



**COALITION TO STOP THE
USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS**



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**Child Recruitment in South Asian Conflicts:
Bangladesh
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Introduction

This document draws on information, lessons learned and recommendations on Bangladesh from the report: *Child Recruitment in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh*.¹ The full report examines two conflict settings, Sri Lanka and Nepal, with a view to contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of recruitment and use of child soldiers, primarily by the non-state armed groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist). From this understanding and the analysis of the situation of children in Bangladesh contained in the report, the following summary identifies potential vulnerabilities of children to recruitment into armed groups there. While there is currently no armed conflict in Bangladesh, nor any studies indicating that recruitment of children is common, there is clear evidence of vulnerabilities among children that could lead to their recruitment and use by armed groups, should conflict develop.

The use of children by non-state armed groups does not take place in a vacuum. A range of conditions, many of which underlie the conflict itself, also make children vulnerable to joining groups which participate in that conflict. Bangladesh shares with Sri Lanka and Nepal many of these conditions that have made children in those settings vulnerable to recruitment, including poverty, discrimination, inequality and exclusion. It also has a culture of political violence, tensions over issues of religion and identity, and a history of the use of child soldiers, all of which combine to create a situation where conflict is possible and where children could be used by armed groups.

By looking at the drivers behind the use of children as soldiers in conflicts in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the full report seeks to examine the root causes of recruitment, which can be used to inform advocacy and policy options. This summary seeks to draw on these lessons in relation to Bangladesh. In addition, the summary includes a set of recommendations which, if implemented, would reduce the risk to Bangladeshi children of being exploited by armed groups and criminal gangs.

Bangladesh: growing Islamic radicalism and political violence

Background

Since its independence from West Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh has suffered from poor governance, weak democratic institutions, corruption, security concerns, economic weakness and uneven development, high-levels of criminality, a population explosion and frequent natural disasters. There is a growing threat of Islamic extremism and, in the meantime, other armed dissident groups remain active in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Recent developments, including nationwide bombings and other violence, militant Islamist extremism and a dysfunctional political system have led some observers to describe Bangladesh as a fragile or failing state that displays the signs of “pre-conflict”.²

The rise of Islamic radicalism and pockets of social unrest in Bangladesh can be traced to problems of governance which hamper development. Despite achieving a level of macroeconomic stability, almost half of the population is below the poverty line and over

¹ The full report is available at:

http://www.child-soldiers.org/resources/S_Asia_Child_recruitment_Nov06.pdf.

² *Bangladesh Today*, International Crisis Group (ICG), Asia Report No 121, 23 October 2006.

half is functionally illiterate. In absolute terms, the same number of people is living in absolute poverty now as 15 years ago. Wealth is inequitably spread geographically, with economic gains concentrated in the Dhaka division. Weak rule of law and widespread corruption have fed insecurity. Internal migration from rural to urban areas has contributed to the growth of slums in cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong, where armed criminal gangs, enjoying protection from police and politicians, operate with impunity.

Political life in Bangladesh continues to be shaped by the 1971 war against Pakistan. Initially characterised by a succession of military governments, bitter rivalry between the two main political parties now dominates political life. This rivalry has been manifested in political murders, other forms of violence, strikes and civil disobedience. The two parties are associated with the two leaders of the liberation movement. The Awami League (AL) was established by Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman (Sheikh Mujib) an independence leader and the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh; The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was set up by General Zia ur Rahman (known as General Zia) following his emergence as military ruler after the coup against Sheikh Mujib in which the latter and most of his family were killed.³ The former is now led by its founder's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajid and the BNP is led by General Zia's widow, Begum Khaleda Zia. Both parties are highly personalized and centred around their founding families. Power, rather than ideology, dominates their agendas and both are reported to maintain links to criminals.⁴

The struggle for a distinct Bangladeshi identity has since 1971 been polarized between ethnic Bengali and Muslim identities, giving rise to two competing versions of nationalism, one religious, and the other linguistic and cultural. Military rulers in the 1970s and 1980s cultivated Islamic support to shore up their legitimacy. Since then both the AL and the BNP have also cultivated radical Islamist interests when useful to them.

