

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ADVISORY

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Sri Lanka: Navi Pillay's visit and Day of the Disappeared

Spokespeople and new case studies available

On 30 August 2013, the world will mark the International Day of the Disappeared.

In Sri Lanka, some 12,000 complaints of enforced disappearances have been submitted to the UN since the 1980s – making it second only to Iraq. But the actual number of disappeared is much higher, with at least 30,000 cases alleged up to 1994 and many thousands reported after that.

“The number of disappeared people in Sri Lanka is astounding. The government has to stop making empty promises and once and for all seriously investigate the tens of thousands of cases of enforced disappearances,” said Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International's Sri Lanka expert.

This year's Day of the Disappeared coincides with the visit of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, to Sri Lanka (25-31 August). She is expected to meet family members of some of the disappeared.

More information

Amnesty International spokespeople as well as activists based in Sri Lanka are available for interviews on enforced disappearances and on Navi Pillay's visit. To arrange, please contact:

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In addition, Amnesty International has documented several new case studies of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka that have never been published before. Photo material and more information on these cases are available through the Amnesty International press office.

Background

On 26 July 2013, the Sri Lankan government announced that it will establish a Presidential Commission of Inquiry to look into enforced disappearances from the final years the conflict (1990-2009), but there are questions about the commission's independence from the government.

Similar commissions appointed in the past have accomplished very little and some have had close ties to the authorities, undermining their independence. There have been ten commissions on disappearances since the early 1990s, but their recommendations have largely been ignored, and few of the many alleged perpetrators they identified have been brought to justice.

During the final bloody months of the armed conflict in 2009, thousands of people disappeared after their arrest or capture by the Sri Lankan security forces or abduction by the Tamil Tigers. Very few of those cases have been resolved. In addition there has been blatant intimidation reported against families and others seeking to take remedial action.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) gives the security forces wide powers to arrest suspected opponents of the government and detain them incommunicado and without charge or trial for long periods – conditions which provide a ready context for deaths in custody, enforced disappearances and torture.

Victims and their relatives have faced enormous difficulties in seeking redress. Hundreds of relatives have filed habeas corpus petitions in an attempt to trace 'disappeared' prisoners but the procedure has proved slow and ineffective.