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## **Commonwealth must stop Sri Lanka stifling human rights efforts**

Diplomats from Commonwealth countries meeting in London today must push Sri Lanka to end its continuing crackdown on human rights defenders, Amnesty International said.

The Commonwealth Committee of the Whole is meeting 17-18 October to prepare for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo in November.

"Commonwealth countries must agree new measures to address the continuing human rights crisis in Sri Lanka and especially to monitor and condemn any civil society repression around CHOGM," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia-Pacific Programme Director.

"Sri Lanka has a disturbing record of repressing civil society activism. Its officials have intimidated, threatened and even attacked human rights defenders around previous international events. We are extremely worried about the safety of such activists around the summit in Colombo in November."

In August, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay after a visit to Sri Lanka noted the country's worrying "authoritarian turn". She pointed out that surveillance and harassment of human rights defenders, journalists, and many ordinary citizens appeared to be getting worse. Security forces intimidated some of those she met or intended to meet, and interrogated human rights defenders.

Father V. Yogeswaran - a Jesuit priest who runs a local NGO in the town of Trincomalee that documents human rights violations - told the media he received a late night visit from plain clothed police officers in August, who reportedly grilled him for four hours about his meeting with Pillay.

After CHOGM, Sri Lanka is expected to be handed the chairmanship of the Commonwealth for the next two years.

"Given the persistence of human rights violations in Sri Lanka, it would be ludicrous to reward the country with the Commonwealth's chair. It's crucial that CHOGM does not lead to Sri Lanka being handed any Commonwealth role with responsibility for the protection and promotion of human rights," said Truscott.