The inclusion of two legal Islamist parties, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) and Islamic Okye Jote (IOJ) in the BNP ruling coalition (2001-2006) is regarded as having bolstered the power of Islamist groups. JIB, the most influential Islamic party in Bangladesh, aims to work through the parliamentary system to make Bangladesh an Islamic state governed by Islamic law. However, its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir), has resorted to violence and its members have been implicated in the murder of opposition AL members, secular intellectuals and religious minorities. Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) is seen as a more radical party advocating a rapid transition to an Islamic State. JIB in particular has the advantage of being regarded as cleaner than the two main political parties, the credibility of which has been damaged by allegations of corruption.⁵

In addition, there are a number of underground Islamist groups. Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) aims to establish Islamic law through armed struggle. Banned in February 2005, it claimed responsibility for the coordinated bombings across 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts in August the same year. It is reported to have a network of mosques, *madrassas* and militant training schools throughout large parts of the country. Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) supports Islamic revolution, but claims not to advocate the use of force. Like other underground Islamist groups its structure is not fully known and it is concurrently reported to be both an offshoot of the JMB and a youth group of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI). It admits to giving recruits self-defence training, although it denies having militant camps. It was banned in February 2005. HuJI has its roots in the fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan and is heavily influenced by Wahabi and Taliban traditions. It has been designated a terrorist organization by the

³ General Zia was in turn murdered by army officers.

⁴ *Bangladesh Today*, ICG.

⁵ Transparency International's index of perceptions of corruption regularly ranks Bangladesh as amongst the most corrupt countries in the world.

United States (US) State Department. HuJI is reported to have an estimated 2,000 core militants mainly recruited from *madrassas* as well as members from the Rohingya refugee community from Myanmar.⁶

Instability and unrest also affect other parts of the country. In 1976 in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, southeast Bangladesh tribal people aggrieved at their loss of rights, and the official lack of recognition and protection of their distinct cultural identity, took up arms against the government.⁷ At the height of the insurgency, almost one-third of the Bangladesh army was deployed in that region, and Bengali settlers, encouraged to move to the area as part of the counter-insurgency strategy, were mobilized against the tribal population. According to official figures, more than 8,500 people, including 2,500 civilians, were killed during the insurgency. In 1997 the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty was signed, but its slow implementation could result in a return to armed conflict.

Another potential trouble spot is found among the Rohingya refugee community in Cox's Bazaar close to the border with Myanmar. Over 250,000 mainly Muslim Rohingya fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh beginning in 1991, in the face of discrimination, violence and forced labour or religious persecution. Most have now been repatriated, but an estimated 20,000 refugees remain in two camps supported by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) between Cox's Bazaar and the border. An unknown number of Rohingya live in the community outside of the two camps. Violence, smuggling and general lawlessness in the area are blamed on the Rohingya who, in turn, blame local Bangladeshi gangs with high-level connections. In the meantime, extremist groups have taken advantage of the disenfranchised Rohingya, some of whom have been recruited to fight in Afghanistan. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), the most radical of the Rohingya group, has the support of the Islamist party JIB and has reportedly received training from the Afghan jihadist group, Hizb-i-Islami.⁸

Children in the Community: A life of discrimination and disadvantage

Children under the age of 18 make up over 40% of South Asia's population, but their rights are often disregarded. The failure on the part of the state in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh to promote the rights of the child results in their systematic abuse in the wider community through practices such as bonded labour and sexual trafficking. Just as the reasons why children work are complex and context-specific, so too are the reasons for their vulnerability to recruitment and use by armed groups. Nevertheless, in all three countries common threads emerge that increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment and use by non-state armed groups. In general in all three settings, the line between 'childhood' and 'adulthood' is usually blurred. More specifically, household insecurity forces children into the labour market; lack of protection by the state permits trafficking and sexual slavery; access to education is inadequate; the content of the state-provided education is often contested; and food insecurity is experienced by a significant proportion of the population.

⁶ For further details on these groups see. *Bangladesh Today*, ICG.

⁷ Amena Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London 2003.

⁸ Jane's Sentinel-Bangladesh, April 2006.

