



# NTS ALERT

*“If only the enemy would listen, it would have been wonderful, and the firing would stop and we would listen to each other, we would just talk and try not to use guns. I wish we could end all this violence and we could develop our country.”*

*- Child Soldier, Philippines.*

## Why Become a Child Soldier?

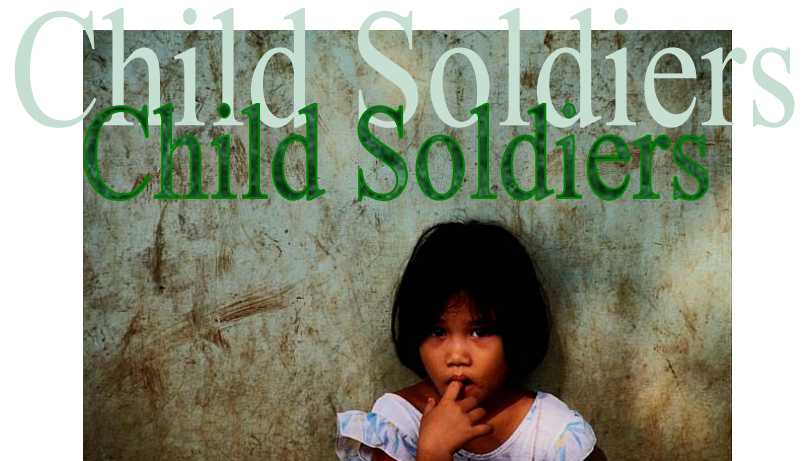
The previous edition of NTS-Alert outlined the adverse effects that political insecurity and conflicts have had on the human security of women and children. This edition takes a look at the phenomenon of child soldiers, which has for the most part, risen out of the lack of human security in areas of conflict.

Given the pitiful circumstances that many internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees have experienced in conflict zones, many children have joined armed groups as it provides them with an avenue out of their misery. Poverty and its subsequent adverse effects have been the main reasons cited by child soldiers to take part in military combat. Whether or not they had thought through their decision thoroughly, most have decided to join the armed conflict to escape their pitiful circumstances.

*Nepal’s* 10-year civil war, according to the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), has so far killed nearly 13,000 people. It has also gravely affected the country’s children by exposing them to violence by both sides, disrupting their home lives, limiting their families’ economic activity, and hampering their access to education and health care.

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Such human insecurity has also been evident in the eastern coastal district of Batticaloa in *Sri Lanka*. In addition to being an area of political tension and source for recruiting child soldiers into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), Batticaloa was hard hit by the Asian tsunami in 2004. While there was a lull in child recruitment immediately after the tsunami catastrophe as Sinhalese and Tamils worked together to rescue survivors of the tsunami and rebuild damaged coastal areas, this did not last for long.

Figures from the United Nations’ Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which monitors the child recruitment situation nationally, show that recruitment in July 2005 was at the highest level since before the tsunami, with 135 under-aged (under 18 years old) combatants known to have been recruited. A local agency staff member noted that recruiting was even taking place in the tsunami shelters in the uncleared LTTE-controlled areas and temple festivals. Such recruitment has also been possible by playing on the poor’s sentiment that they were still living in adverse circumstances and were not assisted sufficiently by the government. By participating in armed conflict, they would be seen as doing something meaningful



and productive with their lives by confronting the government for their ineffectiveness in addressing poverty and other ills associated with it.

There are, to some extent, some perks associated with joining the armed groups. According to the study done by Child Psychologist Yvonne Keairns, the following advantages were cited by female child soldiers in the Philippines.

- ❑ The movement provided them with a family, i.e. a sense of belonging
- ❑ The movement provided a source of empowerment for them with a venue where they could speak, offer opinions and become leaders.
- ❑ The movement gave them a place, a context where they, from their point of view, could help others.
- ❑ The movement provided them with the necessities of life, either from their comrades or the masses: food, clothing, inclusion, a voice, care when ill, meaningful relationships, protection from intimate relationships they did not want.
- ❑ They were able to develop their public speaking skills, organizational and communication skills and thus a stronger sense of self.
- ❑ They were acknowledged for their talents.
- ❑ Their opinions were taken into account and they were able to offer their own criticisms
- ❑ Women were as important as men and proved themselves by carrying out major assignments.

