

## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **Sri Lanka: Amnesty International appeals for an immediate halt to use of unauthorized places of detention**

Amnesty International said today that it was high time that the government of Sri Lanka took decisive action to bring a halt to the persistent use of unauthorized places of detention, particularly by armed Tamil groups opposed to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), currently fighting the security forces.

The appeal comes after recent reports of the spectacular escape of a prisoner who had been held in the custody of members of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) in Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka.

Pararajasingham Kugathanan had been held at the "Lucky House" PLOTE camp in Rambaikulam, Vavuniya since 13 June 1998. He escaped around 7am on 31 August 1998 and ran into the nearby Saint Anthony's church. According to eye-witnesses, there were signs of torture all over his body, including bleeding wounds on his legs and arms. Three armed members of the PLOTE followed him into the church and threatened the priest requesting that Pararajasingham Kugathanan be handed over. Both their lives were saved after the timely intervention of police from a nearby checkpoint.

In the last few years, Amnesty International has repeatedly raised concern about the persistent practice on the part of the army and the police in the north and east to allow (if not encourage) members of armed Tamil groups opposed to the LTTE to carry out search operations or screen civilians. Such operations have often lead to human rights violations, including illegal arrest, prolonged detention and torture, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions.

The then army brigadier in Vavuniya told Amnesty International in March 1996 that members of PLOTE have the task of "identifying LTTE infiltrators" and "keeping the security forces informed". He maintained that armed members of PLOTE did not come directly under his control; instead he liaised with PLOTE's political leadership. Amnesty International subsequently recommended that existing command and control structures in the security forces be reviewed to ensure strict control over home guards and armed cadre of anti-LTTE militant Tamil groups.

Since then, there has been some change in the situation in the Batticaloa area in the east, where members of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) have apparently been brought under direct control of the military commander. However, there remains serious concern about the situation in Vavuniya and about human rights violations by

EPRLF members and members of other armed Tamil groups working with the security forces in the north and east of the country.

According to reliable sources, the PLOTE and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) run more than 20 camps. Amnesty International knows of at least three camps where people have been held prisoner for long periods of time by PLOTE cadres, including at Kovilkulam and at Rambaikulam (the “Lucky House” camp referred to above). Members of TELO are known to hold prisoners at camps in Koomankulam, Pandarikulam and Vairavapuliyankulam. According to our information, as many as 16 prisoners are currently held at “Lucky House” camp and a similar number at Kovilkulam.

Throughout the last few years, human rights activists and relatives of people taken into custody by members of PLOTE in Vavuniya have repeatedly expressed fear for their lives or the lives of the prisoners, should they divulge information about individual cases to Amnesty International, journalists or the authorities.

Amnesty International has on several occasions welcomed the introduction by the government of measures to safeguard the welfare of detainees. These include the requirement that detainees only be held in officially gazetted places of detention and that keeping a detainee in an unauthorized place of detention was made a specific offence under the Emergency Regulations.

However, to date no decisive action appears to have been taken to enforce these safeguards, particularly not in relation to the activities of armed cadres of anti-LTTE militant groups.

In a letter sent today to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Amnesty International has recommended that the following steps are taken:

1. A speedy and impartial investigation into the use of unauthorized places of detention should be conducted;
2. All unauthorized places of detention should be closed and all prisoners held at these places should be released;
3. Those responsible for keeping prisoners at these unauthorized places should be brought to justice;
4. Ex-prisoners of armed groups found to have kept prisoners in unauthorized places of detention, the prisoners’ relatives and any other witnesses must be provided with adequate protection when giving evidence to the independent investigators;
5. Ex-prisoners should be adequately compensated;
6. Ex-prisoners should be provided with adequate medical treatment, if required.

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