Child labour

Poverty in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh pressures the young to work, often at the expense of education. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there are 21.6 million working children (aged between 5 and 14 years) in South Asia, out of the 300 million in this age group.⁹ In Bangladesh, the estimated number of working children¹⁰ is 7.9 million out of 35 million in the 5-14 age group, of whom almost 60% are male.¹¹ In Nepal, 1.6 million children of the 6.2 million in this age group are working.¹² In Sri Lanka 475,000 out of 3.18 million children work.¹³ Forced and, in some cases, bonded labour is a characteristic of child labour in all three countries

Child labour is primarily the consequence of household insecurity. Households that supply child labour are those with low and insecure incomes, and limited access to land, education and social protection. Social differentiation on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity and caste also influences which children are most vulnerable to exploitation. Family structures, cultural values that impose economic responsibilities on children and access to education are also critical factors.

In addition to harming children, damaging their potential and perpetuating marginalization, for non-state actors the social acceptability of child labour justifies its use and lessens resistance to forcible recruitment. Moreover, while linkages between child labour and child recruitment to armed groups need further investigation, there is anecdotal evidence to indicate that, for some, joining an armed group is seen as a way to escape the harsh conditions of labour.

Child-trafficking and sexual slavery

Children in South Asia are trafficked both internally and across national borders. No studies have established that children in Sri Lanka and Nepal join armed groups to escape such practices. Nonetheless, the exploitation of children is a violation of children's rights and is indicative of the failure of the state to develop or enforce safeguards against trafficking. This failure also indicates a lack of state protection that is likely to extend to preventing recruitment of children in times of armed conflict.

Although it is difficult to obtain data on trafficking, the practice is known to exist in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, internal trafficking of male children has been reported, especially from areas bordering the northern and eastern provinces. Children from Bangladesh have been trafficked to the United Arab Emirates to work as camel jockeys. Among migrant families such as Rohingya where trafficking of children, especially girls, is of growing concern, the practice has become a strategy to cope with poverty.¹⁴ In Nepal it is estimated by some sources that between 7,000 and 10,000

⁹ *Child Labour and Responses in South Asia*, International Labour Organization (ILO), 21 March 2005. Available at: www.ilo.org.

¹⁰ Children engaged in economic activity, including both paid and unpaid, casual and illegal work, and work in the informal sector, but excluding unpaid domestic services within their own household.

¹¹ Written responses by the Government of Bangladesh to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, CRC/C/RESP/41, 27 August 2003. Available at: www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/doc/replies/wr-bangladesh-2.pdf.

¹² *Child Labour and Responses in South Asia*, ILO (see footnote 9).

¹³ Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning: *Child Activity Survey* (Sri Lanka, 1999), survey undertaken with the support of ILO.

¹⁴ *Child Labour and Responses in South East Asia*, ILO.

Nepalese girls between the ages of 9-16 are trafficked each year to India.¹⁵ In Sri Lanka there are concerns that children are trafficked from areas of deprivation for domestic and sex work. . A domestic non-governmental organization (NGO), Protecting Environment and Children Everywhere, estimated that 6,000 male children between the ages of 8-15 years were used as sex workers at beach resorts in Sri Lanka in 2005. Some were forced into prostitution by their parents or by organized crime.¹⁶

Unemployment and under-employment

It is widely accepted that uneven and inequitable development contributes to conflict and that conflict marginalizes those already economically vulnerable through the loss or reduction of access to capital, income and employment.

The lack of opportunities for income generation has emerged as a key grievance for under-18s both in Nepal and Sri Lanka, where interviews with former child soldiers show that for those who do not migrate either within the country or abroad, options for jobs in the future are limited.¹⁷ This insecurity makes children susceptible to recruitment.

While the official unemployment rate of 4.3% in Bangladesh is much lower than in conflict-affected areas in either Nepal or Sri Lanka, a large number are considered insufficiently skilled or educated for the urban job market and under-employment is widespread. Unemployment, particularly among males under 30, is thought to be higher than 4.3%.¹⁸

Education

Access to education is often limited in South Asia. In Bangladesh, one-fifth¹⁹ of primary age children, a total of 3.8 million, do not attend school.²⁰ Government spending on education in Bangladesh is the lowest in South Asia at just 2.2% of GDP compared with 3.1% in Sri Lanka and 3.4% in Nepal.²¹

In both Sri Lanka and Nepal, where conflict has had a negative impact on access to education, lack of education has emerged as a critical issue in child conscription. Most former child recruits from the LTTE and the CPN-Maoists interviewed for this report cited 'going to school' as the single issue which would make a difference to their lives.

