
Looking after Children affected by war

Wednesday, 16 September 2009

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Statement of Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights responding to the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Sri Lanka welcomes the statement of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, and registers again its gratitude that Ms Coomaraswamy made crystal clear, when other branches of the UN seemed to condone this, her condemnation of the LTTE for breaching national and international law in its recruitment of child soldiers.

Now that the conflict is over, and clearer information is emerging of the appalling behaviour of the LTTE in the area they controlled, we trust the United Nations will call to account the UNICEF officials who condoned recruitment of 17 year olds on the grounds that terrorist legislation permitted this. We call on the UN too to ensure accountability of those who failed to disclose the fact that the LTTE were recruiting first one member, and then two, from each family in their thrall. Happily senior UN officials in Sri Lanka now are working positively with the Sri Lankan government to overcome this scourge of child soldiers: UNICEF has been promoting the release and rehabilitation of all child soldiers, while ILO is working with our Ministry to produce a framework for the rehabilitation of ex-combatants. Rehabilitation programmes will be implemented by the new Commissioner General for Rehabilitation, who will work under the Ministry of Justice. With regard to the Special Representative's statement, we share her hopes for rapid improvement in the situation, and trust we will be able to complete without impediment the programmes planned in this regard. We also believe it necessary to draw attention to positive aspects of the situation, as has been noted with regard to conditions elsewhere. We are pleased that health facilities have been provided satisfactorily to children as well as others, and that we were able to reduce the appalling malnutrition rates suffered by those who were under the control of the LTTE. It is sad that these our fellow citizens were deprived even of the high energy biscuits that we enabled UNICEF to take to those regions, which were grabbed instead by the LTTE to sustain armed cadres. We should also stress the continuation of education at high levels, though I am sorry the inferior technology this Council now uses will not allow me to share the photographs from the welfare centres that I am holding up. Sri Lanka must be the only country in the world that conducted a public examination, the 'O' Levels, even in the midst of conflict, and parents made sure that many children took the exam despite efforts by the LTTE to promote a boycott. Last month we held the 'A' Level Examination in the Centres, having provided teaching for this in preceding months. We hope therefore that, as is shown in these pictures, we will soon be able to ensure that these children enjoy the fruits of the solid educational system we have in place, and which we extended even to areas temporarily under terrorist control. Geneva 16 September 2009