

**Children and Armed Conflict**  
**12 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber**

***Statement by Mr. Kohona, Representative of Sri Lanka***

Mr. Kohona (Sri Lanka): Let me join previous speakers in thanking Germany for convening this open debate under its presidency, and also acknowledge the presence of the Foreign Minister of Germany this morning. The useful work done by the Secretary-General's Office, the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the UNICEF and other associated agencies will no doubt add substantial value to addressing this issue so vitally important to our times.

Sri Lanka endorses the three side events that were organized by the Permanent Mission of Germany in association with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, the Permanent Mission of Canada and the United Nations Programme on Youth in June. They incrementally advanced our understanding of these issues. The relevant discussions underlined the urgency of concerted action at the national and international levels to contain and halt the repugnant practice of child recruitment for armed combat. To deprive a child of his smiles and dreams and burden him with gore and machine guns is an appalling indictment of the values of the certain groups and individuals.

However, Sri Lanka has serious reservations about the report issued by Conflict Dynamics International under the auspices of the Permanent Missions of Canada and Germany. For instance, its assertion that individuals implicated in crimes against children in armed conflict continue to hold high Government positions is sadly incomplete and misleading. My Government consistently encouraged former armed groups to denounce violence and to enter the democratic process as a part of the reconciliation effort. Following this approach, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP), a breakaway faction of the terrorist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ceased to be an armed group and entered the political process as a registered party.

Like in other countries where former terrorist groups have transformed themselves into legitimate political parties, the TMVP has also joined the democratic process. It has released all child combatants under a tripartite action plan with UNICEF and the Government. The adult cadres are very much part of the democratic process, which has had a salutary impact across the board. It appears that the report will stoke embers of a bitter past and politicize the issue of accountability related to child recruitment. Unfortunately, these complex underlying realities have been ignored.

This debate takes place against the backdrop of the increasing frequency and intensity of the identified six grave violations against children in armed conflict. Children are the most vulnerable group, and they therefore require conscious protection. We therefore welcome the recommendations in the Secretary-General's report (S/2011/250) on adopting targeted measures against persistent perpetrators of grave violations against children. In Sri Lanka, it was clear that the child soldiers of the LTTE were cannon fodder for the movement who were sent to early graves.

On the recommendation of filing systematic information on violations against children in reports and recommendations to sanctions committees, we would like to urge the Council and the Working Group to ensure that the information so collected is objective, accurate, reliable and verified by experts, including forensic experts, and in an open and transparent manner with all the members represented in the country task forces where they exist. Paragraph 3 of resolution 1612 (2005), which clearly states that the monitoring and reporting mechanism must work in close consultation with the country concerned, must be strictly adhered to. We add this note recalling Sri Lanka's unpleasant experience with the global horizontal note filed from 1 May to 31 July 2009. Many reports had been made to the Council without reference to the country task force. Inaccurate reporting would cast doubt on the credibility of both reporting sources and the Secretary-General's report itself.

The progress made by Sri Lanka in realizing its policy of zero tolerance in the case of child recruitment, including the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child combatants under its "Bring Back the Child" campaign, is by any standard salutary.

According to a UNICEF report made public recently, over 60 per cent of the LTTE fighting forces from 1983 to 2002 consisted of boys and girls under 18 years, including orphans harvested after the tsunami. UNICEF recorded over 5,700 cases of child recruitment by the LTTE from 2003 to 2009. Others have suggested a figure closer to 20,000. Child soldiers were often deployed to attack villagers with machetes and used as suicide bombers, especially the girls. Hundreds of such attacks were launched. In the final stages of the conflict, children were thrown up in large numbers as cannon fodder. More than one generation of children were sacrificed to realize a megalomaniac's terrorist dream. These are our children.

Tremendous progress is being made in child tracing and family reunions. According to a recently released UNICEF study, 64 per cent of the missing Tamil children had been recruited by the LTTE. Many may have died in mosquito infested jungles.

In the post-conflict phase, significant attention is being paid to restoring and rebuilding schools and to the release of schools to the educational authorities. Over 135 schools in the north that were abandoned have now been rehabilitated and are functioning normally. Sri Lanka provides free education to all its children without distinction from kindergarten to university level.

Recognizing that children formerly associated with armed groups continue to be highly vulnerable, the monitoring of the reintegrated former combatants will continue. The Government recognizes that these children should be placed under the purview of the Department of Social Services. Children are an asset and the country will invest heavily in their future, as it had done in the past.

Unfortunately, despite the progress I have outlined, Sri Lanka continues to remain on the naming and shaming list in the annexes to the Secretary-General's report. The unresolved cases relating to five children appear to be the reason for this. In comparison with other situations in the world, this would appear to be trite and unreasonable. The individual allegedly responsible for the situation of the aforementioned children was indicted for criminal intimidation, an offence under the penal code. He pleaded guilty and was convicted and sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment, suspended for 10 years with a fine of 250,000 Sri Lanka rupees.

We call on the Council and the Working Group to undertake a holistic and fair assessment of the Sri Lankan case and to de-list Sri Lanka from the naming and shaming list. Sri Lanka now has a representative on the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and we intend to play a very active role there. It is pertinent to recall in this context a proposal made by a civil society representative, Ms. Carla Stea, at the meeting convened on June 30. She proposed that the Council consider adopting an honours list for countries that have registered appreciable progress in addressing issues of former child soldiers, especially those countries that are also parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The three-tier categorization maintained in the methodology of the annual United States Trafficking in Persons Report is also relevant and instructive in this context. A corresponding list, we believe, would be forward-looking and constructive. It would also encourage more countries with the problem of child recruitment to be willing partners to action plans.

We also agree with the views expressed by some representatives during the side event held on 30 June that the discourse on the issue of children and armed conflict should involve the wider United Nations membership if it is to be truly meaningful. Furthermore, the mandate only covers situations of a conflict. Limiting the discussion to the Security Council and allowing the non-Security Council members to speak on the issue only during open debates really does not accord the issue the seriousness, focus and attention it deserves among the wider membership. Broadening the space of this debate would bode well for ensuring collective responsibility and effective monitoring.