

Sri Lanka rebels abducted us using grenades, say children

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Background - Sri Lanka conflict

By Simon Gardner

KANCHANAKUDA, Sri Lanka, Dec 21 (Reuters) - Seven Tamil schoolboys emerged from Tamil Tiger territory in eastern Sri Lanka on Thursday, saying rebels threatened them with grenades and cut their hair in apparent preparation for military training.

Arumugam Sajeendran was studying for his science exams at a tutorial late on Monday when Tiger fighters walked in and forced him, 21 classmates and two teachers to clamber into a van. After a short drive, they were made to trek 6 miles (10 km) to a rebel hideaway in the eastern district of Ampara.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) made an unprecedented admission this week that some of their fighters had made a recruitment "mistake" by failing to check how old the students were, but insist they had volunteered to join them. "We didn't offer to voluntarily join the movement. That is totally untrue," Sajeendran told Reuters outside the Special Task Force police commando camp where he and his classmates arrived on Thursday, around 600 metres (yards) from rebel territory.

"They had grenades in their hands and threatened us: 'If you don't come with us, we'll explode these grenades'," he added. "We pleaded with them, saying we were students and wanted to sit our O-level exams."

Standing beside coils of razor wire separating the camp from an iridescent green expanse of marshland and rice paddies, Sajeendran's relieved parents and those of his classmates waited as their children gave statements to police.

The Tigers - who told Reuters this week they had suspended the fighters involved in the incident for negligence -- released 15 teenage girl classmates earlier this week after their parents crossed into rebel terrain to seek their release.

HUNDREDS ABDUCTED

Abductions have soared in Sri Lanka this year as a new chapter in the two-decade civil war escalates. Aid workers say the Tigers and a breakaway faction led by a former rebel commander called Karuna, which is now seen as aligned to the government, have abducted hundreds of boys and men between them.

"It is a very big problem. The Karuna faction as much as the LTTE are both abducting constantly," said Martin de Boer, who heads International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff in the eastern district of Batticaloa. "We're talking about hundreds on both sides. This includes children, though most are not," he said. "This was a clean-cut abduction."

The government is outraged at the accusation by a high-profile U.N. envoy that their troops have helped the Karuna group press gang children into being soldiers, and denies its forces have had any involvement.

But security experts say children make disciplined fighters because they do not challenge orders, and expect both rebel factions to continue abducting, despite their denials, to boost their ranks as a conflict that has killed 67,000 people since 1983 deepens.

The Tigers had vowed to release all underage fighters -- who they argue lie about their age to join the fight for an independent state for minority Tamils in the north and east -- by January 2007.

"The LTTE had no intention of releasing these children at all," said a Special Task Force officer standing guard with an M16 submachine gun.

"If they had, they wouldn't have shaved their heads and changed their clothes," said the officer, who withheld his name. "You see how they work?"