CHAPTER TWO
SRI LANKA: A CASE STUDY

Sri Lanka has a total of 6.3 million below eighteen years of its total population of 18.3 million. Of this figure it is estimated that some 2,000 children are deployed by the rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).¹ Sri Lanka’s Directorate of Military Intelligence estimates that 60 per cent of the LTTE fighters are below eighteen. Even if this figure is exaggerated, an assessment of the LTTE fighters who have been killed in combat reveal that 40 per cent of its fighting force are both males and females between nine and eighteen years of age.

Sri Lanka has been chosen as a case study because its rebel force, the LTTE, has been assessed by international security and intelligence communities, as being the deadliest contemporary guerrilla terrorist group and is also the world’s first rebel group with cadres drawn from a younger age range.²

The conflict in Sri Lanka is a result of the colonial legacy of divide and rule by the British. The Tamils, though well-educated, were given a disproportionate number of top jobs in the civil service by the British. Once the Sinhalese majority held the political influence, its politicians sought to redress the balance with populist but discriminatory policies against the Tamils. In 1956, the

government of Srimavo Bandaranaike, which came to power on the crest of a popular upsurge of the Sinhalese masses and as a champion of Buddhist revivalism, adopted the “Sinhala Only” law and two years later in 1957, passed the Tamil Language (Special Provision) Act. The Sinhalese felt that at last their language was getting precedence and place due to it while the Tamils thought that now the chances of Tamil were gone. Before the passing of the “Sinhala Only” law both the Sinhalese and Tamil languages were regarded as official languages in Sri Lanka. With the implementation of the language law, the Tamils felt intimidated. An agitation against the Sinhalese was started by the Tamils in the north that was retaliated by the Sinhalese in the south. Bandaranaike tried to allay the fears of the Tamils but to no avail. To make matters worse, the Language of Courts Act 1961 was passed and replaced English with Sinhalese as the language of the courts. This law was made applicable also in Tamil areas as the official language. By the mid-1970s, Tamils were calling for more autonomy in the Tamil areas and the relaxation of language competence for Tamil students into local universities. They also demanded that Tamil be placed at par with the Sinhalese language and be an alternative official language. In seeking approval of the Sinhalese population and to maintain his popularity, President J. R. Jayewardene rejected the Tamil demands, thus invoking resentment and subsequently armed conflict. In the history of the Sri Lankan conflict, thirty-eight Tamil groups and three Sinhala groups have advocated or used terrorism to

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4 Sadhan Mukherjee, Ceylon, Island that Changed, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 46-47.  
5 www.infolanka.com
achieve political goals. The LTTE remains the only rebel group to use children in warfare, stemming from the innovative capability and potential capacity of this resource.⁶

The LTTE, originally known as the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), was created by Velupillai Prabhakaran, in 1972.⁷ Four years later in 1976, he renamed the organization as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and has remained its leader, fighting for an independent Tamil mono-ethnic state in northeastern Sri Lanka. Although children have always been part of the Tigers cadres, its recruitment of large numbers of women and children was only seriously considered after it declared war against the 100,000 strong Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in October 1987. The IPKF was sent to this island nation as part of an agreement between Sri Lanka and India to resolve the ethnic conflict in the former.

Child soldiers were originally recruited into the LTTE’s Baby Brigade or Bakuts. But after the 1987 clash with the IPKF, they were integrated with the adult units. Initially recruited from refugee children in India, they were reportedly sent to a training camp in the southern Indian port town of Pondicherry and supervised by one Basheer Kaka of Trincomalee However the training was non-military and essentially concerned with physical exercises and education only.⁸

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⁸ “Child Soldiers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.com
The LTTE child soldiers recorded their first major action on 22 November 1990, where an attack on the Manikuiam army camp was launched killing nearly a-third of the Sri Lankan troops and an estimated 62 child soldiers. The heavy casualties suffered by the Tigers whereby an estimated 550 LTTE cadres, including children, were killed in their second major attack on the strategic Elephant Pass military complex on 10 July 1991. This forced the LTTE to strategize their deployment tactics and as such changed the composition of its attacking groups. It put child cadres together with elite Black Tigers cadres and scored astonishing results, once in 1993 and another in 1996, whereby two army and navy complexes were overrun and an estimated US$100 million worth of arms and ammunition were seized by the Tigers. In the 1996 amphibious attack on the military complex in Mullaitivu, child soldiers shot dead some 300 troops after they were disarmed.

