Schoolgirl recruited to fight for Tigers

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Taken from home; now learning job skills at camp for child soldiers Stewart Bell, National Post AMBEPUSSA, Sri Lanka -- A demure 16-year-old in a pink sweater, skirt and sandals, Darshika Kugandirasan doesn't look like a frontline guerrilla fighter. She looks like a schoolgirl, which she was until two months ago. She was studying at Malawi Central College, hoping to become a teacher, even though classes were often cancelled because of the war.

As the eldest of three children, she knew the Tamil rebels wanted her to join; every family was expected to hand over at least one child for the liberation cause. She tried to dodge them by staying indoors and out of sight, but on March 14 they came to take her to the training camp at Mulaivaikal.Her parents tried to stop them. "They were shouting and crying," she said. But there was nothing they could do. She was going to become a Tamil Tiger.Ms. Kugandirasan told her story at a government-run rehabilitation camp for child soldiers, where she has been living since surrendering last month.The widespread conscription of child soldiers has been one of the most disturbing aspects of Sri Lanka's long civil war. Thousands of youths have been recruited during the three-decade conflict.Although the rebels promised to stop the practice, Ms. Kugandirasan's account and those of others like her suggest they have embarked on a renewed child recruitment campaign in recent months, possibly to replenish their ranks in the face of a devastating Sri Lankan government offensive.The camp is a cluster of bungalows on a mountain slope overlooking a lush river valley. A barbed-wire fence surrounds the compound and troops guard the main gate.Teenage girls in bright print dresses walk to class holding their notebooks and boys play volleyball. It looks like high school, except all the 95 youths here have been to war.Ms. Kugandirasan said she witnessed the change in the rebel recruitment campaign herself. Whereas Tamil parents once had to forfeit one child to the Tigers, more recently families were told to keep one child and send the rest to fight. Recruiters started taking two or three kids from each house.When she got to the training camp, Ms. Kugandirasan said she was one of 150 kids as young as 13. Their camp was one of at least five in the area. Those caught trying to escape were beaten, she added. The instructors cropped her hair and handed her a Chinese T-56 assault rifle. She was told to pick a Tiger name, a nom-de-guerre. She chose Clever Girl.The female instructors showed her how to fire her T-56 and told her she needed to fight for "Eelam," the Tamil homeland, but she said she didn't see the point. She figured Sri Lanka was too small to divide and everyone should just get along. Eight days into training, she was sent to the front. Her unit consisted of 40 girls, all terrified. They didn't want to fight, she said. They only wanted to escape. Fifteen of the girls were killed or wounded. Ms. Kugandirasan was shot in the leg. Rebel medics brought her to a hospital camp for treatment. She spent 10 days recovering, then made her break. She crept from house to house until she reached her parents' home. Six days later, they all left together.Twice, they tried to cross the 500-metre no-man's land to the government side, but the Tamil Tigers fired and they had to come back and wait. She said the rebels were firing at those trying to escape. On the third try, they made it across. The Sri Lankan armed forces brought her family to Vavuniya, where most of those displaced by the war are being kept at government camps. Ms. Kugandirasan admitted her involvement with the rebels and, on May 1, she and 57 other ex-combatants aged 14 to 18 were taken south to the child soldier rehabilitation centre near Ambepussa. Their daily program begins with physical exercise, followed by vocational training classes where they learn sewing (the garment industry is one of Sri Lanka's biggest employers) or plumbing (a skill many hope to use to get a job overseas). They study math, English and Sinhalese. Dinner is at 7:30 p. m., then they are free until bedtime. A child psychologist visits regularly and parental visits are permitted. Just over half the youths here are boys, such as Agilan Govindarajah. The 17-year-old said he was living in Kilinochchi when the Tamil Tiger recruiters took him away. Sent to the front, he panicked. He dropped his gun, climbed through a barricade and walked across a lagoon to surrender to the Sri Lankan forces. His shins are still scarred from wrestling razor wire. He only arrived at the rehabilitation camp days ago. The staff said the new arrivals tend to play down their involvement with the rebels at first, until they relax and open up. Most have no parents. They were taken from their homes at a young age and their families have been killed or gone missing. The rebels were their only family. Ms. Kugandirasan, one of 41 girls here, said she likes the camp, but worries about her parents. She hasn't heard from them and doesn't know where they are. When she thinks about her brief time as a rebel fighter, she feels frightened. "When I was there, we didn't know if we would live long. Anytime, we are expecting our deaths," she said. In the open-air classroom, a poster shows a boy carrying a machine gun, part of UNICEF's campaign against child soldiers. "I think it's not a good idea," Ms. Kugandirasan said of the Tamil rebels' child recruitment. "Children, they want education. If they go and join the forces by themselves, it's not a problem. But if [the rebels take them] by force, they destroy their future."Courtesy: Nationalpost.com