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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

**Written statement* submitted by International Educational Development (IED), a
non-governmental organization on the Roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[17 February 2006]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the
submitting non-governmental organization(s).

1. International Educational Development addressed certain concerns relating to children in Sri Lanka affected by armed conflict in an oral statement delivered at the 61st session of the Commission.

2. At the time we made that oral statement there was insufficient information about post-Tsunami relief to children in the Tamil areas. Present information indicates that the post-Tsunami period has seriously worsened the situation of Tamil children in Sri Lanka.

3. Our concerns about children affected by armed conflict in Sri Lanka has focused on what we consider politically motivated allegations of “child soldiers” in the armed forces of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rather than on the over-all situation of children in the war zones. The numbers of possible under-age children in the LTTE are relatively few in comparison to the numbers of Tamil children killed outright by military operations of the armed forces of the government of Sri Lanka, or children who have been injured, raped, made homeless, made orphans by government operations in the Tamil areas. The international community should focus on the plight of all the thousands of these children, not on the few instances of “child soldiers” – especially as there has been a cease-fire in the war in Sri Lanka for a number of years and therefore no “child soldiers” in actual combat. Governments and non-governmental organizations that focus on the relatively few “child soldiers” cases are not helping either resolve the conflict or the situation of all children affected by it.

4. The focus on the few rather than on the many has been exceptionally useful to the United States and its interests in Sri Lanka. In our view this interest is not motivated by any genuine concern for children in Sri Lanka, whether the children are Tamil or Sinhala. We presented a brief review of United States interests in Sri Lanka in our written statement under item 5. These include the United States perceived need to establish military control over the region reaching from the sub-continent to the Caucasus, using a revamped Palaly airfield in the north of Sri Lanka, as well as deep water ports in the Tamil areas. Because of these interests, the US seeks to shift attention from the war, and place it in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Under this scenario, Geneva Convention violations of the government of Sri Lanka are not addressed at all. The Tamil people, their aspirations and the LTTE are demonized while inquiry into serious human rights violations carried out by the Sri Lankan authorities against the Tamil people, including Tamil children, does not occur.

5. The US and NGO focus on child soldiers in the LTTE is also distressing as neither the US nor the NGOs have mentioned the far larger numbers of Sinhala child soldiers and the active recruitment of Sinhala children under the age of 17 by the Sri Lanka armed forces. As we indicated at the 61st session of the Commission, former Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe stated in the Sri Lanka Parliament that the government was actively recruiting 15 year old children, and had started one recruitment campaign at the very time the Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Mr. Olara A. Otunnu, was in Sri Lanka. Apparently only Mr. Wickramasinghe and our organization are concerned about Sinhala child soldiers or the government’s under-age recruitment campaigns.

6. The Tsunami, of course, resulted in thousands of casualties of men, women and children throughout all of Sri Lanka. This has added tremendously to the difficulties of

thousands children who had already been victims of the war and many thousands who had not been. However, very little international relief has reached these victims, whose numbers and needs far outweigh possible child soldiers. Indeed, many young orphans sought out the areas under LTTE control for food, shelter and schooling. What few in the international community understand is the degree to which the Sri Lanka government has prevented UN officials and aid providers from traveling to the Tamil areas -- far more affected by the Tsunami than the Sinhala areas. And most distressingly, some non-governmental aid providers, who collected hundreds of millions of \$US for Tsunami victims, were prevented from delivering any appreciable aid to the Tamil areas by the United States and the government of Sri Lanka. For example, the American Red Cross, an organization that collected millions of \$US for Sri Lanka, was told by the United States authorities that under US law it was illegal for them distributed any aid in the Tamil areas. The American Red Cross has apparently not challenged this position that so clearly defies both international humanitarian and disaster relief law. We do not have any information about what the ICRC has done about this, but we can assure the Commission that NO appreciable aid collected by the Red Cross has reached the Tamil people affected by the Tsunami. Our organization, in concert with the Association of Humanitarian Lawyers, seeks the recovery of funds collected for aid to Tamils under false pretenses. Further, both the US and the UK have targeted the Tamil Relief Organization (TRO) and its international effort to get relief to the Tamils in Sri Lanka. TRO has been the only group seeking and delivering funds to Tamil Tsunami victims. The international community should work to ensure fair distribution of Tsunami relief to all victims.

7. The focus of certain governments and NGOs on LTTE child soldiers is also distressing given the huge problem of sexual slavery, child pornography and child prostitution in Sri Lanka, almost exclusively in the Sinhala community, which warrants the attention of all. According to the most sincere organizations working on these issues, Sri Lanka is a pedophile's paradise. This is especially true in the resort areas -- almost all of which are in the Sinhala part of the island. Reports indicate that as many as 30,000 children, many of them boys, work the beaches and that there may be as many as 100,000 Sinhala children involved in child pornography and prostitution.¹ According to Sri Lanka NGOs, human rights activists feel that the sexual exploitation of children in the South is an issue largely ignored by Southern polity, which would rather spend its efforts on highlighting a few cases of children "joining" the LTTE to escape abject poverty than the thousands of cases of Sinhala children trafficked on Southern and Western beaches: a child soldier is a more valuable political commodity than a child victim of sex tourism. As the vast majority of post-Tsunami aid has gone to the Sinhala areas, the resorts have reopened for business, bringing both the sexual predators and the young victims together again.

8. We urge concerted international effort to address the protection of children in Sri Lanka from sexual exploitation. In this light we urge the Commission's Special Rapporteur M. Juan Petit to undertake an investigative mission to Sri Lanka to investigate the post-Tsunami resurgence of child prostitution and pornography.

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¹ IED presents these figures without a guarantee of their accuracy, but to make the point that the figures given by credible NGOs indicate thousands more children involved in child pornography, prostitution and trafficking than are involved as "child soldiers" in areas controlled by the LTTE.