

Sri Lanka: LTTE recruitment drive for child soldiers must stop

Amnesty International today appealed to the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to put an immediate halt to the ongoing recruitment of children as combatants and to return all child soldiers to their families or communities.

"Whether the recruitment is forced or not, children have no role to play in war. The LTTE must live up to its own pledge not to use child soldiers, cease recruitment immediately and return the children to their families," Amnesty International said.

According to international standards and the LTTE's own policy commitments, no children should be recruited, regardless of whether they joined voluntarily or were coerced or forced to do so.

The organization has received disturbing reports of an intensive recruitment drive in areas controlled by the LTTE in the north and east of Sri Lanka. In Batticaloa district, hundreds of people have been recruited over the last month or so in the divisions of Vakarai, Vavunativu, Pattipalai, Porativu, Eravurpattu and Koralaipattu. There have also been reports of intensified recruitment in the Vanni, the area to the south of the Jaffna peninsula largely controlled by the LTTE. Several reports also indicate that many families in the Batticaloa area were coerced with threats into letting their children be recruited. Other families who refused were forced to leave their homes and have now taken shelter with relatives in Batticaloa town.

The total number of children recruited is difficult to establish but it is estimated to be several hundred. The LTTE's recruitment policy is that one person from each family has to do "military service". The age limits

reportedly currently applied in Batticaloa district are from 15 to 45. However, Amnesty International has received reports that children as young as 14 have been among those recruited.

In an interview with Uthayan newspaper on 4 September, Karikalan, a senior LTTE leader was quoted as having said: "We were deeply moved recently to witness parents bringing their children to enrol to fight. Mothers of Arasaditivu and Kokkadicholai have written a new chapter in the history of the Tamil struggle by their bravery." Karikalan has also been quoted to have said that reports of forced conscription "were malicious rumours spread by the military and government media".

Background

In May 1998, the leadership of the LTTE told the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict that it would not use children under the age of 18 in combat, and would not recruit anyone under the age of 17. However, since then, Amnesty International has received reports that children much younger than 17 years of age have been recruited as combatants.

LTTE representatives have admitted that some of their members are very young, but argue that they have not been forced to join. They have also promised to investigate any complaints regarding the recruitment of children under the age of 17, and that if such children are found to have been recruited, they will be released.

Amnesty International opposes the use of children under 18 as soldiers by government and armed opposition groups, whether they have been conscripted by force or joined on a voluntary basis. It also opposes any form of recruitment, training or deployment of children under the age of 18, including for support roles such as messengers or porters.

The LTTE are not the only armed political group recruiting children in Sri Lanka. Amnesty International has also received reliable reports of the recruitment of children by armed Tamil groups cooperating with the security forces such as the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). PLOTE members were known to have recruited children as young as 12 in the Vavuniya area in early 2001. Amnesty International raised concern with President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga at the time. An inquiry by the Criminal Investigation Department later found three children being trained at a PLOTE camp. They were returned to their parents. Others known to have been recruited by PLOTE however remained unaccounted for.

Amnesty International aims to promote the adoption and adherence to national, regional and international legal standards (including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child), which prohibit the military recruitment and deployment in hostilities of any person younger than 18 years of age. It also aims to promote the recognition and enforcement of this standard by all armed forces and groups, both governmental and non-governmental.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>