

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 37/001/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 046
27 February 2004

Sri Lanka: Put human rights first during the elections

In the run up to parliamentary elections called for 2 April, Amnesty International is urging political parties and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to instruct their members not to assassinate political opponents or their supporters, or carry out other violent attacks on party activists and election monitors during the election period.

"We are also appealing to all parties contesting the elections to put human rights at the heart of their agenda," said Amnesty International. "Their manifestos must make clear their specific commitment to undertaking constitutional and legal reforms that will ensure protection and promotion of human rights, ending impunity and ratifying international human rights and humanitarian standards."

"The potential for serious and widespread human rights abuses during the campaigning period is now a major concern," said Amnesty International.

There are already reports of over 100 election related incidents of violence, including 40 party activists who have been injured in clashes in southern and north-central regions, after the close of nominations three days ago. Four people were also allegedly abducted by the LTTE in the east since the elections were announced.

During the last election called in December 2001, 47 murders of political party members by their opponents and attacks on election monitors were reported.

"We are particularly concerned that candidates and supporters of Tamil political parties not allied to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) - which the LTTE is backing in the elections -- may become targets for assassination," said the organization. These include candidates of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) standing as independents, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) (V), and the Democratic People's Liberation Front (DPLF).

The LTTE are suspected to be behind the assassination and attempted assassination of over 50 members of Tamil political groups and several Muslim civilians since the cease-fire came into force in February 2002.

"We welcome the assurance given by the LTTE military leader, Colonel Karuna, at a meeting with Major General (ret'd) Trond Furuho, head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), on 11 February in Batticaloa, that the LTTE would continue to respect the cease-fire and would not resort to violence or interfere in elections in the east," said Amnesty International.

"In view of the vacuum in the provision of law and order in the northeast until agreed interim administration arrangements are established, we are appealing to the government and the LTTE to ensure the right to freedom of movement and right to freedom of assembly and association in areas under their control during the election period."

Amnesty International also called on the government to investigate and punish anyone involved in attacks on political party members contesting the elections and election observers, especially among their own supporters.

Background

Norwegian-led peace negotiations between the government and representatives of the LTTE stalled in April 2003. On 4 November 2003, President Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike suspended parliament for two weeks and took over control of the Ministries of Defence, Interior and Mass Communications. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe declared that without control of the defence forces he could no longer be responsible for continuing the peace process.

On 20 January 2004 President Kumaratunga signed an agreement of cooperation between the main constituent of the People's Alliance (PA), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP; People's Liberation Front) to form the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Four more parties have since joined the UPFA including the Muslim National Unity Alliance (NUA), the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP; People's United Front), the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPLS) and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP; Lanka Equal Society Party).

The JVP is opposed to the devolution of power to the LTTE and strongly supports a unitary state. It is said to be opposed to the terms of the cease-fire agreement and third party facilitation in the peace process.

On 7 February the President dissolved parliament and called parliamentary elections, four years ahead of schedule. This was followed on 11 February, by the dismissal by the President of all 27 non-cabinet ministers and 12 deputy ministers, from the government. Two new ministers of Information and Mass Communication have since been appointed.

Concerns have been expressed about the failure to establish an independent Election Commission, provided for by the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution which came into force on 3 October 2001, to oversee the electoral process. The Commissioner of Elections recently announced that polling booths in areas held by the LTTE would not be allowed and that polling stations would be clustered in places controlled by the Sri Lanka armed forces. Observers have recommended that national and international election monitors are on the ground throughout the month leading up to the election and that freedom of movement for voters going to polling stations should be ensured around election day.

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