

## Report backs Rock on child soldiers

### Government colluding in abduction of children, Human Rights Watch finds

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There is "clear and compelling evidence" that Sri Lankan government forces are helping guerrillas to kidnap boys and young men to turn them into child soldiers, says Human Rights Watch.

And, the New York-based rights organization says, the conclusions confirm findings earlier this month by Canada's Allan Rock, a United Nations special adviser on children and armed conflict.

"We heard essentially the same testimony that Ambassador Rock reported," said Jo Becker, Human Rights Watch's children's rights advocate. "The police and the military are colluding with (the paramilitary rebel faction) Karuna."

The rights watchdog called for the security forces to "immediately stop assisting abductions ... and help those abducted return safely to their families."

The group's full report will be published in December, Becker said. And, she added, statements made to investigators left no doubt about government collusion: "Families testified that they had seen their children in the offices of Karuna, which were guarded by the Sri Lankan police. How can you take children to those offices without government knowledge?"

During three weeks in October, Human Rights Watch investigated more than 20 child abduction cases, interviewing witnesses and parents of abducted children in government-controlled areas.

The Karuna group is headed by Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, a former Tamil Tiger commander now working with the government. The group is linked with the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal political party.

In some places, the Human Rights Watch statement said, the political offices where kidnapped children were brought were "less than 100 metres from a Sri Lankan military camp," too close for government forces not to see them.

Witnesses said that some children had travelled through more than 10 police and military checkpoints to reach the camps where they were held.

Violence has spiralled in Sri Lanka as a four-year-old truce collapsed, and this week Tamil Tiger rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran renewed his call for an independent Tamil nation, as hopes were dashed for a negotiated solution to the bloody conflict. In spite of denials by government and rebels, recruitment of child soldiers continues on both sides.

The Tigers have been reprimanded for years for forcing children to fight. But human rights advocates fear the Karuna recruitment is taking the conflict to new levels of violence.

"The government has known about Karuna child abductions since at least June 2006," Human Rights Watch said, adding that UNICEF at that time issued a public appeal to protect children from recruitment and investigate abductions.

In July, a group of more than 40 mothers of abducted children also filed a detailed petition to the chief justice of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court, the group said.

The Sri Lankan military protested Rock's report issued earlier this month, saying its forces had no connection with child abduction. But the government promised to investigate cases of child recruitment, and Karuna's political party said it would release any under-age fighters in its ranks and help to trace the whereabouts of any whose kidnappings have been reported to UNICEF.

Becker said she was "not aware of any action that has been taken to date to find these children, or any move by the government to intervene."

"Official surprise at Ambassador Rock's allegations is not genuine," she charged. "The government had known about the abductions ... and it has failed to stop the kidnappings or investigate the culprits."

But, she said, it was a hopeful sign that during a visit with Rock, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa made a pledge to investigate.