

SRI LANKA Murugesupillai Koneswary (35)

Murugesupillai Koneswary, a mother of four children, was killed at her home in 11th Colony village by a grenade being thrown at her genitals on the evening of 17 May. Reportedly only her two-year-old child was present when the attackers entered her house. Her husband and three older children were not at home.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that she may have been raped prior to being killed and that the perpetrators may have been one or more police officers attached to the nearby Central Camp police station, on the border between Batticaloa and Amparai districts.

Neighbours say they heard screams from the house, and shortly afterwards they heard an explosion. When they tried to go to Murugesupillai Koneswary's home, they heard shooting and rushed back indoors so they did not actually see the perpetrators. However, because this area is under the control of the police, observers claim that it is unlikely that there could have been any other people with arms in the area at that time.

Local people believe that the perpetrators may have thrown the hand grenade near her genitals in order to cover up the evidence of rape.

The husband of Murugesupillai Koneswary, who discovered her body, made a complaint at Central Camp police station. Some police officers then took her body to the hospital at Kalmunai. However, no medical examination was carried out. It is not clear why no examination took place. Some reports suggest that the police, who also advised the relatives to dispose of the body, may have pressurized the hospital authorities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the context of the armed conflict between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main armed opposition group fighting for a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka, there have been continuing reports of arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, including rape, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions.

In September 1996, the rape and death of a 18-year-old student who "disappeared" after she was stopped at a sentry point at Kaithady, Jaffna district created widespread public protest in Sri Lanka. Her mother, brother and neighbour had gone missing on the same day after they made inquiries at the sentry point. Their bodies were found approximately 6 weeks later. Post-mortem investigations found evidence of rape on the girl's body. Amid public outcry, eleven members of the security forces were arrested in connection with this case and legal action against them is pending.

However, in less prominent cases reported from other parts of the north and east, such as several cases reported from Batticaloa district in early 1997, initial investigations have not resulted in any effective legal action against the alleged perpetrators. In those exceptional cases where perpetrators have been brought to trial, victims of rape have failed to appear in court because of fear for their lives.

Although the preliminary judicial inquiry against four soldiers allegedly responsible for the rape of Velan Rasamma and her sister, Velan Vasantha in March 1997 in the same district is proceeding, observers doubt whether they will be brought to justice. The soldiers have been released on bail. (For more information, see UA 82/97, AI Index: ASA 37/09/97 of 21 March 1997 and follow up UA ASA 37/12 of 21 May 1997.)

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at reports of the killing and possible rape of Murugesupillai Koneswary at 11th Colony, Batticaloa district, on 17 May 1997 and that the perpetrators are believed to be police officers;
- urging that an independent investigation be held and the alleged perpetrators brought to justice;
- urging that protection be provided to witnesses to ensure that the alleged perpetrators cannot put pressure on them to influence the outcome of the investigations and the legal process;
- urging that adequate compensation be provided to the husband and children of the victim.

APPEALS TO:

Her Excellency President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga
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 "Temple Trees"
 Colombo 3, Sri Lanka
Faxes: + 94 1 33 37 03
Telegrams: President Kumaratunga, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Salutation: Your Excellency

The Hon (General) Anuruddha Ratwatte
 Deputy Minister of Defence
 Ministry of Defence
 15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha
 Colombo 3, Sri Lanka
Faxes: + 94 1 54 15 29 or 68 77 68
Telegrams: Deputy Defence Minister, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Salutation: Dear Minister

Inspector General of Police
 Police Headquarters
 New Secretariat
 Colombo 1, Sri Lanka
Telegrams: Inspector General of Police, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Salutation: Dear Inspector General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Sri Lanka accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 2 July 1997.