Tamil Tigers’ child conscripts bid farewell to arms

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Hannah Gardner, Foreign Correspondent AMBEPUSSA, SRI LANKA // Suresh has a sweet face and gentle manner. His skinny body and the downy fuzz on his upper lip mark him out as boy who is still a couple of years away from becoming a man. But in January, that transformation was brutally accelerated.

As fighting between Sri Lanka’s army and the Tamil Tigers intensified in what would turn out to be the final stages of a 26-year-long civil war, the rebels once again turned to a demographic they have long exploited to replenish their ranks: children. At the time, Suresh was 15. Despite the escalating war, he was attending school and dreamt of one day becoming a teacher. All that was to change, however, when his family took the decision to flee their village near the northern city of Killinochchi and to make for the government-controlled areas to the south. At a chaotic roadblock, Suresh became separated from his family and as he waited to get through, the Tigers abducted him, he said. “They told me they would kill my family if I didn’t stay and fight with them,” Suresh said, speaking in the Ambepussa rehabilitation camp. He was taken to a training camp deep in the jungle where he and a group of other teenagers and others as young as 12, were given six weeks of basic military training, including how to handle explosives and use an AK-47 semi-automatic assault rifle. “They told us we should be prepared to carry out a suicide attack if necessary,” said Suresh, now 16. They were also instructed to kill themselves rather than be taken alive by the Sri Lankan army. To do so, they were issued with cyanide capsules kept on strings around their necks and if that did not work, they were shown how to kill themselves by putting a grenade to their stomachs and pulling the pin. Suresh and his fellow recruits knew that the day was approaching when they would be forced to fight. “They told us the enemy was moving forwards and that we had to retaliate. We were in fear,” he said. “We didn’t want to go into battle.” So late one night, he ran away. He risked being beaten if he was caught, but he knew if he stayed he would die. He threw away his gun and took shelter in an abandoned house where he swapped his Tiger fatigues for civilian clothes. A few days later, he arrived at a hospital on the north-east coast and passed into government-controlled territory. Heeding warnings broadcast on loud speakers, he turned himself in. Today, Suresh is in the Ambepussa rehabilitation camp – a government-run institution for former child soldiers and young adult combatants who were forced to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He is one of a group of 59 who have recently arrived from the north-east, where the Tigers fought their final battles against the Sri Lankan army. On May 16, Sri Lanka’s president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, formally declared victory over the separatists after his forces captured or killed almost all of the Tigers’ top command. Since then, he has pledged to invest billions of dollars in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged north-east and to rehabilitate the 300,000 people displaced by the conflict and who are currently living in makeshift camps. His government, which includes two of his brothers, has promised to resettle up to 80 per cent of the refugees by the end of the year after screening the camps for Tigers and clearing the north of mines and unexploded ordinance. However, it could take longer and prove much more complex to fully rehabilitate the former combatants, especially the thousands of child soldiers, many of whom have suffered deep emotional and physical trauma.

“There’s a huge job at hand,” said Andy Brooks, chief of child protection in Sri Lanka for the United Nations’ children’s fund, Unicef. “Their psychological state varies very much from child to child, what they went though and their experiences before they were taken,” Mr Brooks said. In many ways, Suresh’s chances of returning to normality are higher than some of those that arrived at Ambepussa with him.

