

UN WELCOMES RELEASE OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN NEPAL

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KATHMANDU — The United Nations on Friday welcomed Nepal's pledge to release more than 4,000 former Maoist fighters, most of them child soldiers, by November 2.

Almost 24,000 former Maoist fighters are confined to UN-supervised camps around the country as part of the 2006 peace agreement that followed the end of Nepal's bloody 10-year civil war.



A Maoist Liberation Army soldier (AP)

But checks by the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) found that 2,973 were minors when the war ended while another 1,035 were not genuine combatants. The UN said this week's agreement between the government and the Maoists to release the 4,008 disqualified combatants from the camps was "a significant milestone in the peace process."

"It is encouraging that the agreement reached recognises the importance of compliance with international standards," it said in a statement, urging the Maoist party to cooperate with the government in the release process.

"The United Nations stands ready to provide support and assistance in this regard." The move to free the former fighters comes amid growing international pressure on Nepal to speed up the peace process, with the UN Security Council due to discuss UNMIN's future next week.

The mandate of the mission, set up to oversee the peace process, expires on July 23 and is expected to be extended for a further six months at the request of the Nepalese government. But international donors have expressed frustration at the slow progress on some of the key tenets of the peace agreement — including the integration of former Maoist fighters into the regular army.

The Maoists insist their fighters be allowed to join the army, but their political opponents and the military have said the national army cannot accept indoctrinated ex-guerrillas.

(AFP)