

On the Status of Child Combatants

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ABSTRACT In recent years, international human rights groups have sought the assistance of the United Nations in making the employment of child combatants a violation of international human rights law. At the same time, a number of states who are members of the UN have found themselves engaged in internal civil wars with rebel military groups, who include people classified by international law as children among their ranks. The issue of child combatants has become a political tool, by means of which certain state governments seek international support in their conflict with rebel armies. One consequence of such political action has been an increase in military aid to Government-controlled armies, an escalation of their armed conflict with rebels, and a diminution of humanitarian aid delivered to people in rebel-controlled areas. Youth belonging to the same ethnicity as the rebels, especially youth leaving rebel-controlled areas, are likely to be arrested on suspicion of being rebels themselves. Such developments only encourage youth to stay in rebel territory and join the rebels. Thus, well-intentioned international efforts to protect children and youth from armed conflict have tragically backfired. This essay describes the project of "targeting child combatants" as this project has been carried out in Sri Lanka over the past five years.