The LTTE came for 16-year-old Kamala in March when she was suffering from chickenpox. Her parents drove the armed men away, but days later, when she had recovered, they came back. “All families were made to give up one child when we were growing up, but at the end they were taking two or three from each family,” said Kamala, who like the other children in the camp was given another name to protect her identity. In the two months since Suresh was taken, the Tigers had lost almost all of the territory they had once controlled and were reduced to fighting out of a 15-square-kilometre patch of land in the north-east that had officially been declared a no-fire zone. With no time to train new recruits, they cut Kamala’s hair short, showed her how to fire a weapon and how to dig a bunker, and after a few days sent her to the front line. Kamala spent the first day lying face down in a bunker, terrified. On the second day, she and the other newly enlisted Tigers were given guns and told to advance. “They instructed us to keep firing and if we turned back they threatened to shoot us themselves,” Kamala said. Out in the open, with a heavy rifle in her hands, she tried to take cover in some bushes. As the Sri Lankan army moved forward, 15 of the girls in her unit were killed or wounded. Kamala was shot in the leg and was forced to lie in hiding for hours until it was safe enough to move her to a hospital. “I was sure I was going to die,” she said. Like Suresh, she decided her only option was to escape. After a week in the hospital she made a run for it. She found her parents sheltering in bunkers on the beach and together they decided to cross into government-controlled territory. It was not easy. Twice they tried to cross the no-man’s-land and twice, she said, they were fired on by the Tigers who were trying to prevent civilians from escaping. On the third attempt they made it out, but on arriving at the camp for internally displaced people in Vavuniya, her cropped hair identified her as a former combatant and she was sent to Ambepussa. The United Nations and such groups as Amnesty International said the widespread conscription of child soldiers has been one of the most disturbing aspects of Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war. Almost from the start of armed conflict in 1983 children have been forcibly recruited to serve as guides, cooks, spies, suicide bombers and frontline soldiers. In 1984, the LTTE established a formal unit for those younger than 16 known as the the Baby Brigade, providing them with physical training and a political education. Later, military instruction was introduced. But it was the Sirasu Puli, or the Leopard’s Brigade, which proved how effective using children could be. Drawn mainly from LTTE-managed orphanages, members of the unit saw Velupillai Prabakharan, the Tiger’s supreme leader, as a father figure and accepted orders unconditionally. The unit was regarded as being the LTTE’s fiercest after it encircled and killed 200 elite Sri Lankan forces in 1997.

Amnesty International said rebel groups often choose children because their emotional immaturity means they can easily be manipulated into carrying out violent acts that they are too young to resist or understand. More than one-third of the children forced to fight were girls, according to Unicef. They were of particular value as suicide bombers because they were less likely to be as intensively frisked at check points. For families living in the Tiger-controlled north, where the rebels ran a virtually autonomous mini-state, parents were encouraged to hand over at least one of their children in return for exemption from taxes or preferential access to services. The political wing of the LTTE also conducted recruitment drives at schools, showing films of successful battles or of the Sinhalese – who make up 70 per cent of Sri Lanka’s population – mistreating Tamils. At some points up to 60 per cent of the LTTE was made up of minors, according to the Sri Lankan government’s estimates. Many of those recruited as children are older than 18 now and after years of living in jungles and carrying out acts of violence they feel they have little to offer their communities in times of peace. Raju joined the LTTE when he was 13 and served for more than a decade. He surrendered two years ago when he was 26. “The LTTE came to the village and showed us films of battles they had fought and encouraged us to join. I joined voluntarily,” he said. Soon after though, he regretted it. “I was a young child; I had no idea,” he said. “After a few months I felt I had made a mistake, but the political leaders came to us and conducted classes and I became one of them. I couldn’t go back.” He was trained to use machine guns and heavy artillery. At 17 he was in charge of a unit of 10 soldiers. His perceived commitment to the cause attracted the attention of the top leadership and he was invited to have dinner with Prabakharan, the Tigers’ supreme leader, who the government declared dead on May 17. At 23, Raju was promoted to the rank of major. For years the only information he had received about the conflict came in the form of Tiger propaganda, but as a senior officer he was allowed to watch the news and read the newspapers.

“I became aware. It made me think ‘why should I be with this organisation?’”

The final straw came when he watched a news bulletin about a bomb blast in Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital. “It was then I realised that Muslims, Sinhalese, Tamils all die in these attacks and I understood there was no point to our struggle.”

