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Public Statement

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Sri Lanka: Amnesty International urges LTTE to live up to its pledge to end child recruitment

On 18 June 2007 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) released 135 child soldiers and pledged to rid its ranks of all children under 18 by the end of the year. Amnesty International welcomes the release of these soldiers as well as the commitment by the LTTE to stop child recruitment. The LTTE must immediately return all remaining child soldiers to their families and engage in transparent procedures with UNICEF to reunite remaining child soldiers with their families.

UNICEF records a significant drop in LTTE recruitment of children saying that recent releases of children from their ranks outstripped new recruitment. Nonetheless many child soldiers remain in their ranks. UNICEF, which has had direct talks with the LTTE on the release of underage soldiers, said at least 1,591 still remained at the end of May 2007.¹ The figure included 506 who are under the age of 18, and 1,085 who were recruited when they were under 18 but who have now passed that age.

The LTTE has a long history of recruiting minors as soldiers. Prior to the 2002 ceasefire agreement, the LTTE routinely used children in combat, including high profile battles in which children often suffered high rates of casualties. Over the last two and a half decades of conflict, families living in the conflict areas of the North and East of Sri Lanka have been targeted for recruitment by the LTTE. In the past the LTTE have enforced a "one family, one child" policy in areas under its control instructing Tamil households that each family was obliged to provide a son or a daughter for "the cause." There is no excuse or acceptable argument for using children as combatants.

A Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE was signed in February 2002. At the peace talks which followed, the parties asked UNICEF to develop an Action Plan for Children Affected by War to monitor, report on and address child rights violations in the North East. In June 2003, the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE jointly signed the Action Plan for Children Affected by War. One of the commitments made by the LTTE under the Action Plan was that they would stop recruiting children into its ranks, whether voluntarily or through coercion. Throughout 2004 UNICEF issued press statements saying that the LTTE were not living up to their commitments to stop recruiting children.

The 2002 ceasefire effectively collapsed last year. As hostilities between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE intensified in 2006, Amnesty International received reports of intensified recruitment in the Vanni, the area to the south of the Jaffna peninsula largely controlled by the LTTE. In April 2007 Amnesty received reports that the LTTE were active in recruiting children in Madhu in Mannar District in preparation for future military battles in the North. The UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in a report on Sri Lanka released on 20 December 2006 notes, 'although limited progress has been made in the release of some children from the LTTE over the last three years, the refusal of the LTTE to completely cease recruitment and use of children, release all children remaining on the UNICEF database and engage in transparent procedures for release and verification of demobilization warrants the undertaking of targeted measures against LTTE political and military leadership.'²

In May 2007, the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict issued a statement saying that if the LTTE fails to stop recruiting children "further steps may be taken". Ms. Coomaraswamy, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict added that "these recommendations send a strong message to the LTTE, a repeat offender who has been on the Secretary General's list of violators for four years".

The LTTE are not the only armed political group recruiting children in Sri Lanka. Amnesty International has also received reliable reports of increased recruitment by other groups such as the Karuna faction.³ The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mechanism (SLMM) report for the period 11-17 June 2007 notes that 34 abductions in the space of a week were reported in the East in areas where the Karuna faction is active and this number included 16 youth. The head of UNICEF's Sri Lanka mission noted that, "at this point the pace of recruitment by the Karuna faction is actually higher than the pace of recruitment by the Tigers".⁴

Children have no role to play in war. The recruitment of children is a war crime. The LTTE and all other armed groups must pledge not to use child soldiers, cease recruitment immediately and return the children to their families.

Background

Worldwide, more than half a million children under the age of 18 have been recruited into government armed forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and a wide variety of non-state armed groups in more than 85 countries. 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. 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. Amnesty International 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.

Recommendations to LTTE leadership:

- o To fulfil the pledge to end child recruitment and end the practice of abduction, recruitment and use of children under the age of 18;
- o To immediately engage in transparent procedures with UNICEF for release of child soldiers directly to their families and verification of demobilization of all children;
- o To cooperate with UNICEF by sharing information and providing UNICEF representatives with unimpeded access to LTTE military camps with a view to putting an end to violations and abuses perpetrated against children.

1. See, http://www.unicef.org/srilanka/Monitoring_and_Reporting_May_update.pdf

2. See: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/667/18/PDF/N0666718.pdf?OpenElement>

3. In 2004, former Tamil Tiger commander Colonel Karuna broke away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to form his own splinter group, Tamileel Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, or People's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (TMVP).

4. See Reuters Report, "*Sri Lanka rebels, renegades still recruit kids-UK*", 02 July 2007.