



COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Sri Lanka: End of conflict brings no respite to children from human rights abuses

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(London) - Despite the end of hostilities, children in Sri Lanka continue to be at risk of forced recruitment, arbitrary detention and other human rights abuses, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (Coalition) said today. In a new briefing to the Security Council Working Group (Working Group) on Children and Armed Conflict, the Coalition urged the Sri Lankan authorities to act immediately to protect conflict-affected children.

Children are among dozens of people who have been detained by security forces in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Vavuniya, apparently for their alleged links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). 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 since.

“The families of children taken by the security forces from detention camps have no idea where they are -- if they are in detention, have been taken to rehabilitation centres or have disappeared” said the Director of the Coalition, Victoria Forbes Adam.

Given the background of large-scale disappearances in Sri Lanka, there are grave fears that some of the reported incidents of children and adults being removed from IDP camps may represent enforced disappearances.

“There are simple steps that can be taken to enhance the security of children in IDP camps including allowing unhindered access to independent human rights monitors and maintaining a centralized register of all persons in the camps. Families should also be informed of where their children have been taken and their access to them should be facilitated” said Victoria Forbes Adam.

The Coalition has received reports of continued abductions for ransom and forced recruitment of children by pro-government armed 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.

“Armed groups are clearly operating with the support of the security forces who are allowing them access to IDP camps and centres for surrendees and using them to identify individuals

formerly associated with the LTTE. The Sri Lankan authorities must act immediately to prevent armed groups from entering facilities where children are housed and must investigate reports of ongoing abductions and recruitment by them” said Victoria Forbes Adam.

An entrenched culture of impunity in Sri Lanka facilitates ongoing abuses against children. In 2007 the government initiated an investigation into elements of the armed forces suspected of complicity in the forced recruitment of children by the TMVP. Twenty-three months later it has yet to be completed. In the meantime, Karuna, the former head of the TMVP, has been made a government minister. Karuna also stands accused of recruiting thousands of child soldiers when he was an LTTE commander prior to his split with the group in 2004. No known action has been taken against any member of the security forces or of any armed group suspected of child abductions or forced recruitment.

Intense recruitment of children by the LTTE during the final phase of the conflict has created serious challenges for the release and reintegration of underage recruits. While the government has set up a framework to provide support for children leaving armed groups through the establishment of accommodation and rehabilitation centres, the efforts fall short of internationally recognized best practice. Under the framework, there are concerns that former child soldiers may be held in custody for up to one year without clear grounds. Further, there are concerns about the inadequate access of these children to their families; the incomplete separation of children from adults; and the security of children in the centres.

“The end of the 25-year long conflict represents a unique opportunity to release and reintegrate all former child soldiers and to assist thousands of other conflict-affected children in Sri Lanka. It will take concerted and coordinated efforts by the Sri Lankan authorities and the international community to ensure that this opportunity is not squandered.”

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