However, in both countries the role of education is contested. Both the LTTE and the CPN-Maoists argue that education is used by the government as a tool for political and ideological indoctrination. CPN-Maoists in Nepal claim that the government manipulates Nepalese history in official textbooks for political purposes. In Sri Lanka the poor provision of state education and government interference in matters such as education appointments, deployment of teachers and the curriculum have created among Tamils a

¹⁵ J Aengst, *Girl trafficking in Nepal*, Human Rights Advocacy Clinic, 12 March 2001.

¹⁶ US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – 2004, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 28 February 2005.

¹⁷ Interviews with former LTTE and Maoist child soldiers, Sri Lanka, April 2005, and Nepal, March 2006.

¹⁸ UN Country Team in Bangladesh. Available at: www.un-bd.org/bgd/index.html.

¹⁹ M.R. Chowdhury, S.R. Nath, R.K. Choudhury and M. Ahmed, *Renewed Hope, Daunting Challenges: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh*. Dhaka University Press, 2002.

²⁰ 'South Asia: 42 million out of school', UNICEF, April 2005. Available at: www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2005n2/southasia.php.

²¹ EdStats Global Country Data, World Bank. Available at: <http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/cd1.asp>.

belief that the state views education as a means of social control and not empowerment. Similarly in Bangladesh, tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts perceive education as a cultural tool used to repress them.

The schools themselves, perceived as representatives of the state have also become the target of non-state armed groups. The CPN-Maoists in Nepal for example have carried out mass abductions of thousands of school children along with their teachers for political indoctrination.²² It is widely believed that they use the existing education network to target brighter children who can then campaign for them and also provide future leadership. In Bangladesh a similar phenomenon appears to be emerging whereby criminal gangs, or *mastans* as they are known, target out-of-school-street children while Islamist groups target *madrassa*-educated children. [See below for detailed discussion of *mastans* and *madrassas*].

Food insecurity

Food insecurity is both a crucial component and a result of poverty and vulnerability. A high proportion of children in South Asia are malnourished. The proportion of underweight children in the region stands at 46%, while 44% of under-fives are stunted and 15% wasted or severely malnourished. Bangladesh, despite a fall in the prevalence of underweight children between 1990 and 2004, still has the second highest proportion of children underweight in South Asia after Nepal.²³ Out of a population of over 135 million people, about 28 million (more than six thousand households) are considered 'ultra-poor', suffering from chronic food insecurity and severe malnutrition. Women and children have even lower nutritional intake and the vicious circle of malnourished mothers, low-birth-weight babies and prolonged malnourishment has resulted in serious stunting and wasting.²⁴

In conditions of extreme poverty, the prospect of regular access to food can encourage children to join armed groups voluntarily. The converse is also true: parents are more likely to resist forcible recruitment by non-state actors if they can provide food for their children. In Nepal, for example, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that conflict-affected children from extremely poor, single-parent households are more vulnerable to recruitment by CPN-Maoists on account of food security. Even though children may not receive a proper wage for assisting the CPN-Maoists or indeed the LTTE²⁵, they are given food, which reduces their burden on household budgets. In Sri Lanka, both a child's role as a soldier in the LTTE and their death in the line of duty bring economic benefits to their families in the form of assured access to rations.²⁶

²² Report of the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the situation of human rights and the activities of her Office, including technical cooperation, in Nepal, 16 February 2002.

²³ "South Asia: Half the World's Underweight Children", UNICEF, May 2006. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2006n4/index_southasia.html.

²⁴ World Food Program, Bangladesh.

²⁵ There have been some reports that both the LTTE and Maoists do pay some of their recruits.

²⁶ J. Hart, *Children and Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Centre for Refugee Studies, Oxford, June 2001

Living in Fear

Once armed conflict begins, children are among the first to be affected. Recruitment by armed groups is only one way in which their rights may be violated. Although protection mechanisms are often eroded by conflict, they may already be inadequate in the first place. Such is the case in Bangladesh. The treatment of children in state custody, rates of domestic violence against children and the lack of protection for children from displaced or refugee populations can be indicators of the weakness of protection mechanisms. Weak protection mechanisms make access to children for recruitment by armed groups easier. Moreover, as noted above, joining an armed group can become part of a child's survival strategy.

