

UN envoy accuses Sri Lankan military of helping recruit child soldiers

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UN special representative Allen Rock has provoked a furore in Sri Lankan ruling circles by alleging that the military has assisted a paramilitary ally known as the Karuna group in recruiting children to fight in the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The claims undermine one of the key elements of the government's international propaganda campaign against the LTTE. For years, successive Colombo governments have accused the LTTE of using child soldiers. Now the armed forces are being charged with doing the same.

The allegations are doubly embarrassing because the military, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, continues to insist that it does not collaborate with paramilitaries such as the Karuna group. Karuna, or V. Muralitharan, split with the LTTE in 2004, taking with him a substantial proportion of the LTTE's armed fighters in the eastern Batticaloa-Amparai districts.

Rock, who is the special advisor to the UN Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, conducted a 10-day fact finding mission in Sri Lanka. After meeting President Mahinda Rajapakse last Monday, he went public with his findings.

Rock told the media there was "strong and credible" evidence that sections of the military have supported and participated in the abduction of children for the Karuna faction. "Sri Lankan security forces rounded up children to be recruited by the Karuna faction," he said.

Citing eyewitnesses, the UN envoy described an instance in which the army had rounded up children and allowed the Karuna group to choose new recruits. "The Karuna faction is actively abducting by force" in the eastern districts in an "accelerated campaign to increase the size of their force," he said.

Rock reported that members of the Karuna group

roamed the eastern districts with impunity, openly carrying arms through military checkpoints and engaging in violence and intimidation. In one case, an abduction squad seized the father of a family, after the mother escaped with their child.

The envoy found the police had not investigated abduction complaints. UNICEF had recorded 164 cases involving the forcible recruitment of children up to this October, but the actual figure could be higher, he said. Rock also accused the LTTE of failing to keep its promises to release child soldiers and warned that international pressure would be brought to bear to make it comply.

Despite their limited character, Rock's accusations touched a raw nerve in Colombo. President Rajapakse has been keen to keep the major powers on side while openly flouting the 2002 ceasefire and launching a series of military offensives against the LTTE. Anxious to contain any international fallout, he promised that Rock's allegations would be "fully investigated and those responsible held accountable".

The Sri Lankan military, however, immediately denounced Rock's remarks, saying they "deserve a deep sense of revulsion and explanation in view of their serious nature and repercussions". Its statement added: "It is no secret that the [UN] Mission by innuendo has gone the extra mile to blame the troops of the Sri Lankan Security Forces who are deployed in government-controlled areas of eastern Batticaloa to contain LTTE violence and defend human rights in the region."

After the military had spoken, Rajapakse changed his tune and issued a statement declaring: "The Government regrets however that certain conclusions that Ambassador Rock has made in public have led to many distorted media reports, as opposed to the

Government's long-standing zero-tolerance policy on the recruitment of children as combatants."

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella held a press conference on Thursday, defending the military and questioning Rock's ability to collect "credible" information after spending only a few hours on the spot in the east. Significantly, however, Rambukwella, like other official spokesmen, did not deny outright army involvement in child recruitment.

The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) also denounced Rock. JVP MP and propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa accused him of lacking evidence and coming "to the country to clear the bad reputation of the LTTE on recruiting children". The party maintains close relations with the Karuna group and has published articles and photographs of its training camps in the JVP newspaper *Lanka*.

Rock's investigation comes on top of other evidence of the army's ties to the Karuna group. Last week Helen Olasfottir, spokeswoman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), confirmed that its ceasefire monitors had previously observed supporters of the Karuna group "moving to and from SLA [Sri Lanka Army] camps". In its report covering the period from May 29 to August 31, the SLMM noted that the "majority of the cases reported [of child abduction] were not against the LTTE but against the Karuna group."

The collaboration of the military with paramilitaries such as the Karuna group is not simply a matter of abducting children. Military intelligence has long used such outfits to carry out its dirtiest work. Since Rajapakse came to power last November, there has been an escalating covert war in the north and east of the island, in which a number of prominent LTTE supporters have been provocatively killed.

On November 10, pro-LTTE MP Nadaraja Raviraj was gunned down in broad daylight in Colombo. The killer managed to get away on a waiting motor bike and to evade security forces even though the area was close to military bases and police stations. The capital is under heavy security with roadblocks and checkpoints following the eruption of open fighting between the army and the LTTE in July.

The LTTE has repeatedly demanded that the army disarm paramilitaries operating in government-

controlled territory, as required under the 2002 ceasefire. At peace talks in Geneva in February, the government promised to implement the ceasefire, but the military has failed to do so. Its excuses are nothing but thinly veiled lies: either that the Karuna group does not operate inside government territory, or that the army is unable to disarm it.

In fact, sections of the military top brass saw the Karuna breakaway as an opportunity to go on the offensive against a weakened LTTE, in the east of the island in particular. Evidence emerged in 2004 that military intelligence had a series of discussions with Karuna in a safe house in Colombo. Little effort has been made to disguise the close collaboration of the army with the Karuna group.

In its current offensives in the east, the military and the paramilitaries have worked closely together in attacking the LTTE. There is every reason to believe that the army would assist in abducting children for the Karuna group to provide cannon fodder for these operations.



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