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SRI LANKA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WELCOMES GOVERNMENT ACTION TO STOP DEATH SQUAD ACTIVITIES

Last week's arrests of 18 members of the security forces and seven civilian informants suspected of being responsible for the "disappearance", torture and killing of at least 21 people should send a clear message to the security forces that human rights violations will not be tolerated, Amnesty International said today.

Ten of those arrested are members of the Special Task Force (STF), an elite police commando unit, and there are also reports that the head of STF has been suspended by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

"While welcoming the arrests and suspension, we urge the Sri Lankan government to take all necessary steps to ensure that the criminal investigations underway will progress smoothly and that those responsible will promptly be brought to justice," the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International is also calling on the government to ensure that the fate or whereabouts of all people reported to have recently "disappeared" be fully clarified and that the relatives of the victims be granted adequate compensation.

Thirteen of the victims found have been identified as Tamils abducted in the capital Colombo in the last few months; their bodies were later found in lakes and rivers in the vicinity of the capital.

During a press conference on 30 August, the head of the police's Criminal Investigation Department in charge of the investigations of the abductions in Colombo announced that they had found evidence that the victims had been tortured and strangled with plastic handcuffs. The victims were then left in a disused toilet in the headquarters of the STF before being dumped in lakes and rivers in the vicinity of the capital.

On 29 June, President Kumaratunga had ordered an investigation into the discovery of, at the time, 11 bodies in Bolgoda lake, south of Colombo.

Amnesty International had earlier expressed concern about the recent re-emergence of the pattern of "disappearances" which had been so widespread in the period 1988 - 1990. "Disappearances" started to be reported again, particularly from the northeast and the capital Colombo, following the resumption in mid-April of fighting in the northeast of the country between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main armed Tamil opposition group.

Twenty-nine "disappearances" have been reported to Amnesty International to date: 14 from Batticaloa, two from Mullaitivu District, one from Pollonaruwa District, 11 from Trincomalee and one from Vavuniya. The organization is urging the government to ensure that these cases are thoroughly and impartially investigated.

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