Children in custody

Arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment by police and other state authorities are common in South Asia. In all three countries, children are arbitrarily detained, and while in custody are at risk of violence, including rape and other forms of sexual violence at the hands of the state authorities or other detainees.

In 2002, in Bangladesh, the human rights organization Odhikar claimed publicly that nearly 1,200 children were incarcerated in jails, correction centres or homes for indefinite periods. In order to sidestep what they perceive as obstructive legal procedures, the police are reported to have often claimed that these children were over 18 years old.²⁷ During "Operation Clean Heart," an anti-crime campaign that ran from October 2002 to January 2003, approximately 11,000 people were detained, many of whom were under 18, and therefore considered as children according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.²⁸ In October 2003, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about "*the various legal minimum ages... particularly... the very low age of criminal responsibility (7 years)*" in Bangladesh.²⁹

Although the state has a responsibility to protect children in custody, legal provisions in all three countries facilitate abuse of children by law enforcement authorities. In the case of Bangladesh, Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure gives the police broad latitude for arrest without a warrant or magistrate's order, paving the way for abuse. Odhikar investigated Section 54 arrests in 2001 in three districts over a period of nine months and found that women and children were taken off the streets at random and sent to shelter homes and jails. Moreover, they found that the majority of those arrested under Section 54 were from very poor backgrounds and that many arrests occurred for illegitimate reasons, for example to extract bribes, to fulfil informal arrest quotas or to settle political scores³⁰. Similarly, the Prevention of the Suppression of the Women and Children Act (2000) allows the authorities to take women and children into 'safe custody'

²⁷ Odhikar, *Our Children in Jail. A Year Book on the State of Juvenile Justice and Violence against Children in Bangladesh*, 2002. See: www.odhikar.org.

²⁸ Asian Indigenous and Tribal People's Network, 2003. See: <http://www.aitpn.org/Reports/Bangladesh2.pdf>.

²⁹ Committee on the rights of the Child, Concluding observations, Bangladesh. UN Doc: CRC/C/15/Add.221, 27 October 2003. [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/3ff4da770b9e9847c1256df3005a49f4?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/3ff4da770b9e9847c1256df3005a49f4?Opendocument).

³⁰ Odhikar, *Abuse of Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code*, July 2001.

which, contrary to its objective, can expose them to violence, including sexual violence, at the hands of the police.³¹

NGOs and activists working in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh all point to the way in which the criminal justice system fails children, who are left in overcrowded juvenile homes or adult prisons. Few are granted bail – their families may not have been informed of their detention; many families lack the money to meet bail conditions; or may even have disowned the child. Interviews with former child soldiers in Nepal and Sri Lanka indicate that joining armed groups is seen by some as a way of coping with the feelings of fear, frustration and hopelessness that such situations create in a child.

Domestic violence

Children in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh often face abuse in their homes. Indeed, the use of physical punishment and threats is regarded as a normal component of child-raising in all three countries. In Bangladesh children move out of households onto the street, where they are vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs, not only to escape poverty but also domestic violence. For some children, joining militant or criminal groups can be a way of attaining social status and respectability in societies which can be abusive to children and where caste and ethnicity can determine social mobility.

Displacement

Other risk factors include displacement, whether as a result of conflict or natural disaster. In conflict settings, displaced children become easy targets for recruitment by armed groups. Internal displacement in Bangladesh exists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, while Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are located in two government-run camps in Cox's Bazaar.

Estimates of the number of people displaced between August 1975 and August 1992, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, vary between 60,000³² and 500,000.³³ Although according to one estimate, a total of 100,000 have been displaced over the years, of which between 30,000 and 50,000 took shelter in reserve forests.³⁴ Access to education for the displaced children is extremely limited. For example, out of 1,000 displaced children in the hill village of Baghaihat, only 40 attend the local government school. The internally displaced persons (IDPs) have also established their own schools, but no government funding is provided to them.

