

Joint Press Release

National Campaign against the recruitment of child soldiers launched

26 February, Colombo - The President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) today launch a national campaign to prevent child recruitment, and to promote the release of all recruited children.

The campaign, "Bring Back the Child", targets armed groups, vulnerable communities and the children affected. The campaign's call for child recruitment to stop goes hand in hand with the provision of reintegration and rehabilitation services for children who are released.

'Bring back the Child' will air on television, radio and through newspapers, billboards and posters across the country, with a focus on the north and east, and in the country's three languages – Sinhalese, Tamil and English.

"The Government of Sri Lanka has a zero tolerance policy on the recruitment of children, and the recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 to take part in hostilities is against both Sri Lankan and international law," said the Commissioner General for Rehabilitation, Mr Suhada Gamalath. "This campaign reinforces the message that children who are recruited are victims of crimes committed against them. Children released or escaping from armed groups have nothing to fear – they will be treated as children in need of immediate support."

'Bring back the Child' is a multimedia campaign that calls on those who recruit children to stop, and for those children currently in their ranks to be released so that they can return to their families and have access to services including health care, psychosocial support, education and vocational training. Concurrently 'Bring Back the Child' will strengthen the capacity of communities to protect children against the threats of recruitment.

"Child soldiers live in a theatre of violence and suffering where their lives are at great risk," said Mr Philippe Duamelle, UNICEF's Representative in Sri Lanka. "Many are killed or maimed. Those who survive suffer traumatic events with often grave psychological implications. Even those who avoid combat lose precious years that cannot be replaced. Instead of having hope for the future these children live in fear of what tomorrow may bring. However, following their release they can and they do adapt if they are given a second chance at childhood. This campaign is one part of that."

UNICEF has been monitoring and reporting on child recruitment in Sri Lanka since 2002. In this time nearly 7,000 children have been reported to UNICEF by their families as having been recruited to armed groups. Between 2002 and 2009, some of these child soldiers were released, others passed the age of 18, some are still trapped as child soldiers, and some have been killed in the conflict.

Sri Lanka was among the first countries to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Within this Protocol, Sri Lanka committed to take action against the recruitment of children and provide rehabilitation support to children released from armed groups. UNICEF works closely with the Office of the Commissioner General for Rehabilitation who has made great strides in ensuring legal protection for children affected by child recruitment and in providing care and protection for children who have been released.



This collaboration between the Government of Sri Lanka and UNICEF also resulted in the signing in December 2008 of an Action Plan between the Government, the TMVP (Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal), and UNICEF, together with the adoption of new special regulations which strengthen the legal protection of children released from armed groups. Furthermore, a rehabilitation centre for former child soldiers was opened, as was a Child Welfare Unit in Batticaloa where parents and relatives can come and report the recruitment of their children and be provided with a coordinated response to get the children released.

Ends

For further information, please contact:

Nandani Gunawardana, Ministry of Justice 011-2449959

or

James Elder, Communication Chief, UNICEF

Mobile: 94-777416742, Office: 94-11-2555270 ext 250 jelder@unicef.org

