

**Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict, March 7th, 2014, Security Council Chamber**

*Statement by Mr. Kohona, Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations*

I wish to join previous speakers in thanking you, Mr. President, for convening this important debate under the presidency of Luxembourg. We welcome the presence today of His Excellency Mr. Jean Asselborn, Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of Luxembourg. We also thank the speakers who briefed the Council today.

Children in armed conflict is a profoundly disturbing subject for us in Sri Lanka. We went through a dark and brutal conflict during which, according to UNICEF records, thousands of children were recruited as child soldiers and were deprived of their precious childhood. Mercifully, our war on terrorism ended in May 2009 and the sad era of forcible child recruitment for combat by the terror group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was brought to a close — but not before thousands of children paid a heavy price with their lives.

According to UNICEF in a report published in 2011, more than 60 per cent of the LTTE's fighting cadre from 1983 to 2002 consisted of boys and girls less than 18 years of age. UNICEF recorded more than 5,700 cases of child recruitment by the LTTE from 2003 to 2009. Human Rights Watch has suggested a figure of more than 21,000. Following the tsunami, orphaned children were harvested for combat purposes. Child soldiers were also used as suicide bombers, especially girls. Each family was forced to surrender even very young children for combat purposes in the final stages of the conflict. The LTTE had no scruples about sacrificing thousands of children in the frontline of combat. Children were given cyanide capsules by their leaders to commit suicide to avoid capture.

At the Geneva peace talks in February 2006, the LTTE publicly conceded that it was holding thousands of children as combatants. With the end of the conflict, 594 child combatants — 231 girls and 363 boys between the ages of 12 and 18 years — were taken into custody by the security forces. The Government adopted a caring attitude with those former child combatants, treating them with a sensitivity rarely seen elsewhere, as victims and not as perpetrators of violent crimes. They were placed in institutional rehabilitation centres and received access to education, vocational training, health care and psycho-social support. Following their rehabilitation process, they have all been reunited with their immediate or extended families. That happened as early as May 2010. The rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers was a priority for Sri Lanka. Family reunions are continuing to take place with the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF, which has continued to assist with its extensive background of experience and goodwill.

We have always placed the welfare and protection of children at the heart of our policy agenda. The traditional extended family structure in Sri Lanka prioritizes the welfare and education of children. Therefore, forcible child recruitment was excruciating for the affected families in the former conflict-affected areas, as well as for our society at large. I should like to mention that in Sri Lanka all children are required to attend school. Attendance at the primary school level is now close to 100 per cent, including in the former conflict-affected areas.

Let me illustrate the pain and personal loss behind the statistics, with the story of one former child soldier as described by UNICEF. Rajeewan was only 13 years old when he was abducted in 2007 by the LTTE while visiting his sister's family in the Vanni region in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. His many attempts to escape were unsuccessful. He said, "I longed to see my family. I wanted to go home".

He was subsequently placed in the armed ranks of the LTTE and compelled to fight with it until the final stages of the conflict. After the end of the conflict, he surrendered to the Sri Lankan army and was allowed to return home after a year at a rehabilitation centre. The teenager, who left his family at 13, finally returned home as a 19-year-old battle-hardened grownup. Rajeevan lost seven years of his young life to the cruel taskmasters who recruited him. The conflict took away his childhood and disrupted his education, leaving him no option but to look for unskilled work on his release. As he also said,

“I was happy to be finally home, but I was worried about my future and what I could do to earn a living and help my ageing parents”.

Today, almost five years after the end of the conflict, child recruitment is a distant but ever-recurring memory. The story of Rajeevan had a happy ending. With the help of UNICEF, he attended a vocational training programme and obtained qualifications that led to a permanent job as an icecream vendor, selling icecream in villages and towns. Now he says he loves his job and, more than anything, he is able to help his family.

Sri Lanka made its zero-tolerance policy on child recruitment a non-negotiable condition. Through sustained political will and proactive efforts, the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child combatants under our campaign entitled “Bring Back the Child” was achieved. Sri Lanka has criminalized the recruitment of children for armed combat.