Beginning from October 1995, the Sri Lankan military launched a series of operations to deprive the LTTE of territorial control over the Jaffna peninsula that is the Tamil heartland. The LTTE northern command engaged in a tactical repositioning of its troops, withdrawing the bulk of fighters to the Wanni mainland. The Baby Brigade was temporarily dismantled and its units were placed under the LTTE military intelligence directorate. The child forces were given training in small business, namely selling ice cream, newspapers, fruits,

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10 “Child Soldiers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.com
lottery tickets and working in cafes and restaurants with the aim to re-infiltrate into the peninsula. After a while many of them began to live with their parents, relatives and families of the LTTE sympathizers, thus becoming the 'eyes and ears' of the LTTE. With intelligence provided by members of the dismantled Baby Brigade, LTTE Sparrow Teams struck, killing Tamil informants and supporters of the government as well as Sri Lankan troops. It was difficult for counter-intelligence operatives to believe that the LTTE was using children to gather intelligence on troop movements and dispositions. It was even harder to apprehend and prosecute children who were under the age of sixteen.\textsuperscript{11}

The Leopard Brigade, or Siruthai Puli, is said to be the fiercest of all LTTE fighting unit. Children from LTTE-managed orphanages make up the Leopard Brigade. The children profess unswerving loyalty to Tiger chief, Prabhakaran, and their commitment have attracted considerable attention. Among their action was the gunning down of 200 elite government troops on 4 December 1997 in Kanakarankulam, Wanni. Despite the casualties suffered by the government forces, the LTTE failed to overrun the territory because the LTTE too suffered setbacks in causalities especially their child combatants. After the clash, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) sent back 113 bodies, many of who were LTTE's child soldiers.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
The infamous suicide bombers known to have murdered many government leaders including Rajiv Gandhi, former Indian Premier, are made up of the female wing better known as ‘Birds of Freedom’. The girls are personally selected by the Tiger chief from children as young as ten.\(^{13}\) Being a human bomb volunteer is held in high esteem in the LTTE folklore. The said suicide bomber is extended the ‘privilege’ of having the ‘last supper’ with the LTTE chief, Prabhakaran, before setting-off on the mission.\(^{14}\) Women are often preferred to men for the simple reason that they are not subjected to the same kind of movement restrictions and body searches. Moreover, the layers of a woman’s clothing can easily disguise the bulky suicide belt, which is more conspicuous under a man’s shirt and trousers.\(^{15}\) The first high profile suicide bomb attack killing by the LTTE was that of the Sri Lankan Defence Minister, Rajan Wijeratne, in Colombo by a car-borne attacker on 2 March, 1991. In addition, one Dhanu, assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at an election rally in Sriperambadur, Madras on 21 May 1991. Female suicide bombers are not just adults but also include children as young as sixteen. In early June 1999, a 16-year-old suicide bomber blew up Muthulingam Ganesh Kumar alias Razeek, who was a former guerrilla and involved in counter-terrorism operations at the time of his death in Batticaloa district.\(^{16}\) The LTTE justifies their use of females as


\(^{14}\) “Sri Lanka-Suicide Killings”, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org


\(^{16}\) “Sri Lanka-Suicide Killings”, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org
suicide bombers as a way of helping women become liberated and of counteracting the oppressive traditionalism of the present system. 17

