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SRI LANKA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS FOR CIVILIAN PROTECTION

Amid reports of a large-scale offensive looming in the northeast of Sri Lanka, Amnesty International today is urgently appealing to the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to take all necessary measures to protect civilians and others taking no active part in the fighting.

"At the very least, safeguards should be introduced to avoid deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians and those persons who, having taken an active part in the hostilities, are no longer involved in fighting because of sickness, wounds, detention or any other cause," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is also urging both parties to ensure that detainees are not subjected to torture -- including rape -- and ill-treatment, and that the sick, the wounded and those who are detained or who surrender are protected from all acts of reprisal and violence -- including hostage-taking.

Appeals are being sent today amid reports of an escalation of the armed conflict in the Jaffna peninsula. The Jaffna area in the north of Sri Lanka is predominantly under the control of the LTTE -- the main armed opposition group fighting for an separate Tamil state called *Eelam* in the northeast of the country. An estimated 800,000 civilians currently live there.

Although Amnesty International does not address the general issue of military tactics, the appeal is based on concerns for the life and safety of civilians, prisoners and the wounded in view of widespread human rights abuses reported in the context of previous offensives.

The organization is calling on both parties to at least give unimpeded access to all areas under their control, including all places of detention, to fact-finding and other missions dispatched by humanitarian and intergovernmental organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Amnesty International is also appealing for Sri Lanka to become a party to Protocol II Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 relating to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts.

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