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Sri Lanka: Allegations of shootings at the scene of bomb blast

The precise circumstances of Wednesday's bomb attack which killed 29 people, including 22 civilians, in Batticaloa town in eastern Sri Lanka remain sketchy as witnesses have alleged that members of the security forces opened fire after the bomb exploded, killing and injuring people, Amnesty International said today.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing which also injured 90 people, 64 of them civilians. The majority of the victims were members of the Tamil community who were gathered at a Buddhist temple to watch the celebration marking the Buddhist festival of Wesak. Several children were among those killed.

The Sri Lankan authorities have blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the bombing and the deaths and have not made any known reference to allegations that government security forces opened fire, causing deaths and injuries themselves.

The bomb was reportedly concealed inside a freezer box for ice-creams mounted on a bicycle. It was reported to have detonated after two policemen and a soldier had stopped the cyclist -- who ran off -- to check the contents of the box.

Amnesty International condemns the bomb blast in Batticaloa town, which indiscriminately killed and injured civilians, and has called on President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga to institute a full, impartial inquiry into the causes and circumstances of the deaths. If such an inquiry confirms that some people had been shot after the bomb blast, and that they may have been victims of extrajudicial or

indiscriminate killing, those responsible should be identified and brought to justice.

Amnesty International has appealed to the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE to protect the lives of civilians as fighting between the two sides escalated in the Jaffna peninsula. The LTTE is fighting for an independent state called Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the country. In November 1999 it overran ten army camps in the Wannai area and more recently in April 2000 it launched an offensive to oust the army from Jaffna peninsula -- its former stronghold -- and regain control of the area themselves.

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