the Ministry of Interior; and the *Or Ror Bor* (Village Protection Volunteers) established under the Royal Aide-de-Camp department in 2005 to protect Buddhist villages.

The *Chor Ror Bor* were established in 1985 as the successor to the Village Security Teams set up in the late 1960s by the interior minister to defend villagers against communist insurgents. Although operational in southern Thailand for decades, the role of *Chor Ror Bor* in providing village-level security in the face of mounting attacks by armed groups was significantly increased after 2004. By 2005 there was a *Chor Ror Bor* unit in almost all of the approximately 1,500 villages in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Narthiwat, Yala) with a total of some 47,000 volunteer members, with an expectation that numbers would increase further.

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