As in any military conflict, there are bound to be casualties on both sides. Besides success, the LTTE have also encountered heavy losses to their forces where child combatants have been sacrificed. During the Weli Oliya complex assault in July 1995, most of the soldiers killed were children while the clash on the Wanni defences on 1 February 1998 claimed the lives of 200 child fighters. In another battle in October 1999, 49 children including 32 girls aged between ten and fifteen were among the 140 cadres killed. 18

It is claimed that there are more teenagers than adult LTTE fighters, in government custody because children are more reluctant than their adult counterparts to bite the cyanide capsule when they surrender or are wounded. 19 According to human rights lawyers representing detainees, children arrested under the Prevention Terrorism Act (which limits the age of participation for criminal responsibility to sixteen) on suspicion of involvement with the LTTE can face years in detention. 20 Amnesty International, on the other hand, reported that there have been cases of children tortured while in custody. 21 A recent Human Rights

20 Human Rights Watch, No. 1/99 and 4/00.
Commission report on the massacre of 26 young Tamils on 25 October 2000, in a rehabilitation center catering for the vocational training and psychological counseling of Tamil detainees before reintegrating them into society, revealed that the 46 former child soldiers who had either surrendered or captured were cornered inside their dormitories, then beaten with machetes, clubs and iron rods while some were set on fire. In the days leading to the attack, the Tamil prisoners had reportedly been protesting about staff mistreatment and length of detention. Just a day before the tragedy, a shot was heard from within the camp and word spread that a rebellion had erupted. A Sinhalese crowd comprising of about 3,000 villagers began to gather and started pelting stones at the inmates while armed police officers standing guard just stood by.22

During a visit to Sri Lanka in May 1988 by Olara Otunnu, the United Nations Special Envoy on Children and Armed Conflict, to examine the problems faced by the children caught up in the civil war, the LTTE leadership made an oral commitment not to recruit children under seventeen and not to use children under eighteen in hostilities.23 However, there was no commitment made on the release of those already recruited.24 The LTTE made a mockery of this commitment when it continued to recruit hundreds more from the Batticaloa area, forcibly taking children from schools.25

It was reported that at one time teachers and school principles in Vanni would help parents surround children to safeguard them from the LTTE abductors who go to their schools. The situation, however, has changed since 1996 because the LTTE would threaten the teachers if they fail to cooperate with them. Fearing that they would also suffer the same fate as others that failed to comply with the LTTE demands, the teachers would walk away while their wards were pressured or persuaded into following the recruiters.26

Propaganda used by the LTTE to get school children to join the LTTE is now a common feature. A common message conveyed to every school visited by the LTTE recruiter is that:27

I thought studies were important and I had put my heart and soul into it but later realized that liberation is far more important. Studies are not necessary until Eelam is achieved.

Institutions of learning are the main sources of child soldier recruitment for the LTTE. It is here that the child gets his first dose of political indoctrination delivered in between regular classes by the teachers compelled by fear of the LTTE. It is for this reason that some parents are reluctant to sent their children to

27 Ibid.
school. Their anxiety is justified as it was reported that in November 1998, the LTTE abducted some 64 children from a school in Batticaloa.

The LTTE has refuted claims that it recruits child soldiers. It claims that children under seventeen who voluntarily join the LTTE are sent back to their parents. The LTTE strongly defend its commitment made to Olara Otunnu that it does not recruit cadres against their will. However, the LTTE admits that it is impossible for the organization to scrutinize every individual by age and their reasons for joining. A Tamil support group has dismissed the many defamatory reports about the LTTE as being a merciless organization and claims that such vicious tales is the work of Tamil traitors orchestrated by the Sinhala government to discredit the LTTE.