When the army took the east of the country in 2007 he saw his opportunity and turned himself in. It was an act that took some courage. “I feared if I surrendered they would hurt me. We were always told how cruel the Sinhalese were. I never thought I would be in a camp like this.” The Ambepussa camp was set up in March last year with the help of Unicef, and is the only facility of its kind dedicated to children.

Located two hours north of Colombo, the cluster of bungalows nestle on a hill top overlooking a winding river and lush valley. At first glance, it would be easy to mistake the facility for a summer camp. There is a volleyball court and a place to play cricket, a national obsession in Sri Lanka. Children mill about chatting, laughing or kicking a ball around. But the camp is heavily protected. Entry is through a checkpoint guarded by armed soldiers and the whole site is ringed with barbed wire. The staff are largely drawn from Sri Lanka’s military and apart from weekends, they wear army fatigues. The children all say they are treated well. A law passed in December states that child soldiers who turn themselves in will not be held accountable for any crimes they have committed. Instead, they are expected to spend a year at Ambepussa. Here, said the people who run the facility, the children are treated as victims of the war rather than its perpetrators. “This is just another form of abuse or extreme exploitation: we need to see them as victims,” said Haranthi Wijemanna, a Harvard-educated expert in public health issues who works with Sri Lanka’s justice ministry and who helped to create the rehabilitation programme at Ambepussa. There are 95 former child soldiers at the camp ranging in age from 14 to 28. About 120 other minors who fought for the Tigers have been identified in the displacement camps and Unicef said of the 7,000 cases of forced recruitment it registered during the period 2002 to 2008, about 1,400 are not yet accounted for – though many of these children would now be older than 18. Camp officials said they were particularly shocked by the most recent group to arrive, the one that included Suresh and Kamala. “They were some of the youngest we had ever seen,” said Major Herman Fernando, who is in charge of the day-to-day running of the camp. “Many were wounded. Some had rashes and skin infections due to lack of sanitary facilities and many had seen dead bodies or had to run over corpses.” On arriving, the children are often scared. To try to make them feel more at ease, the staff call the children “son” or “daughter”. The staff, which includes civilian teachers and carers, also encourage the children to talk about their experiences. Often the new arrivals play down their involvement with the rebels or keep quiet when it comes to talking about the more violent aspects of their time with the LTTE. “It’s extremely hard for them to come to terms with what they have done. They may have killed people or committed terrible acts,” Dr Wijemanna said. If that is the case, returning to their communities might be hard for the children. To help rehabilitate them, they are taught vocational skills. The central hall of the camp also functions as a classroom. Children are taught a range of practical skills during their year in the camp, including tailoring, which they may one day use to get a job in Sri Lanka’s garment industry, one of the country’s largest employers. Other courses include computer studies, electrical wiring and plumbing. For Raju, who spent years with the rebels, the last two subjects are of particular interest. He feels it would be too dangerous for him to return home, so he is hoping to find a job in Malaysia or the Gulf fitting out new houses. The camp has already arranged for some former recruits to go overseas. But now, with the global downturn affecting the construction boom in such places as the Gulf, there is less optimism that places exist for people like Raju. In the meantime, however, he is happy to stay at the camp. Despite the trauma they have endured, most of the children at Ambepussa seem able to function and form friendships. When they speak, however, there is a sadness that is rare in people so young. They have access to television and they are aware the war is finally over. When they recount their own stories they are detached, but it is when they speak of their parents they seem closest to tears. The camp encourages parents to come and stay. The International Red Cross tries to locate the children’s families. In the final weeks of the war so many people were displaced, however, it may take a while. On a recent day, Suresh had just made contact

with his family for the first time in almost five months. A letter he had received that morning told him his brother and sister and parents were all safe and living in a camp for those fleeing the fighting in the Vavuniya district. “I had no idea where they were. After getting the letter I understood they had no idea where I was, they thought I was dead,” he said. “Now all I want to do is see them.”

hgardner@thenational.ae Courtesy: thenational.ae