With these various means of increasing one's own human and economic security, it was not surprising that many found the militant life to be attractive and rewarding.

However, it should be noted that such perks are not uniform amongst all militant groups. For instance, there is the issue that the physical demands during training and moving from place to place were too strenuous for many to endure (see section on "A Day in the life of a Child Soldier"). In addition to this, while many child soldiers did take on auxiliary roles such as kitchen help, others have had to engage in killings, raids and attacks, against their own will. In Sri Lanka, female members of the LTTE have been

implicated to up to a third of the suicide bomb attacks against the Sri Lankan government.

Furthermore, not all child soldiers had voluntarily joined the groups. There have been reports of children- both male and female- being abducted or lured into armed conflict against their will, especially in Sri Lanka and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, children are said to have been employed on both the sides of the Tamil Tiger rebels as well as the government's army. After 10-day mission in conflict-ridden parts of Sri Lanka, Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Allan Rock, noted that there were instances of women wanting to poison their children rather than to see them conscripted by rebel troops that made their rounds in villages, particularly in the Batticaloa district.

In *Nepal*, national and international observers believe that up to 4500 Maoists soldiers were under 18 when they were recruited to fight in the decade long civil war. At the height of the civil war, in areas firmly under their control— particularly in the insurgency's heartland in Nepal's west and far west—the Maoists operated a "one family, one child" program whereby each family had to provide a recruit or face severe punishment. This campaign operated at a particularly high capacity in 2004 and 2005, as the civil war was escalating.

In addition to this, Nepali NGOs have noted a high casualty rate among child soldiers. According to the Nepali Coalition for Children as Zones of Peace, which operates through Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN), 445 children were reported to have been killed and another 522 injured between 1996 and April 2006; dozens were killed as a result of indiscriminate attacks by the combatants. Nepali children have also suffered from the explosives that constituted the detritus of the conflict. According to UNICEF, Nepali children suffered the second highest rate of injuries caused by explosives in the world.

*According to Sandra Beidas, a child soldier expert and head of the protection section in the United Nation's Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Kathmandu, Nepal, the recruitment and use of any children under 18 is against international child rights principles.*

***“I was abducted from school. I was in school, it was lunch break, and we saw several Maoists coming. We were nine girls there, all 16 to 18 years old. The Maoists asked us how we were doing and said that we should join their campaign. We went to our teacher and said we wouldn’t go, and the teacher told the Maoists, but they threatened him, and then just grabbed us and took us away. There were 15 or 18 of them so they could easily drag us away.”***

*-Human Rights Watch interview with Maya (age 16, from far western Nepal), Butwal, March 5, 2006.*

In the **Philippines**, according to reports in 2003 by government forces, the testimonies of former National People’s Army (NPA) members revealed “...massive recruitment of minors aged 13 to 17 from the ranks of urban students and out-of-school peasants”. The NPA has rebutted such allegations, noting that in cases where minors do wish to join the NPA, “they are not given guns and are not assigned tasks that directly involve combat operations....most of them perform menial assignments, running errands, courier jobs and the like.” Even so, government forces continue to report of the recruitment and training of children by the NPA in several areas in the country.

Being a Child Soldier, therefore, only serves to further threaten children’s human security. Given their youth and vulnerability, children are forced to

be pawns in conflicts. Even those who joined the armed groups on their own accord have also realized that in the long term, the effects of being a Child Soldier were highly detrimental. While they were happy to reap the benefits of food security and the like, separation from their families did take a toll on these children eventually. Moreover, having been a part of the movement made it difficult for them to return home to their family, even if that was what they wanted most of all. Many of them were also afraid of the consequences of being turned over to the government troops. This fear may have kept them in the movement longer than they would have chosen.

At best, life as a Child Soldier only provided temporary escape from the harsh realities of poverty. The consequences of such a life have proven to be similar, if not worse, than their life in poverty.