There is some truth in the claim that Tamil children join the LTTE voluntarily or are offered by their parents for the cause of Eelam or escape the clutches of brutalities of the Sri Lankan forces and discrimination of the Sinhalese. The LTTE uses propaganda to encourage every family to give a son or daughter to the cause. The families of recruits get US$40 a month and food

28 Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, Child Soldiers-The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts, p.31.
The children in Tamil schools militarized by the LTTE are not just taught the rudiments but have been known to carry out military training as well as indoctrination classes depicting the brutalities of the Sinhalese army and inciting the children to become heroes. The children are told by recruiters, that if they die fighting it will be a hero’s death but if they die a natural death it will be a coward’s death. When acts of persuasion fail, the LTTE resorts to forced conscription. It was reported that the LTTE was abducting children at gun-point and loading them onto trucks with some of them jumping out to freedom, while parents ran wailing behind the vehicles. Once recruited, each child becomes detached from his family and undergoes intensive military training for four months in the jungle. At times, owing to the exigency of immediate requirement on the battlefield, the program is cut short by three months. There they are taught how to handle the AK-74 and M16 as well as the use of hand bombs. Orphanages are not spared the atrocities of the LTTE. One report cites the case of a mother who left her child to be brought up in a LTTE-sponsored orphanage called Chencholai (Red Blossomed Garden), only to receive a sealed coffin containing the remains of her thirteen-year-old child some three years later. The Chencholai houses inmates from a variety of backgrounds. Some are close relatives or siblings of dead LTTE cadre whose families had fallen on difficult times. Children in these homes are graded into categories and used accordingly.

32 "You will have to die," Newsweek, 29 May 2000.
34 "You will have to die," Newsweek, 29 May 2000.
36 www.lanka.net/lakehouse
37 "Sri Lanka," www.satp.org
Some would study and get into universities while some do military-related work from a very early age.\textsuperscript{38}

Like most rebel groups that have sustained through its trials and tribulations, there is certainly either moral or financial support from foreign sources. This quarter century old organization has survived the mill because of international financial support. The bulk of funds are raised through a charitable organization known as Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) that engages in large-scale projects to alleviate the sufferings of 600,000 displaced Tamils by massive fund-raising campaigns in France, Britain and Canada, as well as receiving a substantial grant from the German government. The funds are not solely used for humanitarian and children’s welfare organizations as claimed. Instead it is used to fund the LTTE’s war effort.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the United States’ designation of the LTTE as a terrorist group, the TRO raises funds there as well. In permitting funds raised for humanitarian purposes, Washington has earned the criticism of its own operatives because of the difficulty of monitoring how the money will be used in the affected areas. Since no mechanisms are available for monitoring expenditure in the affected areas, the United States’ decision is perceived as naïve.\textsuperscript{40} The LTTE has also founded bases in India, Libya, Myanmar and Thailand for their logistical support. Phuket, in Thailand, for instance has

\textsuperscript{40} Gunaratna, "LTTE Child Combatants," www.reality.lanka.com
been an active holding center for the LTTE since the late-1980s. Over the last decade, Thailand has become a vital interface between the LTTE’s war at home and its relentless international arms-procurement efforts. The ruse was discovered on 9 April 2000 when Thai marine police at Phukat’s Rassada pier stopped a truck and its driver for suspected smuggling of oil. The investigation led the authorities to a Sri Lankan born Tamil with Norwegian citizenship and his 17-meter high-powered motor boat equipped with sophisticated and global positioning system equipment, satellite phones, combat-training videos in Tamil and LTTE calendars and uniforms. Also uncovered was a half-built mini submarine at one of Phuket’s shipyards. A LTTE commercial vessel, Sunbird, carrying diving and communications equipment and ammunition which was impounded in Penang, Malaysia in December 1990, had regularly called at Phuket. The LTTE’s front companies and sympathizers in Bangkok have provided backup for an extensive logistics network. Munitions have moved not only through Phuket, but also Ranong and Krabi on the Andaman coast, as well as Satahip on the Gulf of Thailand. Most of the hardware the Tigers critically need (namely artillery, mortar rounds, surface-to-air missiles, big-caliber machine-gun ammunition) is bought from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and North Korea and Thai ports are used as key points for trans-shipment. Munitions are switched from ocean-going vessels to smaller crafts to make the risky 1,9000-km run to the Sri Lanka’s northeastern coast.41

