

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 37/016/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 154
15 June 2006

Sri Lanka: Amnesty International condemns attack on civilian bus

Amnesty International today condemned the killing of at least 58 civilians and the wounding of at least 45 others in a Claymore mine attack in Anuradhapura district, in northern Sri Lanka. The attack on the crowded bus occurred near the town of Kebitigollewa at around 7:30 a.m. local time, when many villagers were travelling to work and school. It is the deadliest attack on civilians since a ceasefire agreement was reached between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2002.

The government has blamed the LTTE for the attack. The LTTE has, however, denied responsibility and issued a statement condemning the incident. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which is charged with monitoring alleged violations of the ceasefire agreement, has sent a team to investigate.

Earlier this month, on 6 June, a civilian bus was hit by the simultaneous explosion of two Claymore mines outside the Welisara navy base near Colombo, injuring the driver. The LTTE denied responsibility for that attack. The LTTE have carried out a series of mine and bomb attacks targeting members of the Sri Lankan security forces in recent months.

International humanitarian law, which applies in situations of armed conflict, prohibits attacks against civilians and indiscriminate attacks. It requires that at all times the parties to the conflict distinguish between civilians and combatants.

There are reports that, following this morning's attack on the passenger bus, the Sri Lankan armed forces have launched air strikes on LTTE positions in Sampur, Mullaitivu, and near Kilinochchi. Amnesty International is concerned that this response by the government may endanger civilians. International humanitarian law prohibits attacks which are indiscriminate or which cause disproportionate loss of civilian life.

In late April, in retaliation for a suicide bomb attack that injured Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen Sarath Fonseka and killed nine others, the government launched air strikes on LTTE positions around Sampur and nearby Ilakkantai that resulted in the deaths of 15 civilians, according to the SLMM. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that between 7,000 and 8,000 people fled from the area, just south of Trincomalee town, in the wake of the air strikes.

Increasing numbers of civilians are being caught up in escalating violence sweeping the island. Amnesty International fears that a long-simmering, low-intensity conflict now threatens to explode, further exacerbating the human rights crisis in Sri Lanka.

Amnesty International urges all parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under international law, and to hold accountable those members of their forces, including commanders, who are responsible for

violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law.