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Commonwealth giving Sri Lanka carte blanche for human rights abuses

Sri Lanka's disturbing human rights record means it should be barred from hosting a key Commonwealth summit in November or chairing the organization, Amnesty International said ahead of a key meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers today.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group - made up of foreign ministers and Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma, who gather to address violations of the Commonwealth's fundamental values, including human rights - is meeting in New York today.

"Today's meeting is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to show some real leadership on human rights. The organization has been shamefully silent so far about Sri Lanka's human rights crisis—including the persistent lack of justice for past crimes and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and other activists," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia-Pacific Director.

"Instead of giving Sri Lanka carte blanche for human rights violations, Commonwealth leaders should be supporting calls for an independent and international investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity, and condemning reprisals against civil society still taking place."

Today's meeting comes less than two months ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo, after which Sri Lanka is set to serve as the Commonwealth's Chair for two years.

"Allowing Sri Lanka to host CHOGM and then chair the Commonwealth would give the country a seal of approval that it does not deserve. The Commonwealth must think twice before allowing such a blow to its own credibility," said Truscott.

"As Chair, Sri Lanka would be charged with helping the Secretary-General address violations of human rights in other Commonwealth countries – it's difficult to think of a bigger irony."

There are credible allegations that the Sri Lankan military and Tamil Tigers armed group committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during the armed conflict ending in 2009. But Sri Lanka has resisted calls for an international and impartial investigation into the conflict, while its own domestic efforts have been wholly ineffective.

Since the war's end, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has steered his country in what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described as "an increasingly authoritarian direction". The government has concentrated powers in its own hands and led an assault on dissent, harassing and attacking critics including journalists, human rights defenders and opposition politicians.

"Despite repeated demands from the UN and others, the Sri Lankan government has not stopped violating

people's rights. There's a huge risk of increased reprisals against activists and others in November around CHOGM. Sri Lanka is not a safe pair of hands for the Commonwealth," said Truscott.