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Former LTTE child soldiers' college

by Liu Yongqiu, Chen Zhanjie

COLOMBO, Nov. 21 (Xinhua) — There seems no difference between the Colombo Hindu College, Ratmalana and any other school, except for the armed police officers guarding the gate.

The college in the Sri Lankan capital is a government rehabilitation centre established exclusively for former child soldiers of the Tamil Tigers, a rebel group that was defeated by the government troops in May after a 30-year civil war in the south-eastern Asian country.

"There are 273 ex-child soldiers in the college, 154 boys and 119 girls coming from various camps in the north after October," Major Herman Fernando, who runs the college's rehabilitation program, told Xinhua.

He said the government is now doing its utmost to provide education, sports and living facilities to the former child soldiers — now from 13 to 23 years old — with an aim to offer them a better future.

Despite their new lives at the college, however, all of the students still have sad stories to share.

"I was taken by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) last March along with about 80 children

in (the northern) Mullaittivu (district). Only 25 of us escaped alive after staying with the LTTE for one month," said Danika, a 16-year-old girl.

She said she was sent to the front lines by the LTTE to fight government troops but retreated unnoticed until she got a chance to surrender.

Danika went through six months of rehabilitation at the Ambepussa Rehabilitation Centre before being sent to the college to continue her education.

The Ambepussa Rehabilitation Centre, about 60 km north of Colombo, was specially created to rehabilitate former LTTE child soldiers like Danika.

Danika's parents and her younger brother and sister still live in government refugee camps in Vavuniya established to house the country's nearly 280,000 war displaced civilians.

Danika said she is busy now preparing for her ordinary-level examination to realize her dream of becoming an English teacher.

Shanta, meanwhile, was a "senior" child soldier who worked for the LTTE for about a year before surrendering to government troops.

"I was in the transport department. My work was to transfer dead bodies and injured LTTE cadres from the front line to the rear," the 18-year-old Shanta said.

He once escaped from the LTTE but was soon recaptured.

Shanta has not heard from his father for about five years. His mother, younger brother and younger sister still live in the refugee camps at Vavuniya.

"I want to stay with my family. But because of my studies, I prefer to stay in Colombo," said Shanta who hopes to become a teacher or nurse.

Priya was taken to Kilinochchi, a former LTTE political centre, along with a group of other former child soldiers in March.

"I was kept in a camp. Nobody beat me and I had no work to do there," the 14-year-old girl said.

Priya said the LTTE held her hostage because what it really wanted was her 25-year-old brother or 23-year-old sister.

"If anyone of them joined the LTTE, I would have been released," she said.

After the LTTE was defeated, the Army brought Priya to the Punthottam Rehabilitation Centre in Vavuniya and she stayed there for about three months before being sent to Colombo.

The government, Priya said, promised the former child soldiers that they could stay in the rehabilitation centres for one year before rejoining their families.

The children's families can visit them, too, after their visitation requests were approved.

Xinhua watched as Taariq hugged his parents and a younger brother who came from Vavuniya to visit.

The family chatted warmly in the corridor of the college in the presence of armed police officers.

"The visit requests will be considered case by case as the rehabilitation centre has just started and no rules or regulations have been formulated," Fernando said.

Fernando said there are about 40 teachers in the college and 20 police officers provide security.

The former child soldiers have no lessons to attend on Sundays, so they can play football or other sports or make phone calls to their loved ones and friends. The children can also leave the school if their requests are permitted.

Daya Ratnayaka, who is in charge of rehabilitating about 11,000 former LTTE cadres, said the program at Colombo Hindu College Ratmalana is a part of government efforts to integrate the former child soldiers into society.

Ratnayaka said the children were sent to Colombo because they had started their formal education before being taken by the LTTE.

Ratnayaka told Xinhua that the government has established "another rehabilitation centre in Punthottam in Vavuniya" for the former child soldiers who did not attend school before being taken by the LTTE.

"There are 293 such ex-soldier children in the centre where they can learn and improve their vocational skills," he said. "Children are basically victims of this armed conflict."

He said that after studying in the camps for a period of time, the children would be evaluated by a professional body to determine whether they are ready to be reintegrated into society.

"We will give financial, educational and vocational assistance to help them become independent, responsible and peace-loving citizens," Ratnayaka said.