

Briefing No.2

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Children in the North-East War:1985 -1995

The Beginnings

From the inception of the UTHR(J), we have constantly documented the use of children in violence, pointing out areas of concern. Our reports analysed the degeneration of the politics that lay behind this development. A host of studies in war zones around the world, including Jaffna, testify to traumatising and other extreme adverse effects on children resulting from the ravages of war. This makes children even more vulnerable to propaganda, the content of which they are, even under normal conditions, in no position to judge. The use of children as tools of war, where they are manipulated and coerced into being the unwitting and unwilling perpetrators of war's inevitable atrocities and inhumanities, is therefore as pernicious as it is cynical. It can form no part of a genuine liberation struggle. It would thus hardly come as a surprise that the child recruits are drawn from the most vulnerable sections of society. These child victims in turn brutalise an entire society beyond human endurance.

The first use of children in the North-East war surfaced during the mid-eighties when various groups used them as sentries. These children were, sometimes, given grenades and asked to monitor the movements of the Sri Lankan Army as well as of other groups around their camps. When the LTTE attacked and killed several hundred cadres from the TELO in May 1986, several of these children who were on sentry duty were also brutally killed. The enlistment of very young children for military activities began about November 1987, following the establishment of the Indian Army's control over Jaffna. Children as young as ten were used as assassins by the LTTE in a bid to paralyse life in Jaffna. During the middle of 1989, the Indian-backed EPRLF-led coalition press-ganged thousands of youth for its Tamil National Army, hundreds of whom were later massacred by the LTTE. Among the conscripts were many children.



LTTE child soldier captured by the Army

Institutionalisation of child recruitment

A point had been reached where large numbers of people became disillusioned with the liberation struggle. While mature youths kept away, the use of women and children as combatants became significant from the inception of the war with the IPKF(Indian Army). When the Indian Army withdrew and the LTTE prepared for a fresh round of war with the Sri Lankan forces during the early months of 1990, the use of children had become firmly institutionalised.

The LTTE had cornered itself into a situation where its oppressiveness within the community had to be counterbalanced by an appeal deriving from a vision of the grandiose. Sycophancy from all levels of society was used to legitimise its cause and its recruitment drive. We have in our earlier reports described how several members of the elite traded expressions of support for the LTTE in return for special favours in securing their private interests.

From 1990, the LTTE's methods of enlisting children were initially relatively subtle. The methods employed included displaying cut outs and poster pictures of dead cadre all over, patriotic songs, exhibits of representations of Sri Lankan Army atrocities, meetings in schools, LTTE versions of history in school curricula with compulsory tests and a general exhibition of military glamour. Even children's playgrounds and parks were designed with mock weapons to give children a feeling that they were playing in a battle ground. A common picture seen everywhere in Jaffna in 1990 was of an LTTE soldier holding children on either side and walking towards a hill top where a gun was planted upside down. This symbolically portrayed the vision of the LTTE.

An important reason why children were vulnerable to the appeal of the LTTE was the inhuman behaviour of the security forces, particularly in the East, and the constant use of aerial bombing and shelling of civilian areas of the North. It must be remembered that this recruitment was taking place amidst social

paralysis, and in a moral vacuum where only one voice could be heard - the voice of the LTTE.

Since a momentary perception of glamour, or alienation, rather than political motivation, was what led children to join, this tended to wear off quickly and many children longed to get back to their mothers. Thus, from the beginning, means were contrived by the organisation to trap the children.

1. The LTTE's laborious pass system restricts flow of the people from the North. Also, the general travel ban on the age group 10-25 years makes it extremely difficult to take children out of Jaffna.

2. As soon as children were taken into the organisation their hair was cropped to make sure that they do not escape. There are several cases of deserters in Jaffna who had to be kept hidden until the hair grew. As the war of June 1990 gathered momentum even harsher methods were employed. Children who joined were quickly hidden away and parents were denied contact. The first child to express a wish to go home, was humiliated and given a sound thrashing in front of his mates, which effectively deterred others from expressing any such wish.

3. The procedure for leaving the organisation was so punitive that even those who applied to leave after being in the organisation for a number of years often withdrew their application.

