

**Child recruitment “An Affront to Humanity”:  
Sri Lanka’s call for zero tolerance commended.**



**The Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Office at Geneva  
21<sup>st</sup> September 2007**

The statement by the Sri Lanka delegation to the Sixth Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2007 at Palais des Nations in Geneva emphasized the strong commitment of the Government to eradicate the heinous practice of child recruitment.

Ms Shirani Goonatileke, Director Legal of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process speaking on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka outlined the steps taken to protect children in armed conflict. (The full statement is reproduced below).

Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy, Under-Secretary –General, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict presented her report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva today. The report included her findings from her field visits to countries undergoing conflict and the findings of her Special Adviser Mr Alan Rock’s visit to Sri Lanka in November 2006. **Ms Coomaraswamy stated that with the full cooperation of the Government he was able to access all areas of the country including the north and the east in order to ascertain the ground situation.**

**Ms Coomaraswamy welcomed the statement made by the Sri Lanka delegation and commended the positive steps taken by the Government.** She highlighted in particular the adoption of zero tolerance in regard to child recruitment, the commitment in relation to the Security Council Resolution 1612 and the action taken in setting up a committee to investigate allegations of complicity against certain elements of the security forces in the alleged abductions and recruitment of children by the LTTE “break away” group the Karuna faction.

She said it was unfortunate that the LTTE did not commit to the full release of children under the age of 18 years and this she noted was in contravention to applicable national and international law.

**STATEMENT BY MS.SHIRANI GOONATILLEKE OF THE SRI LANKA DELEGATION  
UNDER AGENDA ITEM 3 OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
21 SEPTEMBER 2007, GENEVA**

**Child Recruitment: An Affront to Humanity**

Mr President, my delegation would like to thank Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy for her comprehensive report presented today.

Mr President,

One of the most serious aspects of Sri Lanka's conflict, is the forced participation of children as soldiers. Recruitment of children is an absolute affront to humanity. The Government of Sri Lanka strongly condemns the heinous practice of child recruitment and the tragic abuse of children that results, when they are used as combatants. The government regards it as a zero tolerance and non-negotiable issue and is totally committed to eradicating this scourge and ensuring the protection of all children affected by the armed conflict.

We welcome the work undertaken by the good office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, in this regard and reiterate our commitment to continue working in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant international laws and UN resolutions, in particular Security Council Resolution 1612 of 2005.

This for the first time, focused on providing a comprehensive framework to address issues related to the protection of children affected by armed conflict and rightfully placed high priority on the issue of child recruitment. Annex II of the Resolution identified the LTTE as a party in Sri Lanka responsible for the recruitment and abduction of children.

In this respect we urge UN agencies to make clear that there will be zero tolerance of child recruitment. The recent UNICEF claim that things have improved because the LTTE no longer recruited under 17s, but what was termed "legislation" was required to bring policy in line with

international norms, is unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> We beseech the Special Representative to ensure that UN staff do not compromise on this issue.

Sadly the LTTE and those close to it argues that the issue of child soldiers is comparatively unimportant and even produce arguments to suggest that it is acceptable to recruit children over fifteen.<sup>2</sup>

The LTTE which commenced an armed conflict in Sri Lanka since 1983 has continued child recruitment unabated since then, despite the many pledges made to the international community that it would cease recruitment. It has been estimated that between 1983 and 2002 over 60% of the 14,000 strong LTTE fighting force was composed of children. A data base on known child recruitment was set up in 2002 by UNICEF. However according to UNICEF, the current figures of over 6,000 in the database are likely to represent only one third of the actual number, as not all parents can overcome their fear of the LTTE and report forcible recruitment of their children. There is recent evidence of massive LTTE recruitment of children and young persons mostly in the North of the country.

The UNICEF database since 2006 also records, in a tragic twist of fate further underage recruitment mostly in the eastern province by the “break away” group of the LTTE, the Karuna faction, some of them former child recruits. UNICEF verify that 130 children had been recruited between 1/11/06 to 31/5/07 including re-recruitment of 21 children. 38 children were released during this period. UNICEF states that from the total of 307 registered on its database, 152 cases of children remain outstanding as of 31<sup>st</sup> May 2007.