Financially, the LTTE is said to accrue some US$60 million a year through a highly secretive set of businesses around the globe, including running illegal immigrants into Europe and North America. They also own more than a dozen ships. In between smuggling arms, ammunition, explosives and illegal narcotics using different front companies, the LTTE also transports rice, cement and other legitimate cargo to Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The Tigers have tapped into Tamil communities in more than forty countries, often using violence and intimidation to collect ‘taxes’ from local businesses and Tamil families-ranging from 33 cents a day in Canada to US$300 a year in Britain.42

The international community cannot be totally held responsible for the continued existence of the LTTE and its defiance to the ban on child conscripts. On the domestic front, the Sri Lankan Government is to be blamed for failing to counter the psychological operations on systematic LTTE propaganda in fund raising and child recruitment. It looks like the only solution to ending the child soldier problem is to end the conflict itself. President Chandrika Kumaratunga should be commended for taking the initiative to end this 17 year-old conflict that has left more than 62,000 people dead since 1983, but the initiative was rejected by the LTTE. The inability to neutralize the rebels makes it difficult for President Kumaratunga to proceed with her alternative strategy of finding a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka’s troubles. That strategy revolves around a constitutional package that would ultimately result in some autonomy for the 3.2 million Tamils.

The new constitution would guarantee freedom of religion but states that Buddhism, the religion of the Sinhalese would be protected by the government. It however, forbids regional councils, which would operate for ten years, from promoting secession in any way, but calls for a referendum in ten years to decide whether the northeast remains merged. The 84,000 Tamils whose forefathers were brought from India to Sri Lanka by the British to work in plantations would be granted their citizenship.\textsuperscript{43} It is hoped this could form the basis for attempts brokered by Norway to lure the Tigers to the negotiating table. President Kumaratunga’s pledge among others also devolves powers to the regions north and south of the island, where the Tigers are fighting for a separate state and abolish the executive presidency. This twin-track approach is aimed at eroding support for the LTTE as well as bringing the LTTE to the negotiating table.\textsuperscript{44} However, President Kumaratunga’s proposal for constitutional reform has run into problems with the opposition United National Party (UNP) which has five vital seats in the Sri Lankan Parliament. A member of the opposition front, Joseph Pararajasingham, is of the opinion that the proposed reform does not fulfill the aspirations of the Tamil people.\textsuperscript{45} He further reiterated that:\textsuperscript{46}

> It does not permanently merge the north and east and does not vest the regional authorities with the power over land. I don’t think any Tamil who is committed to this cardinal principle will support the new constitution ... and personally I feel that I cannot support this.

\textsuperscript{43}“Sri Lanka proposes reforms to end war,” \textit{The Star}, 4 August 2000.


\textsuperscript{46}“Sri Lanka proposes reforms to end war,” \textit{The Star}, 4 August 2000.
Another attempt at reconciliation met with a deadlock again as with earlier attempts initiated domestically and by third parties when the rebels rejected the offer saying that they will settle for nothing less than a separate homeland.\textsuperscript{47} Norway attempted to mediate a peaceful settlement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE through its Foreign Minister who made a visit to Sri Lanka in February 2000 but failed to effect any positive changes to the conflict.\textsuperscript{48} One political analyst, P. Ramasamy, is of the opinion that these talks especially those mediated by India, Japan, Britain and South Africa have failed because of underlying agendas on the part of the mediators as well as the Sri Lankan government.\textsuperscript{49} Whatever the motives are of either party, it is without doubt that third party intervention appears the to be the only reasonable solution to the conflict and in resolving the child soldier problems in Sri Lanka. Until such an amicable solution is reached, innocent Tamil children will probably continued to be abused by both the Sri Lankan government as well as the LTTE.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} “You will die”, \textit{Newsweek}, 29 May 2000.

A LTTE child soldier

Source: Janes Intelligence Review July 1998
Tiger Cubs of Sri Lanka in the bush

A LTTE adult with a Tiger Cub

Source: http://www.spur.asn.au/childwar.htm