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Sri Lanka: "Disappearances" on the rise

In a letter sent to the President of Sri Lanka today, Amnesty International urged investigations into an increasing number of "disappearances" reported over the last two weeks in northern Sri Lanka.

Seven people who were last seen in the hands of security forces in Vavuniya between 10 and 16 August have "disappeared", bringing the total number of "disappearances" in that city to nine this year. In addition many people have reportedly been held in secret detention for up to two or three weeks and subjected to torture.

This deterioration in the human rights situation appears to be linked to attacks on army camps and convoys apparently carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). The killing of two army personnel in a suicide bomb attack on August 16 may have contributed to the "disappearances". Attacks on the military in 1996 in Jaffna also appeared to cause soldiers to resort to illegal arrest, torture and "disappearances". At the that time, more than 500 cases were reported within three months.

These "disappearances" have taken place in the context of a general deterioration in human rights following the introduction of emergency regulations in May 2000. The regulations increase the risk of secret detention and "disappearances".

Amnesty International has expressed concern that the Sri Lankan authorities decided to reduce the safeguards against the abuse of prisoners and called on the government to repeal the emergency

regulations, or failing that, order a thorough review to bring them in line with international standards.

"Security concerns cannot justify human rights violations. The Sri Lankan government must take action to prevent further 'disappearances' and immediately investigate those that have already taken place," Amnesty International said.

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