
Retraining Tiger cubs

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Soldiers in Sri Lanka From The Economist Is as hard as it sounds AFP in Ambepussa, child soldiers struggle to be children again FAIRNESS cream; scented hair oil; talcum powder: these are things that female ex-combatants of the Tamil Tiger rebels, many forcibly recruited as children, hesitantly ask for when placed in rehabilitation. Thousands of exhausted rebels surrendered in the weeks before the government declared its victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. The army says more than 9,000 are now in custody. Some face prosecution; more are being absorbed into the army; others will be sent into rehabilitation as soon as space becomes available in these overburdened camps. But to judge by the stories of the former child soldiers, turning their lives around will be a lot harder than providing some of the frills denied them during their years of warfare.

The Protection and Rehabilitation Centre in Ambepussa is run by the Bureau of the Commissioner-General of Rehabilitation. To reach it, you take a narrow lane that snakes through paddy fields and thick woods, climbs a steep incline and stops at a neat collection of single-storey buildings. As the LTTE fought its final, doomed battle, 112 ex-fighters arrived there, fresh from combat, aged between 14 and 29. Tall and thin, a young man with fragile features is summoned by army officers. Ganeshalingam Thayalan speaks softly, uncertainly. He has just turned 18. Today, he pores over maths and chemistry books to pass his advanced-level examination and enter university. There is no hint from his outward appearance that Thayalan was a trained suicide bomber. He was just two when his parents died in an air-force bombing and he was sent to Sencholai, a rebel "orphanage" in the Kilinochchi district. Every school holiday, he was trained in the use of weapons, psychological warfare, combat skills, and other military activity. After his ordinary-level exams he was taught to be a human bomb. The Tigers showed him how to wear and activate a suicide jacket. It was a compulsory lesson: other friends from Sencholai also had to learn it. The LTTE subsequently deployed Thayalan in Vavuniya and ordered him to continue studying until they found him a target. He was living with a friend when, acting on a tip-off, the police arrested him. Would he have exploded himself when told to? Yes, he says, because the Tigers were watching. If he had disobeyed, they would have killed him anyway. The rehabilitation centre provides children and adults with vocational training, and education in maths, computer science and languages, including Sinhalese, the tongue of the majority Sinhala Buddhists they had once been coached to kill. There are cultural and sporting events and occasional field trips. But the children are chaperoned on all excursions and, while parents and relatives may visit, the centre is not open to outsiders. In October 2000 a Sinhala mob attacked a similar venture in Bindunuwewa and killed 26 people. Hiranthi Wijemanne, a consultant to the commissioner general, says that most of the inmates want to leave the country after rehabilitation. Social stigma will not permit them to return to their own villages or to mingle with the population in the Sinhala-dominated south. More than 50 reformed fighters have already gone abroad.

James Elder, a spokesman for Unicef in Sri Lanka, calls the centre a genuine attempt to help child soldiers learn how to be civilians. From 2003 to the end of 2008, Unicef recorded more than 6,000 cases of child recruitment by the rebels but the number is thought to have soared in the final months of the war. To cope with the influx, the bureau is expanding its centres in the northern Jaffna peninsula and Welikanda in the east. It is also building a new facility in Vavuniya, where many ex-combatants now while away the time, awaiting their turn.

Courtesy: economist.com