Of around 20,000 Rohingya refugees in the two camps in Cox's Bazaar, 65% are children. The government permits only partial primary education in the camps which is conducted in the Myanmar language and not the children's mother tongue (which is the Chittagong dialect of the surrounding area) The authorities have discouraged education in the national language of Bangla since it fears that this could represent the first step

³¹ Redress, *Torture in Bangladesh 1971-2004: Making International Commitments a Reality and Providing Justice and Reparations to Victims*, August 2004. Available at: <http://www.redress.org/publications/Bangladesh.pdf>.

³² *Bangladesh: Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Amnesty International, February 2000 (AI Index ASA 13/01/00). Available at: [http://web.amnesty.org/library/pdf/ASA130012000ENGLISH/\\$File/ASA1300100.pdf](http://web.amnesty.org/library/pdf/ASA130012000ENGLISH/$File/ASA1300100.pdf).

³³ Government of Bangladesh Task Force on the Hill Tracts Region, *Statistics of refugees in the greater Chittagong Hill Tracts*, May 2000.

³⁴ A. Shapan, *Migration, Land Alienation and Ethnic Conflict: Causes of Poverty in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, Research and Advisory Services, Dhaka, 2004.

towards integration of the refugees in their host country. The overall literacy rate in the camp is 12%.³⁵

Past Legacies and current practices

In Bangladesh there is a history of involvement of child soldiers, both in the 1971 independence war and, more recently in the three-decade long conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where there has been little effort to rehabilitate the 1,947 children reported to have participated.³⁶ It is feared that another outbreak of violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which some analysts believe is possible, would again involve children as soldiers.

In southwest Bangladesh, groups such as the Janjuddha and Marxist-Leninist factions of the Maoist Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP)³⁷ have already recruited children aged between 13 and 16 from slums, to make bombs and to plant them at, for instance, political rallies.³⁸

There is an absence of research into any linkages between *madrassas* and Islamist groups. However, the non-government Quomi *madrasses* are alleged to serve as a recruiting ground for various Islamist groups such as HuJI. Such groups have gained momentum since October 2001 when attacks on religious minorities and secular intellectuals by Islamists rose sharply. In Khulna and Rajshahi districts some Quomi *madrassa* teachers have been accused of providing children for the Islamist group, JMB, to carry-out country-wide bombings in August 2005, which left two people dead and hundreds injured.

According to local activists, 12-15 year old children also work for JMJB, another Islamist group, mainly as couriers but also carrying and planting bombs. Evidence is mostly anecdotal: only one case of attempted child recruitment has been reported to the police,³⁹ but NGO workers believe the figure to be higher. While local media reports claim that another militant group, Hizbul Tawhid, which promotes *jihad* in order to establish global Islamic rule, has claimed that groups of 6-11 “skilled *mujahids*” currently operate in almost every district in the country and are persuading children to join them in preparation for an armed *jihad*. Financial incentives are offered in some cases, while in others recruits receive a mobile phone. Most children who join are believed to be acting against their parents’ wishes.⁴⁰

³⁵ ‘Rohingya refugees living in touch conditions in Bangladesh camps’, UNHCR News Stories, 21 September 2005. See:

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=43316f084>.

³⁶ Answers by the State Party to the Questions asked by the Committee on the Rights of the Child 41st Session- Pre-Session Working Group, January 2006. Available at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.OPAC.BGD.Q.1.Add.1.pdf>

³⁷ The PBCP is among the many Maoist organizations in Bangladesh. It was founded in 1968 following a split in the Bangladesh Communist Party (BCP). Outlawed since Zia-ur Rahman’s military regime, it has been more active since the beginning of 2002.

³⁸ “Outlawed parties recruiting slum boys, street urchins”, The Daily Star, 24 July 2005.

³⁹ Parents of 14-year old Moniruzzaman Moni filed complaint with Daulatpur police station in Kushtia on 5 December 2005 seeking rescue of their son from an alleged plot by the banned militant Islamist outfit JMB to send him on a suicide mission. The parents claimed that the principal of *Allah'r Darga Idrish Ali Biswas Kawmi Madrassa* had told them that their son had been sent away for training in 'Jihad' and that Moni would become a big leader and earn a lot of money once Islamic rule is established in the country. *Daily Star*, December 6 2005, www.dailystar.net

⁴⁰ The Daily Star, 22 August 2005.

