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Sri Lanka: Time for a New Start; A Human Rights Agenda for Sri Lanka's Presidential Candidates

Amnesty International calls on all candidates standing in Sri Lanka's Presidential elections on January 26th to end widespread human rights violations and the culture of impunity that continues to plague the country.

On Monday, the organization issued a 10-point Human Rights Agenda for all candidates.

"Candidates should commit to restoring respect for basic rights, like life and liberty, ending arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearances and torture, and to restoring respect for freedom of expression, said Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International's Sri Lanka specialist. "In the longer run, what's needed is to rebuild Sri Lanka's institutions so that they can protect efficiently and without discrimination. That's the only way to restore public faith in the justice system."

More than 20 candidates are standing in the elections with President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his former Army Commander and Chief of Defence Staff, retired General Sarath Fonseka the main contenders. Both have taken credit for the military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, while at the same time attempting to evade blame for grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Thousands of people died in the last phase of the war when government forces fired artillery into areas densely populated with civilians. The LTTE used civilians as human shields, opened fire on and killed civilians who attempted to escape. Survivors were forcibly confined for months to displacement camps guarded by the Sri Lankan military. The government relaxed restrictions on freedom of movement in December, but in the camps or outside, these civilians need assistance and protection.

"As the Sri Lankan people contend with the most recent abuses committed by both sides of the recent conflict, the reality is that they have been haunted by injustice and impunity for years", said Yolanda Foster. "Accounting for the conduct of combatants and their superiors during the fighting is crucial, but accounting for the past is only part of the challenge. This election could be an opportunity to improve the human rights of millions of people, but this can only happen if the authorities make a real commitment to respect rights and enact reforms.

"Immediate steps can be taken to improve human rights protection. The government must repeal emergency laws like the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Journalists like J.S Tissanaiyagam have been wrongly imprisoned under these regulations while hundreds of prisoners held without charge or trial are simply forgotten".

More than 11,000 people are currently held without charge by the army in school buildings and other ad hoc detention camps in northern Sri Lanka. The army suspects they are LTTE members who fled the conflict zone along with civilians; there are hundreds of other suspected LTTE members detained without charge in

jails and lock-ups elsewhere in the country.

The authorities must stop using irregular places of detention and must end the dangerous practice of incommunicado detention, which increases the likelihood of torture and enforced disappearances, of which Amnesty International has received reports.

“There is a long history of enforced disappearances and torture is widespread across Sri Lanka, especially in the north and east of the country and in the capital Colombo. Amnesty International calls on candidates to commit to ending these practices and to bring national laws into accordance with international standards,” said Yolanda Foster.

Amnesty International urged all candidates to commit to ending grave violations against people expressing dissenting views, including human rights activists, lawyers and journalists.

“Sri Lanka is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists to work with 15 journalists being killed since 2004, and many others going into hiding and fearing for their lives. Lawyers and human rights activists have been threatened and attacked. People have lost faith in the justice system and there has been a chilling effect on freedom of expression and association in the country” said Yolanda Foster.

“People in Sri Lanka are tired of the rule of the gun and long for the rule of law. Sri Lanka needs to make a fresh start and end impunity for violations of human rights and humanitarian law. It’s time for the government to turn their promises into real action and act now on human rights abuses,” said Yolanda Foster.

Background

About 100,000 people who fled the northern war zone remain in camps, dependent on the government for shelter and relief. Many more are in the early stages of attempted return or resettlement and continue to require protection and humanitarian assistance. Ensuring protection, assistance and respect for the rights of Sri Lanka’s displaced and newly resettled survivors of war remains an urgent priority.

Journalists and human rights defenders have been denied access to camps housing displaced persons and have been prevented from monitoring and reporting on conditions faced by survivors and documenting their experiences in the war zone.

Displaced people must have the right to freedom of movement, liberty and security of person, the right to health, education and to adequate standards of living.

To view the 10-point Human Rights Agenda for all candidates click on the links below:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/002/2010/en>

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/002/2010/ta>