Sri Lanka’s approach has had a positive effect on the country’s reconciliation process. Former child soldiers were able to put their pasts behind them and rebuild their lives as the Government adopted the overarching principle of restorative justice and not retributive justice, consistent with our cultural heritage and reconciliation efforts. For us, revenge and retribution was not an option. The opportunity was given to 273 child combatants to continue with their formal education at Hindu College in Colombo, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, prior to their reintegration into their families. Following reunification, they were also given the freedom to seek admission to a school of their choice. Thirty-five former child combatants returned to Hindu College to continue their junior and senior high school education, and 321 former combatants opted to undertake vocational training conducted by the vocational training authority of Sri Lanka.

Among the adult beneficiaries who were once recruited as children, a system called the Catch-up Education Programme has been initiated in liaison with the Ministry of Education to enable them to continue their formal education. In 2010, 175 beneficiaries completed the national Grade 10 examination, while 361 beneficiaries completed the national Grade 12 examination — 91 passed their ordinary level examinations and 222 passed the advanced level examinations.

Let me briefly outline some actions taken by the Government of Sri Lanka over the years on this vital issue.

In terms resolution 1612 (2005), Sri Lanka voluntarily submitted to the Security Council monitoring process and established the Sri Lanka Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting in July 2006. Sri Lanka fully cooperated with the Special Representative, the Council’s Working Group and UNICEF on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child combatants.

During the entire conflict period, basic and essential services such as health care and education were provided unimpeded to all affected communities in the north and the east, with particular attention on

safeguarding the rights and needs of children. The lessons learned and reconciliation commission report comprehensively details the supply of essential services to those areas. In 2006, the consultative committee on humanitarian assistance, an apex consultative body to ensure a coordinated humanitarian response, was established following a request by the co-chairs to the peace process — Japan, the United States, the European Union and Norway.

Sri Lanka's experience in ensuring the overall well-being of children in conflict is unique. Even during the height of the conflict, the Government agreed to a cessation of hostilities to ensure that the national qualifying examinations were held in the conflict zones to enable students to sit their examinations every year. We were also able to reach agreement on ceasing hostilities to ensure that the polio vaccination programme could be carried out in the conflict zones. In recognition of those dedicated efforts, UNICEF, in *The State of the World's Children 2008*, documented and commended Sri Lanka as the best achiever in our subregion despite a long-standing conflict. UNICEF also commended Sri Lanka in its publication entitled *Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity*.

Following the end of the conflict, special initiatives were undertaken to provide access to health services for children through a collaborative mechanism between the national child-protection authority and the department of paediatrics of Colombo University.

In the post-conflict phase, significant attention was paid to restoring and rebuilding schools. Today, 1,630 schools in the former conflict-affected areas have been restored.

An armed group released all combatants under a tripartite action plan with UNICEF and the Government. It has also since transformed itself into a legitimate political party by joining the democratic process. The former adult cadres are very much part of the democratic process. A former child soldier of that armed group was elected as the first chief minister of the Eastern Province.

The Government has established women's and children's police desks staffed with female police officers in police stations in the north and the east. Specially trained police officers function at such desks, which provide an enabling and protective environment for children, women and girls and their parents to report incidents of abuse and exploitation. The network is also linked to the national child-protection authority. Sexual and gender-based violence help desks are located in hospitals in the districts formerly affected by the conflict.

Due to the progress made and the true commitment of the Government with regard to its children and former child soldiers, Sri Lanka was delisted from the Secretary-General's list of shame in June 2012. Sri Lanka successfully completed Security Council-mandated programmes to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

Finally, Sri Lanka continues with its efforts to help and support former child soldiers to rebuild their lives. The Government of Sri Lanka is appreciative of United Nations agencies such as UNICEF, and countries such as Japan, which have made key contributions to the Government's efforts to reintegrate former child soldiers into society.

The Secretary-General's 2013 report on children and armed conflict (S/2013/245) notes that the evolving character and tactics of armed conflict are creating unprecedented threats to children. We encourage greater engagement between Member States and the United Nations for the better protection of all children who are affected by armed conflict.

