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Sri Lanka: Armed groups infiltrating refugee camps

Armed groups, some identified as part of a breakaway group of Tamil Tigers known as the Karuna faction, are infiltrating camps for newly displaced people and abducting residents, according to sources known to Amnesty International.

Tens of thousands of people have been fleeing their homes after intense fighting in the eastern region of Batticaloa over the weekend, pushing the number of displaced people to well over 120,000.

"We are hearing reports of armed men, wearing the uniforms of the Karuna faction, roaming the camps and even distributing relief goods," said Purna Sen, Asia Pacific Direct at Amnesty International. "The Karuna faction appears to operate throughout Batticaloa town with the complicity of the Sri Lankan authorities."

The military action of the Karuna faction in the east has increased violence and displacement. Analysts observe that the Sri Lankan Army tolerates its military camps as the Karuna faction has assisted in the Sri Lankan military campaign against the Tamil Tigers.

"The people who have been forced to flee the fighting are in an extremely vulnerable position: they have left behind their livelihoods and their homes, they may not know the area and they are likely to be very scared. The government has a responsibility to ensure that camps are safe and civilian in nature -- it is unacceptable for men with guns to be wandering around as if they're in control."

There have also been reports of armed men abducting young people from internally displaced people (IDP) camps. In one previously unreported incident on 9 March, a 15-year-old boy was approached by a white van as he waited for a bus at a temple near an IDP camp. Armed men tried to pull him into the van, but his struggling and screams attracted a crowd and the abductors fled. A witness said members of the Sri Lankan army watched the incident but did not step in to help the boy.

Food shortages and overcrowding in the camps for displaced people are another concern and Amnesty International is calling on the government to ensure it provides food, water, housing and medical care to all those who have been displaced by the fighting.

"As the fighting continues, we fear even more people will be forced to seek protection in the camps -- and basic necessities like food and water will be stretched even further," said Purna Sen. "The government must act now to ensure supplies can meet the increasing demand."

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports of people who have been displaced being forced to resettle in the north of the country. Over the weekend displaced people were asked to leave Batticaloa to go to the north-eastern town of Muthur. Around 40 buses transported them away; some of the people apparently did not wish to go.

In a welcome move, the Sri Lankan government invited the UN Secretary General's Representative on internally displaced people to visit at the opening of the UN Human Rights Council earlier this week. Given the humanitarian crisis, Amnesty International urges the government to allow the visit to take place as soon as possible.

Background

Recent fighting in Batticaloa has resulted in a significant increase in internally displaced people. Large numbers of people are seeking shelter and protection in areas controlled by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) as the SLA continues to shell Tamil Tiger or 'uncleared' areas. Batticaloa already had 80,000 IDPs and 40,000 more are now seeking shelter.

More than 250, 000 civilians have been displaced by the conflict since April 2006.

In 2004, former Tamil Tiger commander Colonel Karuna broke away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to form his own splinter group, Tamileel Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, or People's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (TMVP). A prominent TMVP sign welcoming people to Batticaloa stands opposite an Sri Lankan Army checkpoint on the lagoon. The TMVP is not a political party. Its military wing appears to be operating with the support of the Sri Lankan Army to challenge the LTTE.

In the past year there have been increasing numbers of abductions of children for use as soldiers. Both the Tamil Tigers and the Karuna faction have been implicated.

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