
BHUTAN

Kingdom of Bhutan

Population: 2.2 million (1.1 million under 18)

Government armed forces: 6,000

Compulsory recruitment age: no conscription

Voluntary recruitment age: 18

Voting age: not applicable

Optional Protocol: not signed

Other treaties ratified (see glossary):

CRC

There were no reports of under-18s in government armed forces or armed political groups.

Context

Tensions increased in the south of the country and in December 2003 government forces launched an offensive to expel members of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization, armed separatist groups from northeast India.¹ Thirty seven women and 27 children were reportedly among ULFA rebels captured in Bhutan.² There was no information to indicate that the children were involved in armed combat.

Over 100,000 ethnic Nepalese refugees from Bhutan have lived in camps in southeastern Nepal since the early 1990s, and more than 15,000 live in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal.³ In March 2001, after years of stalemate, the governments of Bhutan and Nepal agreed a pilot screening of 12,000 refugees to determine their identities and eligibility to return to Bhutan.⁴ However, ministerial-level meetings between Bhutan and Nepal, and the announcement of a process to “verify” refugees, produced little visible progress.⁵

Government

National recruitment legislation

There is no conscription to military service. The army is a volunteer force and the minimum age of recruitment is 18. There were no reports of under-18s being recruited to the armed forces or militias.

Military training and military schools

In 2003 volunteers were invited to join a national militia in response to growing tensions in the south.⁶ In 2003 more than 700 militia volunteers received two months’ military training in Yongphula, Shaba, Samtse, Gelephu and at the army training centre at Tencholing. Women volunteers were trained at police headquarters in

the capital, Thimphu. Officer trainees attended an intensive training course in Dechencholing. The militia was subsequently deployed in the south to provide support to the regular army.⁷ There were no reports of the involvement of under-18s involvement in the militias.

Armed Political Groups

No information was available about the recruitment practices of armed separatist groups in southern Bhutan.

- 1 *Amnesty International Report 2004*, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>; BBC, “Bhutan steps up assault on rebels”, 23 December 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
- 2 S. Bhattacharya, “ULFA women cadres flay top leaders’ lifestyle”, *Tribune Online*, 29 December 2003.
- 3 US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003*, February 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/c1470.htm>.
- 4 Human Rights Watch, *Nepal/Bhutan: Bilateral talks fail to solve refugee crisis*, 28 October 2003, <http://www.hrw.org>.
- 5 Amnesty International, op. cit.
- 6 Child Soldiers Coalition correspondence with Permanent Mission of Bhutan to the UN at Geneva, September 2000; *Kuensel*, “Assembly discusses volunteer militia force”, 18 July 2003, <http://www.kuenselonline.com>.
- 7 *Kuensel*, “Serving the nation”, 13 September 2003; “Militia posted”, 6 December 2003.