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Sri Lanka: Decision to wind up Human Rights Task Force could jeopardise welfare of detainees

The decision to wind up the Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) next week could result in the welfare of detainees in more than 374 authorized places of detention in Sri Lanka being put into jeopardy, Amnesty International said today.

The HRTF will be wound up on 30 June, and the welfare of detainees, one of its main functions, is set to be taken over by the newly established National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on 1 July.

“We fear that the NHRC has not as yet become operational and may not be in a position to take on the vital task of monitoring the welfare of detainees,” Amnesty International said. “At all costs a vacuum in the monitoring the welfare of hundreds of detainees should be avoided.”

The life, liberty and security of those detained at these often very remote places should be a primary consideration when considering any transitional arrangements for the handing over of functions from the HRTF to the NHRC.

In a letter to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Pierre Sané, urged that the heads of the security forces be informed within the next four days of the need to report all arrests and detention -- under the emergency regulations and Prevention of Terrorism Act -- to the NHRC and in any case no later than 48 hours from the time of arrest or detention.

“It is imperative that safeguards for the welfare of detainees set out in Presidential Directions issued in July 1995 be reissued to avoid lapses which could result in new waves of arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and ‘disappearances’,” Amnesty International said.

These safeguards included the issuing of arrest receipts to the relatives of people taken into custody, the informing of relatives, the granting of the right to detainees to inform a relative or friend of his or her whereabouts, the recording of statements of detainees in a language of their choice and the putting in place of specific protective measures when arresting or detaining women and children.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the expertise built over the years in the HRTF both at the national and local level be safeguarded during this transition. The government should ensure that the new structure makes the best use of the existing experience of HRTF officials. Furthermore, the organization urges that new procedures are put into place for the handing over of complaints pending with the HRTF to other authorities with the power and personnel to handle them.

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