Dehumanisation and traumatisation

Many children were used in tasks such as the torture of political prisoners, and in massacres, even of women and children in Muslim and Sinhalese villages. Children were also used in massed frontal attacks such as on Elephant Pass camp in July 1991. There were also very young cadre in other major massed attacks, such as at Pooneryn during November 1993. Each one of these attacks claimed of the order of 500 dead. The trauma of children who suffered permanent loss of limb and saw many of their closest comrades mowed down, made a vivid impression on those who visited Jaffna Hospital. The agony of children who had being used in acts of violence against unarmed civilians, women and children are also on record. Several of them were in the 12-14 age group. Many of them live in a spiritual emptiness where they wish to end their lives, and resign themselves to be used within the organisation itself as suicide operatives. The LTTE also found that children are more useful and efficient as lone assassins. With cyanide in hand, when children lose the fear of being apprehended, they could become very deadly. They have fewer inhibitions and treat the assignments as a game.

Target groups

One gets some idea of which the target groups for recruitment are if one takes into account the fact that in the Jaffna peninsula, the most educationally advanced part of the North-East where many have access to foreign countries, about 20 to 30% of the population has already emigrated to the West. Although the LTTE regards all children as potential recruits and has imposed strict controls on people leaving the North, the elite and their children are accorded

favoured treatment in return for their complicity. Displacement of large populations and the high cost of living, partly resulting from the LTTE's means of financing the war, have made the poor extremely desperate. It is such groups that provide most of the child recruits. 'Punniapoomi' (Sacred Land) is a school run by the LTTE in Oddusuddan where children are moulded and trained in a militaristic environment. The 'Chencholai' group are LTTE sponsored orphanages in Jaffna, where children are taught to sing songs with godly veneration for the Leader and his vision.

From early March 1995 even as the recent peace talks were supposed to be going on, LTTE propaganda wing leader Thamil Chelvan addressed school children in the Rural North announcing preparations for the next round of war and calling for volunteers. Recruitment took an aggressive turn, particularly when the war became a physical fact from 19th April. There was a sharp increase in the invasion of schools and tutorials in Jaffna by the LTTE to have recruitment sessions. A Student's Revival Week was announced beginning 6th June targeting students in the mid-teens who were to be subjected to intense propaganda and the screening of action videos. Schools are now grinding to a halt as parents and teachers fear for the children. In recent weeks there have been several amazing instances of unorganised and spontaneous resistance by parents and teachers to the LTTE. The latter have used desperate methods to enter schools whose authorities and parents tried to prevent them. Principals have been manhandled and veiled threats issued against individual teachers. Even this resistance may fall apart in the face of the LTTE's resolve to recruit their targetted 10,000 cadre, if the Government continues to bomb and shell civilian areas! Confronted with public demonstrations of disenchantment in earlier times, the LTTE's reflex has been to provoke the opposing state power into a violent response that was as severe as it was blind.

In the East the recruitment was concentrated during the ceasefire period of early January to April 19th. One means used to collect children was the screening of video recordings of military operations such as Elephant Pass and Pooneryn. One category of youth in the Amparai district among whom the LTTE recruited a significant number are cow hands. These were boys mainly in the age group 12 - 16 years who had dropped out of school for reasons of poverty.

There were several cases where youngsters were forcibly taken by the LTTE. In one case two boys of ages 15 & 18 respectively from the Amparai District who later walked through the jungles to Urani in the Batticaloa District said that they had been forced by the LTTE which otherwise threatened to set fire to their houses. In Kallar people complained to the STF that LTTE recruiters were forcibly taking four boys in a north-bound public bus towards Batticaloa. They were rescued by the STF at the Cheddipalyam check-point. The incident was reported in the press and was independently confirmed by us. A technique commonly employed was for an LTTE cadre to lure a school boy away to a lonely place by asking him for a lift on his bicycle.

Even for children who went on their own, the transience of the attraction clearly revealed itself. In the Batticaloa District, unlike in LTTE controlled

Jaffna, many of the boys were able to escape and go into hiding or surrender to the Army, provided they had not been sent to Jaffna immediately. There was also the operation of a herd instinct. Often boys joined as a group and deserted as a group. In Veechukalmunai, four joined after a video session, and all four later returned home. There are several cases of this kind. One of the LTTE's operations during the ceasefire was to launch boy-hunts for youngsters with cropped hair (the first thing done upon recruitment) who were in hiding.

