

# Child Soldiers of Sri Lanka

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# Key Features of the Conflict In SL

- Continued for 26 year from July 1983 to May 2009 in spite of four Ceasefire Agreements, all of which were not effective.
- The roots of the conflict lay in the marginalization of youth, poverty and deprivation.
- None of the CFA's included the demobilization of Child Soldiers.
- There was no data base on CS from 1983 to 2002. But numbers of CS both boys and girls were estimated to be at least 60 per cent of the fighting cadres. They undertook other tasks as well.
- Children as young as 10 and 12 years were forcibly recruited.

- First data base was established in 2003 by UNICEF.
- According to this, over 6700 were registered . These numbers are considered less than the actual total as some parents were too scared to report.
- Of the total, CS recruited, 2 thirds were boys and the balance girls.
- Recruitment mainly occurred in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka.
- The training was rigorous, particularly in relation to the use of weapons
- Promotion of a culture of racial hatred, a culture of suicide as noble for the “cause” of separatism. There was devaluation of human and family life.

# Root Causes

- The marginalization of youth
- Poverty and deprivation
- The lure of access to food, better living conditions in camps.
- Payment
- Special honours bestowed on the parents

- Conduct of “ Hate propaganda in schools”
- Making “ dying for the cause” noble
- Ease to coerce children, recruit them, motivate them and ensure obedience
- Attraction to have a weapon, uniform, food and power over even adults.

# How Recruitment Occurred

- Kidnapping
- Schools
- During festivals and other events
- Motivational programmes
- Orphanages
- Single parent families

# Rehabilitation

- Setting of a centre based system based and the issue of a special gazette through the justice system, based on the UN CRC and Paris principles.
- Reunification with parents and families
- Access to education and skills
- Health screening and access to medical care
- Responses to psycho social issues
- Birth Certificates and ID cards

- Computer skills
- Recreation, sports activities, music and drama therapy
- Treatment of war injuries and disabilities
- Exposure to “normalcy”
- Reintegration with other races.

# Positive Features

- Nearly all the children displayed a high degree of resilience and coping capacity to regain normalcy and be re integrated with their families and communities.
- Nearly all were hopeful of the future
- There was a desire to learn new skills like IT
- Most were keen to learn other languages , English and Sinhala
- Some wanted to go abroad for an example to the Middle East and be able to earn a living outside Sri Lanka.

- Some did not want to go back to their original homes because of the fear of reprisal for the acts they had committed as CS
- Most integrated well ( So Far ! )

# Lessons Learned

- Guerilla type wars against the state are fought mainly by young people, and mostly marginalized youth, many through the forcible recruitment of children. This was the experience of Sri Lanka.
- Poverty, deprivation and marginalization with lack of opportunities for advancement are root causes.
- The demobilization of CS must be regarded as a non negotiable pre requisite to ceasefire agreements with non state actors who forcibly recruit children
- In the event of such wars, specific mechanisms which help children to “surrender”, obtain protection and have access to quality rehabilitation as well as social re integration with their parents and families is essential

- A stronger thrust on addressing the needs and concerns of young people is essential in developing countries which are poor and which have disparities in terms of access to basic services and income.
- Conflict Resolution programmes to inculcate attitudes and behavioral patterns to counteract violence are essential. This includes controlling access to violence in the media, toy guns and other weapons, as well as promoting attitudes which condone violent behaviour.

# Concluding Remarks

- The forcible recruitment of Sri Lankan Children as child soldiers ended only in May 2009 after 26 years and the end of conflict. Even many of the 11,000 thousand adults “surrendees” was probably child recruits.
- None of the previous initiatives to stop recruitment undertaken in the 1990’s, And even after 2000 had no impact on this abhorrent practice. A further analysis on identifying different approaches would be useful to enable a cessation of this practice in the context of ongoing conflicts in other countries.

- There is no justification for the forcible recruitment of children, even for a just cause. It should be a zero tolerance / non negotiable issue.
- No rehabilitation effort however comprehensive can give child soldiers back their lost childhood , family life, leisure and recreation, education, good health and psychosocial well being in entirety. The violence, they have experienced, cannot be erased.
- Therefore the accent should be on PREVENTION!