The Government welcomed the UN Security Council Resolution 1612 and collaborated with UN entities to set up in July 2006, a Sri Lankan Task Force to Monitor and Report on child rights violations related to the conflict.

Following its commitment earlier this year, to the UN Security Council working group on children and armed conflict that it would adopt necessary measures to cause an independent and credible investigation into allegations made against certain sections of the government security forces for complicity in the abduction and recruitment of children by the “break away” group of the LTTE, the

---

<sup>1</sup> On the basis of cases reported, UNICEF reports the average age of underage recruits was 14 years in 2001, 15 years in 2002 and 2003 and 16 years since 2004.

<sup>2</sup> To quote one of their more ridiculous phrases, “ the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had recruited perhaps 530 persons under age eighteen, of which about 230 (sic) were fifteen or older with no indication whether any of these youth had actually engaged in hostilities “ were the other 300 under fifteen ?

Karuna faction, the Minister for Human Rights recently appointed a high level interdisciplinary “committee to conduct an investigation into such allegations”.

The Government has also ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on involvement of children in armed conflict and has consistently maintained the age for voluntary recruitment of persons into the Sri Lankan armed forces at 18 years. Under the Penal Code, the practice of child recruitment is both prohibited and criminalized.

As a follow up to the UN Secretary General's recommendations in his report of December 2006, on Children and Armed conflict in Sri Lanka, a multi disciplinary Task Force on children affected by the armed conflict was established in April 2007. Issues being addressed include harmonization of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)/Optional Protocol with national legislation, strengthening education to prevent child recruitment, promotion of birth registration in conflict areas, the protection, and rehabilitation of child “surrendees” and strengthening law enforcement in conflict areas to also ensure the protection of children in IDP camps.

The government whilst focusing on child recruitment has also reiterated its commitment to address other problems and needs of children affected by the conflict and places great emphasis on ensuring that both curative and preventive health care and free education from the primary to the tertiary level reaches all children in these areas.

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRC) has widened its mandate to include child rights violations. However Lack of resources remains a barrier and the government is seeking funding to strengthen the capacity of relevant local institutions such as the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the National Commission for the Protection of Children (NCPA established in 1999). This effort to mobilize funding and resources is in accordance with the recommendations of the Secretary General in December 2006, which urged the international community to assist Sri Lanka and support this work

In furtherance of the Government's on-going commitment to the rehabilitation and re-integration of child “surrendees” the Government appointed a Commissioner General of Rehabilitation in September last year. Temporary facilities have been set up for these children at present and plans are underway to establish more permanent infrastructures. Currently programmes are being devised and discussions have been initiated with key stakeholders and the international community to broaden the scope of rehabilitation beyond an institutional approach to one which lays emphasis on education,

vocational training, sports and drama. Detailed proposals have been handed over to countries particularly concerned with armed groups in the East and the need to provide attractive opportunities for former combatants. Proposals involve partnerships with NGOs and the private sector in the forms of the Business for Peace Alliance to underscore the governments commitment to partnerships for progress. Sadly due to unavoidable bureaucratic constraints, responses from donor countries has been slow, but we hope the interest and concern expressed will translate into helpful actions.

The Government of Sri Lanka calls upon the Office of the Special Representative and the international community to impress upon the LTTE and its “ break away” Karuna Faction to give priority to implementing the recommendations made in the 20<sup>th</sup> December 2006 report of the UN Secretary General on Children Affected by the Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka and to cease child recruitment immediately and return child combatants and young persons to their families so that they can be reintegrated.

Whilst legal frameworks and laws are important and play a paramount role , they are not enough, unless there is a will to implement actions on the ground.

Sri Lanka urges the international community to assist in bringing hope to children who have been deprived any opportunity to live normal lives for so long and “ restore to them a sense of renewed hope”.

THANK YOU MR PRESIDENT.