Slum and street children

Bangladesh's urban population has increased fourfold over the last two decades: more than 60% of the increase is due to migration from rural areas.⁴¹ Uneven regional development and massive rural-urban migration have contributed to the growth of urban poverty. Bangladesh's cities have been unable to support the massive influx of people, so slum communities have risen in number and size where access to services, including education, is poor.

Children in urban slums are vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs commonly known as *mastans*. High levels of unemployment, patronage from political parties, together with inadequate, inefficient and corrupt law enforcement agencies have all contributed to the growing culture of "*mastanocracy*". Their connections with political parties make it possible for them to engage in extortion and other crimes with impunity.

Although primary research on recruitment of children by *mastans* is scarce, child rights NGOs claim that poor children are used in drug-trafficking and arms-carrying in slum areas of Dhaka, while anecdotal evidence indicates that children from slums in Dhaka and Chittagong have become easy targets for local *mastans*. In a 2003 baseline survey of street children by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the ILO, some children admitted to being involved in theft and drug businesses.

The proliferation of small arms in Bangladesh in the last decade has contributed to both the rise of *mastans*⁴² and to the increased vulnerability of children to recruitment by them. Among the most vulnerable are children of brothel-based sex workers who face particular obstacles to accessing education and who are often required to work for *mastans* in lieu of fees that must be paid by sex workers to them.

The *madrassa* debate

There is potential for the content of education to become contested in Bangladesh, particularly as the role of Islam within the national identity remains unresolved. At the same time, the expansion of *madrassa* education is likely to increase demands for Islam to play a greater role in society, a development over which Bangladeshi society is starkly divided.

Traditionally, *madrassas* in South Asia have played an important role in preserving Islamic traditions. They generally provide free religious education and often provide board and lodging for students. In recent years, *madrassas* have come under scrutiny because of their perceived linkage to militancy, although there is little research that demonstrates the connections between radical Islamic education and militant behaviour.

There are two types of Islamic schools in Bangladesh, the government-monitored and funded Aliya *madrassas* and the privately owned Quomi *madrasses*. The curriculum at the government-run *madrassas* is similar to that of secular schools and comprises a wide range of subjects including sciences, history, maths and Bangla language. English language is compulsory at primary level in many of the Aliya *madrassas*, which are also adapting to demands made for education relevant to employment.

⁴¹ World Bank, 1999.

⁴² Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, *Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh: Tales of Ascent, Descent, Marginality and Persistence: The State of the Poorest*, May 2004.

There is, however, more concern about the 20,000 Quomi *madrassas* which are independent of government control and where teaching focuses narrowly on religious studies. Their financial autonomy has enabled them to resist reforms and the introduction of more modern secular content to the curriculum. Lessons are often taught in languages other than Bangla, frequently Arabic. Teachers may lack a good command of these languages with the result that children do not acquire sufficient literacy or proficiency in any language including their mother tongue.⁴³ On completing their studies, pupils are ill-equipped to find employment within the job market.

The tenets of *jihad*⁴⁴ are taught as part of the Islamic curriculum, although its applicability in contemporary contexts is rarely taught in *Aliya madrassas*. Some Quomi *madrassa* teachers are reported to have shown students videos showing fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, with a view to inciting support for *jihad*. Quomi students are also likely to have greater exposure to a militant religious-political commentary. The concept is interpreted both as a domestic *jihad* to pressure the state to implement Islamic law and as a pan-Islamist *jihad* to help fellow Muslims elsewhere. The latter belief is said to be growing in importance among *madrassa* students.

The majority of Quomi *madrassa* students come from poor families in rural areas and small towns, where access to government schools is limited. Yet the education they receive in the Quomi *madrassas* does not equip them to find mainstream employment. Under pressure from poverty and unemployment, children in Bangladesh could become vulnerable to recruitment by militant Islamic elements. Already, anecdotal evidence suggests that extremist influence triggered by pan-Islamic anti-Americanism is spreading, particularly among the rural poor, where poverty and limited access to opportunity has already bred discontent.

Conclusion

In Sri Lanka and Nepal, failures of development and governance and widespread corruption have contributed to poverty, inequality, social discrimination and lack of social justice, which have in turn created conditions for widespread discontent, extremism and conflict. Many of the same conditions are present in Bangladesh.

