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PRESS RELEASE

*Children as cannon-fodder : the darkest side of Asian conflicts*

*BANGKOK, May 10, 2000 : Asia ranks close behind Africa in the appalling use of tens of thousands of children as cannon-fodder in conflicts across the region, a group of leading NGOs warned today.*

*"In conflict-zones across Asia, from Mindanao to Manipur, Aceh to Jaffna, children are recruited to serve war's ends -- as porters, 'safe' carriers for bombs, couriers, spies and combatants," said the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.*

*This coalition groups together the major international NGOs working in the field and campaigns worldwide for a global ban on the use of children as soldiers.*

*"Maoist rebels, jihad fighters, separatist guerrillas and right-wing nationalists are united in one respect -- exploiting children for their cause," said the Coalition's convenor, Rory Mungoven, announcing the findings of a major report on child soldiers in Asia. "But across the region, governments too are using under -18s in their armed forces."*

*"In some places, Asia's children are being recruited at gunpoint, but often it is poverty, propaganda and social alienation that drives them into armies, paramilitaries and militias."*

Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Afghanistan are identified as the worst affected countries in the report, which is the first country-by-country survey of the use of under-18s by armed groups and state armies in the region.

It will be placed before 150 NGOs, government and military officials attending Asia's first ever conference on child soldiers, opening in Kathmandu on Monday.

"Myanmar rivals parts of Africa as one of the world's largest recruiters of child soldiers," Mr Mungoven pointed out.

Young children are found, not just in insurgent groups like the headline-making God's Army, but in the Myanmar armed forces, which recruits large numbers of under-15s, sometimes forcing street children and orphans into its ranks.

In Sri Lanka, the separatist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is reported to have stepped up recruitment from schools, despite international outcry and promises made to UN officials.

But state armies are far from blameless. The survey shows that nearly all recruit under-18s, often flouting their own laws or exploiting legal grey areas.

"The argument that under-18's in state armies are protected from active service does not stand. Australia reportedly sent at least one underage soldier to East Timor last year " as long as you recruit under 18s, there are no hard and fast guarantees they will not end up on the front line." said Mr Mungoven.

Governments are also insensitive in dealing with captured child soldiers, at times parading them before the media. Some have been tortured in custody.

In Cambodia, after two decades of civil war, children have been the first to be expelled from the army as conflicts recede. But little is being done, by governments and donors, to recognise their special needs and reintegrate them into society, says the report.

These issues will be at the forefront in Kathmandu next week. The conference aims to garner regional support for a global ban on the recruitment of under-18s and promote practical action for dealing with child soldiers on the ground.

The conference is expected to call on states to ratify and implement the new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which seeks to strengthen protection in this area.

"The use of children as weapons of war should be put on the same moral and legal footing as the use of chemical and biological weapons, as other extreme forms of child labour exploitation," said the Coalition.

"Some Asian governments, like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Thailand, have already spoken for a ban, against powerful opposition from the US and the UK. What we now need is an Asian consensus."

NOTE:

More than 300,000 child soldiers are currently being used in conflicts in over 30 countries of the world, and tens of thousands more become involved every year. The international NGO Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, launched in June 1998, brings together the leading NGOs in this field to mobilise world opinion for a ban on child soldiers. The

*Kathmandu conference is being organised by the Coalition and the government of Nepal.*

*For more information or to arrange interviews, please call Rory Mungoven/Kathryn Burgess in London at +44 207 2740230 or + 44 780 8771379 (mobile) or contact the Conference Secretariat in Kathmandu from May 13 at +977 98102 5392 and +977 1 248 999/ext 2903.*