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## A way out for Sri Lanka's child soldiers

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In the aftermath of war, a lost generation of Sri Lanka's youth is seeking rehabilitation, writes TOM FARRELL in Ambepussa, Sri Lanka. RANJENDRAN HAS the acne and somewhat awkward gait of many a 17-year-old schoolboy. He has already completed his O-Levels and is studying for his A-Level examinations, the local equivalent of the Leaving Certificate. He says he would like to be a teacher in the future, an aspiration that possibly comes from having his own childhood brutally cut short.

Ranjendran pulls up his sleeve to reveal a fearful scar arching down his forearm, just below the elbow. "I still have problems. I can't do any heavy work," he says, adding that "the doctor is very sure I will recover though". Ranjendran is one of 112 teenagers at Ambepussa camp, a government-run rehabilitation centre set up last March with assistance from the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef). Many of the children arrived in the last few months as the government's war against the Tamil Tigers reached its apocalyptic conclusion. In the weeks before the government declared victory over the Tigers, killing its leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran and most of his deputies, the rebel outfit press-ganged children as young as 12 and 13 into battle as its area of control shrank into a small strip of coastal territory. In March, Ranjendran was taken from the bunker where his family sheltered as government artillery pounded down on the Tiger-held district of Mullaitivu. "I met Bhanu," says Ranjendran. "He told us we had to struggle against the government. There were 75 children in my group. I do not know what happened to most of them." Ranjendran says he received his bullet wound when he and some other boys escaped from the "training camp" where they were being detained. "It was about two in the afternoon," he says. "Altogether, five of us made the attempt. Only two escaped, another boy and myself — one boy was shot and fell, and may have been killed. Two were recaptured." Although most of the children in Ambepussa were hastily inducted into the rebel army in the last weeks, use of under-age fighters was long a tactic of the Tamil Tigers, officially known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). By the time President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared victory over the LTTE on May 16th, nearly 100,000 people were estimated to have been killed in the war. Nearly 300,000 civilians now languish in cities of tents behind barbed wire. Euphemistically termed "welfare villages", these camps are mostly scattered around the former LTTE-held northern province. Meanwhile, a lost generation of Tamil children and ex-combatants is in urgent need of rehabilitation. The LTTE first established the "Baby Brigade" for recruits under the age of 16 in 1984. At that time, Tamil children underwent physical training and political indoctrination. They also received the vial of cyanide on a string necklace that each Tamil Tiger is instructed to bite down upon in the event of capture. In later battles, such as the three-month siege of Jaffna Fort in 1990, child soldiers as young as 12 were sent to the front lines. "It was a question of where the supply was because if you're 18 or 21, you're not going to join a guerilla group," says Dr Hiranthi Wijemanne, a Harvard-educated expert in public health issues working for the Sri Lankan Justice Ministry. "I think it is true for any kind of labour. Now look at the carpet industry in Pakistan or Nepal: they use little children because they don't have to pay them. They have no power." Ambepussa is located near the lush central highlands of Sri Lanka, an area inhabited mostly by the island's ethnic majority, the Buddhist Sinhalese. "The LTTE was saying that the army and Sinhalese people want to kill them and their families," says Major Herman Fernando, director of the camp. "But within one or two weeks [here] the children feel secure." The facility has the feel of a summer camp or sports club. A volleyball court overlooks a spectacular sweep of forest and mountains. Boisterous youngsters mill around the dining area. In the central hall they go through dance routines as a form of therapy. One tell-tale sign of former LTTE membership is the close cropped hair of some of the girls. The Tigers compelled female fighters to wear their hair in tight plaits or cut it short to avoid it becoming cumbersome in battle. According to Amnesty International, one third of their child fighters were female. Marie Theresa, a 15-year-old girl from Jaffna district, spent 17 days in a Tiger training camp after every family in the LTTE zone was forced to supply the movement with one child. "I was on sentry duty when I escaped. There were altogether 22 children in the base. Some of them were killed in the last battles," she says. In most cases, the parents and siblings of these children are still in various "welfare villages" in the north. Access to these camps has been severely restricted to foreign aid workers and media by the Rajapaksa government. Nevertheless, Marie Theresa says she has contact with her family. "My mother telephoned me. They are in a welfare village in Thandikulam in the north of the country," she says. The camp provides the children with vocational training in tailoring, plumbing and computer studies. There are also forms of psychological support and counselling. "As long as they are kept outside a fighting situation, they probably function quite well," says Dr Wijemanne. "We don't even ask them how many people they killed. If under 18, there was no choice for them." Former child soldiers can be found all over Sri Lanka's north and east, in the areas the LTTE claimed as "Eelam", a mono-ethnic, independent homeland for the Tamil minority. In the eastern district of Batticaloa, several thousand under-age fighters were released in April 2004 when Col Karuna Amman, a powerful eastern commander, defected from the LTTE. Nanthini, a 20-year-old woman from the eastern village of Mandoor, was just 12 when she was kidnapped by the LTTE on her way to school one morning. She describes the three years she subsequently spent in a Tiger camp. "I did not wear cyanide: that was only for the older sisters," she says. "Punishments for wrongdoing included humiliations, running around the camp with a rifle over my shoulders." Nanthini now works for a charity that maintains a home in Batticaloa for orphaned and indigent girls. When asked what she would like to do in the future, she says: "I would like to be a social worker." Courtesy: irishtimes.com