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# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 10/94

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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - SRI LANKA

Correction - SEE JORDAN ITEM NEWS SERVICE 09/94, AI INDEX SHOULD BE AMENDED TO MDE 16/WU 01/1994. Sorry!

NEWS INITIATIVES - INTERNAL

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18 January 1994**

**SRI LANKA: Discovery of mass graves at Suriyakande**

Amnesty International is calling on the Sri Lankan Government to ensure that a full, impartial investigation is carried out into the discovery of mass graves found in southern Sri Lanka.

At least three mass graves estimated to be 40 feet deep and thought to contain up to 300 bodies have been discovered on a mountainside at Suriyakande, a remote area of southern Sri Lanka 165km south of Colombo.

On 3 January 1994, following a tip off received by the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) about the existence of the graves, opposition politicians accompanied by journalists unearthed several skeletons at Suriyakande.

Since excavation in the area began, the remains of up to 26 bodies have been exhumed, as well as pieces of clothing and other personal effects.

Many believe that the remains are of people detained and killed during the 1989 government counter-insurgency operation against the armed insurgent group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, Peoples Liberation Front). Tens of thousands of people are reported to have "disappeared" during this period.

A judicial inquiry into the findings at the grave site has begun. About 600 relatives of people who have "disappeared" assembled at the courthouse in Embilipitiya on 10 January to try and make an initial identification of the body parts.

Fears for the safety of those involved in the investigation have arisen following reported incidents thought to be related to the discovery of the graves. A lawyer, acting for the opposition politicians involved in the magisterial inquiry, was fired on by unidentified gunmen as he and his driver returned to Colombo from the proceeding. His car was damaged but no one was hurt. In the centre of Kahawatta, the town through which opposition MPs and journalists travelled to reach Suriyakande, a skull and bones were left by the post office. Amnesty International is calling on the Sri Lankan government to protect those professionals involved in the investigation so they can carry out their inquiries without fear of intimidation.

Although a government spokesperson has reportedly stated that a Deputy Inspector General of Police is to investigate the mass graves and assist in the judicial inquiry, Amnesty International is urging the Sri Lankan Government to make further assurances and ensure that UN guidelines on disinterment and analysis of skeletal remains are followed.

The human rights organization has asked the government to ensure that any further exhumation is carried out under the supervision of forensic experts so that evidence that would help reveal identity of the bodies and the cause of death is not lost; and that the identity, the time and the cause of death are investigated with a view to establishing whether the bodies are of people who have been unlawfully killed.

Amnesty International is also calling for the findings of the investigation to be made public.

In February 1992, the Government of Sri Lanka accepted a recommendation from the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, that in the event of bodies being discovered, believed to be those of missing people, it could request the

assistance of an international team of forensic experts under the auspices of the United Nations. To Amnesty International's knowledge, the Sri Lanka Government has yet to request such assistance.

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