### **The Use of Fear by Maoists Commanders on Child Soldiers**

#### **Fear of the Nepalese Army**

*“The commanders told us never to surrender. They told us to throw the grenade that we had into the troops and run away. When I said that I wouldn’t be able to do that, they said that the army would then arrest me, and if I surrender the army would torture and rape me.” \**

#### **Fear of the Maoists**

*“We were staying in the house with our commanders; they went out and started firing at the helicopter, and they also told the others to come out. Then, when the second helicopter arrived, the commanders just threw their weapons in the house and left. The commanders told us to run and not to surrender, but we said we would surrender to the army. The commanders were outside of the house, still trying to convince us to run, saying, ‘You are going to surrender, we cannot let this happen— we would rather kill you.’ And then they shot at the house once from a submachine gun, and ran away.”\**

*\*Human Rights Watch interview with Padma (age 18, from far western Nepal) Butwal, March 5, 2006.*

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### **What can be done to help Child Soldiers?**

The United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has been actively advocating for the prevention of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 May 2000), for instance, prohibits the use of child soldiers under the age of 18. Nepal has recently ratified the optional protocol on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2007. While the Philippines and Sri Lanka had ratified it earlier in 28 August 2000 and 8 September 2000 respectively.

Even so, ratifying a protocol would be ineffective if no concrete action is taken to support it. Violence continues to plague Sri Lanka and Philippines till today. In 2002, the government and the Tamil Tigers signed a ceasefire to end Sri Lanka's 20-year civil war which had cost 65,000 lives. However, according to European ceasefire monitors, despite the truce, more than 4,000 people have been killed from January 2006 to March 2007.

In the Philippines, a press statement by *Salinlahi*, an alliance of organizations concerned with the rights and welfare of children, condemned government military troops' use of the label 'child soldiers' as an excuse to ignore the violation of children's human rights and thus escape accountability. This comes in the wake of a series of government military attacks on supposed Communists rebels –members of the National People's Army (NPA). The most recent victim was a 9 year old girl, who was caught in the crossfire between government military troops and the NPA, while swimming in a creek near her village with her siblings. According to *Salinlahi*, there have been hundreds of cases of children's rights violations since 2001 – 54 cases of which have been children killed by the military during their operations.

Fortunately, more progress has been made in ending the violence in Nepal. UN officials have noted a process of locking up weapons, which is a key part of the peace deal between Nepal's government officials and former Maoist rebels. More importantly, the former Maoist rebels have been made greater stakeholders in the political process by

joining Nepal's interim government and having won several cabinet posts and 83 seats in parliament via democratic elections. Hence, by engaging the conflicting parties into the political decision-making process, a fruitful discussion over the well-being of the Nepalese state, as well as the Nepalese people, is more likely to emerge.

In addition to these political processes, other measures must be taken to address the problems faced by children involved in existing conflicts. The (OHCHR) also advocates for the release of children from armed groups and for establishing programmes to support children leaving armed groups.

One important area that would require attention would be the detention of child soldiers. In Nepal, child soldiers have been held under "anti-terrorism" laws alongside adult soldiers, and were subject to abuse while in detention, including repeated and brutal beatings, interrogation, and forced labor. Findings from a UNICEF noted that 30 percent of children and youth interviewed in prisons reported psychological problems related to torture, including sleeping disorders, nightmares, anxiety, palpitations, and uncertainty about their lives.

Moreover, rehabilitative support for these young ex-combatants is critical, as many of them may not have anywhere to live, or need help locating relatives who might be willing to take them in. Many have been out of school for a considerable period of time, and without previous school records and money for tuition and supplies they find it nearly impossible to re-enroll. As such, they would have very few marketable job skills and few options to support themselves.

Some efforts have been made to rehabilitate these children back to their homes. In Nepal, there have been several initiatives over the past few years to provide care for children who were either released by the parties to the conflict, captured or who voluntarily left. Some of them have received temporary shelter while others were given assistance when found to be held illegally in detention. Family tracing and mediation have also been carried out to allow for the safe return of such children to their families.

