

Child Soldiers in Sri Lanka: Forcible Recruitment from which Civilians Have No Escape

Press release from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, submitted by Zinthiya Ganeshpanchan

The absence of serious efforts to de-escalate the ongoing military confrontation between the government and LTTE is having a terrible impact on the civilian population. The situation in parts of the north, in particular, has sharply deteriorated with the LTTE stepping up its recruitment drive in preparation for an anticipated onslaught by government forces. There is apprehension that the government may soon send in its ground troops in large numbers into the north to confront the LTTE there, as they have in the east.

One of the first targets appears to be the Madhu area of the north which is currently under LTTE control in the vicinity of the sacred Catholic shrine of Madhu. As a result the situation there, it has become very tense and fearful and those internally displaced persons who were staying here in large numbers are reported to have moved to safer locations in and outside of areas under LTTE control.

Amnesty International and other reputable sources have confirmed that the LTTE is engaging in forcible recruitment of both children and adult civilians on a large scale basis. This recruitment has been taking place over the protest of civil and moral authorities, including the Catholic Church, and is in gross violation of international humanitarian and human rights norms. In this context we welcome the recent LTTE notice in its media that parents can obtain the release of their underage child recruits.

The National Peace Council reiterates its condemnation of forcible recruitment of civilians of any age to fight in war. We particularly reject the conscription of children which is a traumatic experience for both them and their families and one that is likely to scar them for life. Such recruitment also continues to take place in the east of the country, by both the LTTE and the Karuna group which operates as a political party within government-controlled territory.

The human costs of continued confrontation between the government and LTTE are very high. There is an urgent need for an alternative path to conflict resolution. The National Peace Council regrets that at the present time neither the government nor the LTTE appear to have either the political vision or commitment to carve out that path. So long as they continue to be locked in a cycle of violence the people can have no escape.