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SRI LANKA: HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

Two years since it came to power, the People's Alliance government continues to tolerate human rights violations while refusing to take the crucial steps needed to ensure that human rights protection becomes a reality in Sri Lanka, Amnesty International said today.

Although the situation has improved dramatically since the late 1980s, the government's stance allows violations such as extrajudicial executions, "disappearances" and torture to continue, particularly in the context of its conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) armed opposition group.

"Despite its public commitments to protect human rights, the government is trying to justify human rights violations because it is fighting a war," Amnesty International said. "This is duplicitous at the very least. The deliberate targeting of innocent men, women and children for horrifying abuses such as electro-shock torture and rape can never be justified."

Amnesty International is particularly concerned at the recent escalation of human rights violations, including the killing of numerous civilians in several deliberate bomb attacks in and around Colombo attributed to the LTTE, and the alleged indiscriminate killings of civilians by both sides during fighting in the north and east. At the very minimum, both the LTTE and the government should ensure that all necessary steps are taken to protect the safety of civilians, including refraining from indiscriminate attacks, the organization said.

"The government cannot just rest easy by saying that things are not as bad as they used to be," Amnesty International said. "This complacency is completely unacceptable to the families of victims such as 17-year-old Arumaithurai Tharmaletchumi, who was raped and then shot dead by government soldiers, and 14-year-old Anthony Joseph, who was shot between his legs when he tried to stop them."

There has been some progress with the introduction of a number of safeguards to prevent human rights violations, like the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission and the arrest of alleged perpetrators. But the government is still refusing to amend provisions in several laws which fall far short of international standards and facilitate torture, deaths in custody, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the issue of impunity for past human rights violations. Only a few court cases have been instigated against members of the security forces charged with violations, and these have been proceeding very slowly.

The organization is calling on the government to repeal or amend the widely formulated powers to arrest and detain currently given to the security forces, and to speed up investigations and judicial proceedings against those accused of human rights violations. It is also urging the LTTE leadership to make a clear statement condemning and prohibiting the deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians.

The LTTE has argued that killings of Sinhalese civilians settled by the government in certain areas of the north and east can be justified because they consider them to be actively

taking part in the armed conflict. One LTTE spokesperson tried to justify present human rights abuses by the organization in the context of general discrimination against Tamils.

An Amnesty International delegation which visited Sri Lanka earlier this year gathered evidence from victims and eyewitnesses of human rights abuses committed by both government forces and armed opposition groups. The victims included women and children as young as 12.

Since April 1995, government security forces have arbitrarily detained thousands of Tamil people and have been responsible for torture, extrajudicial executions and more than 60 “disappearances” of Tamils. Armed Tamil groups opposed to the LTTE, including the People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), have also committed human rights abuses.

The LTTE have been responsible for deliberate and arbitrary killings of Sinhalese civilians; summary executions of Tamils considered to be “traitors”; and torture and ill-treatment of prisoners and young boys and girls who were forced to join the group.

Among the personal stories highlighted in Amnesty International’s report are:

- July 1995. A 15-year-old girl who had been recruited by the LTTE at the age of 12, reported how she was tortured by navy officers after she surrendered to them in Jaffna district. She alleged that she was held naked and tortured by being hung upside down. A young woman who surrendered around the same time alleged that navy officers pulled a shopping bag full of petrol over her head.
- July 1995. 15-year-old Dharmalingam Chandramohan was taken away by army personnel from Muttur ‘GPS’ Camp in Trincomalee district. Relatives made enquiries at the camp but officers denied arresting him. Nothing more has been heard of his whereabouts.
- August 1995. Lakshmi Pillai was raped at her home in Trincomalee by two army informants in front of her two sons. The motive may have been revenge as she had spoken out about being raped before at Plantain Point army camp in August 1993.
- 11 February 1996. Soldiers killed 24 civilians, including 13 women and seven children below the age of 12, at Kumarapuram, Trincomalee district. The soldiers broke open the shutters of houses and shot at the people hiding inside. Among the victims were Arumaithurai Tharmaletchumi and Antony Joseph.
- 11 June 1996. 14 Sinhalese civilians, including four children, were killed. One survivor said that about 15 LTTE members entered his house, blindfolded nine people, tied their hands behind their back, attacked them with machetes and finally shot them. Six other villagers were reportedly dragged into the jungle and hacked to death.

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