Around Batticaloa town itself more than 40 youths, both escaped and deserted from the LTTE recently, were handed over to their parents by the Army through various channels. Other sources in the North said that during the ceasefire, about seven MRS buses brought Eastern youth for training in Mullaitivu- a total of more than 500. The age group they said was below 15 and sometimes less than ten. The total number recruited or conscripted from the East during this period is placed at about 1500 - some put it below this figure and others estimate figures as high as 3000. The majority of the recruits were from certain parts of Batticaloa District including Kiran and Sittandy areas. Knowledgeable sources place the total number recruited in Trincomalee District at much below 200.

Addressing the issues: Some first steps

The use of children as combatants in the manner it is done brings out certain features of the Tamil struggle in its present debased form. Apart from condemning the LTTE for methods of this kind, we need to understand other important factors which contribute to this tragedy.

From past experiences with the Security Forces, most Tamils do feel insecure. Even people who stayed in refugee camps during 1990 were taken away by the Security Forces and hundreds of them disappeared (eg. Eastern University). Most of the poor who live in interior villages in the Eastern Province have undergone tremendous hardships resulting from the total disregard with which they have been treated by the State. Invariably every family has been affected by Security Forces activity. Their constant disabilities range from threat to their life, to a breakdown of economic activity. Young children continue to live with bitter memories amidst fear. Their internalised anger is being effectively harnessed by the LTTE in various ways.

Unless the voices of people who are marginalised are heard and responded to, the present trend will continue. Owing to the chauvinist ideology in which most members of the Security Forces have been moulded, they are unable to respond creatively to the dilemma of ordinary Tamils, and find it more congenial to rely on the use of terror.

The grim fate staring at these children scarred by the war poses a major challenge for democratic forces in the South that are working for peace. They need to understand the predicament of the ordinary Tamil people and consistently uphold their interests by making the Security Forces accountable.

Moreover, the Government needs to take the initiative to monitor the activities of the Security Forces especially in the interior villages. The reality in Jaffna too needs clear understanding. The children are growing up in a militarised environment, having constantly faced bombing and shelling. They have been in every sense trapped by a force which sees children chiefly as cannon fodder.

Suicidal attacks and cyanide carrying cadre symbolise the overall nature of the political trend. If it cannot attain its goal of achieving uncontested power (ie. Eelam) , it will commit both itself and the section of Tamil society within its ambit to collective suicide. This is the inescapable direction of its logic. How do we break this vicious circle? If the Government is prepared to accept that the politics of the past, with its narrow sectarian ends, had created the present crisis, it is necessary to look into every aspect of life which has been affected by it.

Has the Government any message for the children, the marginalised, and the youths in Tamil society ? If so, are there any concrete programmes to educate and guide the Armed Forces who are the only representatives of the Government in the war zones? Are there any structures which have been vested with adequate powers to give effect to such programmes? Is there any qualitative change in the outlook of the military to encompass the complex reality of the present and the ethnic nature of the conflict?

Then, how do Tamils themselves deal with this phenomenon of child warriors? We can no doubt academically explain the present reality. But can we justify it and allow this trend to continue when we can clearly see that its outcome is necessarily the total destruction of our community? In the present reality where ordinary Tamil people are powerless, some perceive it as a necessity to preserve the LTTE with its child battalions comprising other people's children, as a means to extract a political solution from the Government. Hence all criticism is muted. But the hypocrisy of this position becomes evident from the fact that it is nearly always voiced by elites from outside the North East and by a few in Jaffna whose children have been secured means of escape. On the other hand the victims and prospective victims in the North-East are daily voicing their doubts in several ways about the politics which is neither defensive nor liberating. Tamil opinion makers, politicians and expatriates must look at the fate that awaits these children and the community, and rethink the roles they are playing now.

At a broader level, can we allow such collective brutalisation to continue in the name of patriotism, national integrity and sovereignty; or of the right to self determination and liberation? We do know from experience that these notions are only rhetorical in the absence of any corresponding substance in the politics of either side that could give them realisation.