

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 37/033/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 290
8 November 2006

Sri Lanka: Amnesty International calls for inquiry into attack on displaced civilians

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by reports of the killing today of as many as 65 civilians taking refuge in a school in Kathiraveli, a coastal hamlet 15 km north of Vaharai in the eastern district of Batticaloa.

The Sri Lankan Army (SLA) reportedly fired multi-barrel rockets and artillery shells which hit a school where internally displaced people (IDPs) were taking shelter. As many as 40 bodies are reported to have been recovered from the scene and more than 100 have been wounded. It is likely that many more may have been injured as the area targeted was densely populated and inhabited by some 5000 IDPs.

Amnesty International is appalled that the military should attack a camp for displaced people -- these were civilians who had already been forced from their homes because of the conflict. Amnesty International condemns all attacks on civilians and is particularly saddened and shocked to see such a large-scale attack on civilians just days after the government's announcement of its Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses.

A Sri Lankan military spokesman has confirmed heavy artillery and mortar bomb exchanges in Batticaloa district, but has accused the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of using civilians as human shields. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 60,646 people remained displaced in Batticaloa district alone, as of 23 October 2006, and over 200,000 have been displaced in the north and east of Sri Lanka since 7 April 2006.

Amnesty International condemns the targeting and killing of innocent civilians and calls on the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to take immediate and adequate precautions to protect civilian lives. All parties to the hostilities must comply with international humanitarian law, which prohibits murder or other violence to those taking no active part in hostilities, requires parties to ensure that their forces comply with the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets and do not target civilians or carry out indiscriminate attacks.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Sri Lanka to initiate an immediate inquiry by international and independent human rights experts into this incident and all serious violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law. Amnesty International reiterates the urgent need for the Government of Sri Lanka to establish a strong and effective international human rights monitoring operation as a matter of urgency to respond to the dramatic deterioration of the human rights and humanitarian situation. Such a mechanism must have the full cooperation of both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE and the support of the United Nations and its member states.

