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## **Sri Lanka: Commonwealth must not turn a blind eye to civil society crackdown**

Commonwealth leaders must use their summit in Colombo this week to pressure the Sri Lankan authorities to end their alarming crackdown on civil society, Amnesty International said.

Sri Lankan military this morning blocked scores of family members of disappeared people from attending a human rights vigil in Colombo, the latest move to stifle freedom of expression and assembly ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) on 15-17 November.

“It may be astonishing to some that even on the eve of CHOGM, the Sri Lankan government feels free to abuse rights at the heart of the Commonwealth charter. But such government repression of civil society was expected. Commonwealth leaders must not just turn a blind eye,” said Steve Crawshaw, Director of the Office of the Secretary General who is in Colombo representing Amnesty International around CHOGM.

“Sri Lanka is trying to use CHOGM to whitewash its despicable human rights record and hide ongoing abuses under the carpet. The government must not be allowed yet again to get away with this.”

Today the army stopped scores of family members of disappeared people, who were travelling by bus from Sri Lanka’s Tamil-majority northern province to attend the Samagi human rights festival in Colombo. Samagi is an “alternative CHOGM” organized by human rights groups.

“This is a blatant attempt by the authorities to stifle people’s right to peaceful protest. It fits a familiar pattern in Sri Lanka, where the government has in recent years done everything in its power to silence dissent,” said Crawshaw.

“It is notable that the Commonwealth has been shamefully silent throughout this, and has yet to condemn the human rights violations that are still so clearly business as usual for Sri Lanka.”

The Sri Lankan authorities have taken measures to prevent public protests in Colombo during CHOGM. Meanwhile, the government has intensified a crackdown on critics and dissenting voices in the build-up to the summit, with opposition activists, journalists and human rights defenders among those have been harassed or threatened.

International human rights experts have also been barred from entering the country. The International Bar Association Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) had to cancel a planned meeting this week after its representatives and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, were denied entry to the country.

“These developments have confirmed what Amnesty International has long argued. Given Sri Lanka’s atrocious human rights record and its refusal to address ongoing violations, the country should not have

been allowed to host CHOGM in the first place,” said Crawshaw.

“The Commonwealth and those attending the summit must use the coming days to highlight and condemn ongoing human rights violations in Sri Lanka. Under no circumstances should Sri Lanka be handed the chair of the organization for the next two years.”

### **Background**

During a recent visit to the country, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay expressed dismay that the surveillance and harassment of Sri Lankan civil society "appear[ed] to be getting worse". Local human rights groups have documented a range of other measures taken by the government against civil society ahead of CHOGM. These include the closing of all universities across the country, restrictions on journalists' freedom of movement; banning a range of planned civil society meetings; and threatening deportation of visiting parliamentarians, including from Australia and New Zealand, for engaging with domestic civil society.

### **Note to editors**

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