The rehabilitation process itself is not an easy task as psycho-social and cultural issues may arise. Former combatants, particularly young adolescents, are often traumatized upon their release from the military. An official working with an education program for former combatants in Sri Lanka explained that as child soldiers, their lifestyles have changed completely due to the fighting and thus, they would need to learn a new way of life. In addition to this, many may react with anger and get very aggressive and would thus require more attention and care during counseling.

While this rehabilitation process must be supported and increased, some refugee aid groups have suggested that by giving increased attention to these former combatants, they might inadvertently benefit from the attention. According to one group interviewed by Refugee International in Sri Lanka, the added attention would be seen as a reward for joining the LTTE and thus provide them with an incentive to join and later benefit from leaving the armed group. Moreover, as seen from the controversial decision to pay cash to former child combatants in Liberia, specialized attention could actually put former child combatants at risk. It would provide an incentive for families to allow recruitment and thus encourage a misperception that serving with an armed group would be beneficial in the long run. What they fail to realize are the psychological and physical scars that will be afflicted on the children during their time spent with the armed groups.

Hence, what is critically lacking is a national process of separating children from armed groups and returning them to their communities. In addition to increasing the resources for facilitating the rehabilitation activities, these processes must be institutionalized so as to ensure a multifaceted approach in dealing with issues such as rampant

poverty and suffering that would potentially push the children back into the militant groups. Given the immense time and effort needed to rehabilitate the children back into societies, governments would rather seek alternatives or short cuts as these states are often too poor to support themselves, what more the added responsibility of rehabilitating child soldiers. There is however, no effective shortcut in dealing with poverty and states need to accept this and be committed to the initiatives.

Furthermore, governments need to persevere in ensuring sustained dialogue and cooperation with armed groups. By fully understanding the needs of the various groups involved in the conflict – in particular the needs of the poor and those most vulnerable – can there potentially be a complete end to conflict and violence.

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## **A Day in the Life of a Child Soldier**

According to study\* done by Dr Yvonne Keairns, a Child Psychologist and Executive Director of *Arsenal Family & Children's Center* in the United States, the training offered to young women in Sri Lanka was essentially very rigorous and demanding. There was an initial period of 3 to 5 months called basic training and then a more expansive period of training that lasted for 5 to 6 months of more rigorous training. Superimposed on the training was additional work that involved becoming one with a wooden "dummy gun."

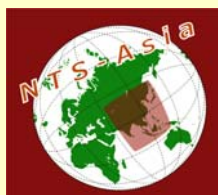
There was a specific training schedule that was carried out 7 days a week. Punishment for failure to comply or inability to keep up and perform at the required level of activity resulted in being forced to do extra 'rounds' of the exercises. If you could not keep up you were given a heavy rifle to hold above your head while performing sitting-to-standing exercises. At the same time you were randomly hit and kicked. These body blows were instituted without mercy.

4:00 or 5:00a.m	Morning ablutions: Older sisters of the movement oriented the girls and told them where they should go for morning ablutions. They were under orders to use water sparingly and to protect the water supplies at all times. The older sisters acted as guards over them and enforced the policies of the movement
7:00 to 8:00a.m.	Breakfast
8:00 to 12:00noon	Demanding physical exercises that included: weight lifting, jumping, running, crawling over sharp terrain, karate, rope climbing, and practice in climbing heights. (One short break was permitted for a drink of water)
12:30p.m.	Lunch Foods at different times included: soup, marmite, eggs (drink them raw), bread, lentils, rice and curry, apples, water, on some special occasions ice cream.
1:30 to 4:00 p.m	Training in special skills that included: map reading, identification of particular geographical locations, use of the compass, knot tying, use of special codes, use of the walkie talkie, and how to shoot and kill animals. Each girl was also asked to write a personal report about her own self.
4:00 p.m.	Tea
5:00 to 6:00 p.m.	Parade
6:00 p.m.	Gather to say oath
10:00 p.m.	Sent to bed. They slept in small sheds on the ground in sacks (fertilizer bags) without pillows. Sometimes they used their clothes bag for a pillow.

\* The study was based on interviews with female Child Soldiers in Sri Lanka.  
Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers – Sri Lanka*, Quaker United nations Office (QUNO), January 2003

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