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# Children pawns in war, envoy says

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**Allan Rock tours strife-torn country**

**Hears `chilling' tales of abduction**

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Parents watch as masked gunmen break into their homes and carry away their screaming children.

Government security forces round up young boys so guerrillas can take their pick of the youngsters for child soldiers.

Children are photographed by troops, then kidnapped and enlisted by a government-linked paramilitary.

These are some of the accounts United Nations envoy Allan Rock heard during 10 days of travel through Sri Lanka, where, he says, an atmosphere of fear and impunity reigns, and the country is sliding back into civil war between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels in the north and east of the country.

"I heard chilling stories of children carried away to be used as child soldiers," said Rock, who is a special adviser on Sri Lanka for the UN's representative for children and armed conflict, and Canada's former UN ambassador. He interviewed 24 families who said their children had been abducted by a group linked with the government.

Some parents said they had been able to visit their children in government-controlled territory after the youngsters were taken away in trucks that soldiers had allowed to pass undisturbed.

"The point I heard repeatedly was that there was government complicity, and that it is deepening the sense of despair and breakdown of the rule of law. Civilians feel they have no one to turn to for help," Rock said.

The reports of government links to abductions by a paramilitary known as the Karuna faction raise the stakes in an already escalating conflict, he added.

Human rights groups, as well as local people, have complained for years of child recruitment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known as the Tamil Tigers. According to UNICEF, the group recruited 500 child soldiers last year, and the practice continues in spite of an agreement to stop it.

"They said they would have a law (on child soldiers) fully operative by Jan. 1 (2007), but they continue to abduct children, and refuse to release those who have been abducted," Rock, a former federal Liberal cabinet minister, said in an interview from New York.

Rock's mission to Sri Lanka has made waves in the country, where the military has "vehemently rejected" charges that it is linked with abductions by the Tamil Karuna faction, which reportedly switched sides from the Tigers to the government. Meanwhile, the political party linked with Karuna said it would release any children now in its ranks and help to trace the whereabouts of children whose parents have reported their kidnapping to UNICEF.

The Sri Lankan government has said it would investigate the allegations, and Rock called it "open and

helpful" in giving him access to all areas he requested.

"We were on the road sometimes 16 hours a day, and we saw ordinary people, police, NGOs, the military and government officials. I was able to develop a feeling for the place, and what was happening there," he said.

Rock said his conclusions were alarming. "My strong impression is one of impunity. There is no sense of protection for ordinary people, and no one to turn to. ... The country is an armed camp, with bunkers and machineguns every few blocks, even in the capital."

Sri Lanka has spiralled closer to war since a 2001 ceasefire between the government and Tamil Tigers broke down a year ago.

Rock said the situation in some parts of Tamil-populated territory is desperate, especially in the eastern Vaharai peninsula, a Tamil Tiger-controlled area that hosts more than 30,000 people who fled their homes in fighting last summer. The Sri Lankan army has shelled the area this month, killing at least 23 people and wounding 135. Civilians are also at risk as the Tamil Tigers return fire.

"I saw blood on the floor where the shelling took place," Rock said. "People mobbed me when I arrived and told their stories, including children. They said when the shells landed they were in a panic and tried running south. But the (Tigers) pushed them back. They feel frightened, and they say they have had no aid since October."

During Rock's visit he met with the Tamil Tigers political leadership, as well as with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa. But he said, after a recent failed peace conference in Geneva, "there is a feeling that the country is sliding into war ... there's a foreboding sense that the parties are gearing up."

Rock is meeting with UN officials and ambassadors in New York, before returning to Windsor, Ont., where he practises law. His report is to be submitted to the Security Council in January.

*Additional articles by Olivia Ward*

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