

PUBLIC

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UA 230/06 Fear for safety/Possible "disappearance"

SRI LANKA Reverend Fr. Thiruchchelvan Nihal Jim Brown (m)
Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas (m)

Reverend Fr. Thiruchchelvan Nihal Jim Brown and Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas went missing after a friend left them at a Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) checkpoint on Kayts Island off the northern peninsula of Jaffna on 20 August at approximately 14:10. There is great concern for their safety, and Amnesty International fears that they may be victims of "disappearance".

Father Jim Brown, a parish priest in the village of Allaipiddy on Kayts Island, and Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas left Allaipiddy by motorbike around 12:30pm on 20 August heading for the nearby village of Mandaithivu. The SLN did not allow them to enter Mandaithivu, and Father Jim Brown and Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas decided to return to Allaipiddy. On the way back to Allaipiddy, they met a friend who accompanied them to the Allaipiddy SLN checkpoint. The friend left Father Jim Brown and Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas standing at the checkpoint at approximately 14:10, which is the last confirmed sighting of the two men.

Inquiries about their whereabouts have been made at a number of churches across the Jaffna peninsula and in surrounding areas. As Kayts Island is strictly controlled by the SLN, there are suspicions that the two men may have been taken into custody. Rear Admiral Upali Ranaweera, Commander of the SLN's Northern Region, has denied that the two men were arrested. Navy personnel at the Allaipiddy checkpoint have stated that Father Jim Brown and Wenceslaus Vinces Vimalathas passed through the Allaipiddy checkpoint and returned soon after in the direction of Jaffna town. However, when Kayts police requested that they produce the registration of the two men passing through the checkpoint on their return from Allaipiddi, they refused.

Father Jim Brown had assisted a number of civilians in moving from Allaipiddy to the town of Kayts following armed conflict in Allaipiddy between the SLN and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on 13 August, during which at least 15 civilians were killed and 54 injured. In the days following this incident, he allegedly received a number of death threats from the Commanding Officer of the Allaipiddy Naval Camp, accusing him and other civilians of assisting the LTTE to dig bunkers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The human rights situation in Sri Lanka has deteriorated dramatically in recent months, as escalating violence has resulted in widespread human rights abuses and a climate of fear and insecurity. Increased fighting between the government security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since April 2006 has resulted in the death and injury of scores of civilians, the displacement of more than 200,000 people, and the destruction of homes, schools, and places of worship. Neither the government security forces nor the LTTE appear to be taking adequate precautions to protect civilian lives. The two parties to the conflict say they remain committed to the 2002 ceasefire agreement; however, analysts refer to the situation on the ground as an undeclared war. Over two decades of conflict in Sri Lanka have claimed the lives of more than 65,000 people, the majority of them civilians.

There are fears that a pattern of "disappearances" by state agents is re-emerging in Sri Lanka following the introduction of new Emergency Regulations in August 2005 that granted sweeping powers to the security forces. Sixty-two cases of "disappearance" in the north of the country have been registered by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka over the past year. The Commission is also investigating the status of 183 other individuals who are still missing under unknown circumstances.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- urging the authorities to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into the fate and whereabouts of Rev. Fr. Thiruchchelvan Nihal Jim Brown and Wenceslaus Vences Vimalathas and to make the findings public;
- calling upon the authorities, if the two men are found to be in custody, to allow them access to their relatives, a lawyer and any medical treatment they may require;
- urging that they be immediately and unconditionally released unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence;
- calling for the authorities to adhere to presidential directives requiring detainees arrested by the security forces to be handed over to the police within 24 hours of their arrest;
- expressing concern at reports that a pattern of “disappearances” appears to be emerging again in northern Sri Lanka, and calling on the authorities to put a halt to this practice immediately.

APPEALS TO:

President Mahinda Rajapakse
Presidential Secretariat, Colombo 1, Sri Lanka

Fax: + 94 11 2333 703

Salutation: Dear President

Major General Asoka K Jayawardhana
Secretary, Ministry of Defence
15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka

Fax: + 94 11 2446 300 / 2541 529

Salutation: Dear Secretary of Defence

Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda
Navy Commander
Navy Headquarters
PO Box 593
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Fax: +94112542430/ +94 11 2433 896

Email: cofn@navy.lk

Salutation: Dear Vice Admiral

COPIES TO:

Rear Admiral Upali Ranaweera
Northern Naval Area Commander

Fax: +94 21 222 2800/ +94 21 222 3341

Email: comnorth@navy.lk

Salutation: Dear Rear Admiral

And 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 10 October.