Such conditions risk pushing children into the hands of radical elements and criminal gangs. The increase in narrowly-based Islamic education may make children more susceptible to recruitment by militant Islamist groups. Socially and economically excluded children from the streets, slums and brothels in Bangladesh have already been targeted for recruitment by armed, politically connected criminal groups. Similarly, children in IDP and refugee communities are vulnerable to recruitment.

The absence of armed conflict in Bangladesh has allowed the issue of child protection to slip from the agenda and has meant that service delivery has become the main focus of child rights organizations. Domestic political sensitivity to rights-based advocacy and governmental interference has combined to ensure that even basic research for the purposes of advocacy is difficult to undertake.

⁴³ A. Memon, *Madrassa Education in Bangladesh: Background, Present Scenario and the Position of Women*, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha, 1997.

⁴⁴ The term '*jihad*' has been used and manipulated by both proponents and opponents of Islamic doctrine. For some *jihad* is a purely militant concept that focuses aspect of combating the enemy. For many moderate Muslims, the term has the benign connotation of 'struggle.'

Despite the many challenges facing Bangladesh, in relation to child soldiers, it has in its favour an opportunity to put in place strategies to help prevent their recruitment before the practice becomes commonplace. By heeding the early warning signs, the Bangladesh authorities could significantly reduce the risk to children from militant groups, criminal gangs or other armed actors now and in the future. The challenge is to build a protection framework that guarantees the basic rights of children and addresses those issues that underlie their exploitation both in conflict and in peace.

Recommendations

As part of a prevention strategy, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers calls upon the Bangladeshi Government, national and international child protection agencies working in Bangladesh, NGOs and donors to consider the following recommendations:

Child Protection

- Child protection efforts in Bangladesh should address and remedy conditions that make children vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, including poverty, discrimination, the use of child labour and exposure to abuse, including sexual abuse.
- Particular attention should be paid to developing policy and programs for groups already identified as vulnerable to recruitment, especially slum and street children, internally displaced children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and children from the Rohingya refugee communities.

Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration

- All necessary measures should be taken to ensure that children who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups are duly protected and receive assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration. Individuals who were involved as children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict should be among those for whom such measures are introduced.

Monitoring and Reporting

- The government should establish a mechanism that works closely with human rights NGOs and child protection agencies to monitor the recruitment and use of children by radical elements and criminal gangs, to provide the government, national and international child protection agencies, donors and other relevant actors with accurate, up-to-date information about the prevalence, patterns and root causes of such practices in order to inform their interventions.

Education and training

- Further efforts should be made to ensure access to primary and secondary state education for all children in Bangladesh, including children from marginalized communities such as the children of sex workers, internally displaced persons and refugees.
- All necessary measures should be taken to ensure that education provided in Quomi *madrassas* is in full conformity with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (Optional Protocol) and with the Convention on the Rights of the Child including that it should be directed to the development of the child to its fullest potential; develop respect for

human rights and fundamental freedoms; and develop respect for his or her cultural identity, language and values, and for the national values of Bangladesh.

- The Optional Protocol should be published in Bengali and widely disseminated. The government should ensure that its provisions are widely known to children through, among other routes, the school curricula.

Juvenile justice system

- The age of criminal responsibility should be increased to an internationally acceptable level.
- The government should undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the full implementation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and existing international standards relating to the administration of juvenile justice. In particular, the arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time. A child deprived of liberty should be treated with humanity and respect and in a manner that takes account of the needs of their age.

Accountability

- Ensure legislation to guarantee the prosecution of persons responsible for recruitment of children under the legally permitted age and/or the use of children in military activities.
- All reports of recruitment of children by armed groups, including militant Islamist groups and *mastans*, should be immediately, thoroughly, independently and impartially investigated and anyone found to be responsible for such practices brought to justice.

Advocacy

- Service delivery by NGOs and humanitarian organizations should be complemented by monitoring, lobbying and advocacy work. National and local NGOs and child protection agencies have an important role in gathering information on children associated with armed or criminal groups and advocating for policies to be put in place by the government to protect children from recruitment or use.