Sri Lanka: Coalition of rights groups urges Tamil Tigers to stop recruiting children at Hindu temple festivals.

London 13 June 2005. A group of leading human rights and humanitarian organizations today strongly urged the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to stop all recruitment of under 18 year olds at Hindu temple festivals in the eastern Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka.

The International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers said that sources on the ground have reported increased recruitment at temple festivals in recent weeks. Most of the children are believed to be about 15 or 16. In one case parents said their 17-year-old son was with friends in Koraweli when he was escorted away by an alleged LTTE member on 23 May. Family members said the LTTE later confirmed that the youth was being held at the Navalady Uttu base. The family said they had met other parents trying to locate their children at the camp. Eight children were reportedly recruited on 9 June at the Punnai Cholai Kali temple festival. There have been further reports of underage recruitment in Koppaveli, Mandur and Mandapathady.

"These reports are particularly troubling as they could signal a return to past practice" said Coalition representative Victoria Forbes Adam. Temple festivals have been frequent sites for LTTE recruitment. For example, in July 2004, an estimated 26 people, mostly children, were taken from the Thandamalay Murugan temple. Most were subsequently released after family members protested and international agencies intervened.

Up to 100 cases of underage recruitment a month were reported to UNICEF during the second half of 2004 but reports of recruitment decreased substantially in the first months of 2005, with UNICEF registering a total of 154 cases from January to May 2005. "The decrease in recruitment over recent months was a welcome and encouraging development," said Ms Forbes Adam, “but increased recruitment at temple festivals puts this progress in jeopardy. It contravenes the LTTE’s pledges and is very distressing for the children and their families.”

A ceasefire has been in place between the government and the LTTE since February 2002. The LTTE has pledged to end all underage recruitment and to stop using children for military purposes. In July 2003 it signed a Joint Action Plan with the Sri Lanka government for the demobilization of all the under-18s in its ranks.

The Coalition is urging the LTTE to uphold its pledges, to release all the under 18s in its ranks and to issue immediate orders for a halt to all recruitment, including at temple festivals.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was formed in May 1998 by leading non-governmental organizations to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers,
both boys and girls, to secure their demobilization and to promote their reintegration into their communities. It works to achieve this through research, monitoring, advocacy, public education, network development and capacity building.

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