

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

News Flash

AI Index: ASA 37/013/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 110
14 June 2007

Sri Lanka: President must invite international human rights field operation

(Geneva) President Mahinda Rajapakse, as Head of State, must take personal initiative to end the human rights crisis in Sri Lanka, said Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan, after a meeting with President Rajapakse today.

Ms Khan urged President Rajapakse to use his executive power to invite the United Nations to set up a strong human rights field operation in Sri Lanka to investigate and verify serious human rights abuses committed by all sides, throughout the country.

Over the past year, over 1,000 people are believed to have been "disappeared" and another over 1,000 unlawfully killed. Civilians have been killed by indiscriminate artillery bombardments, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bombings and reprisal killings. Between March and April alone, the internally displaced population of Batticaloa District doubled, as 80,000 civilians fled their homes. The LTTE are responsible for killing and abducting civilians and, as with the *Karuna* faction, continue to recruit children as combatants.

"A climate of fear dominates Sri Lanka with human rights activists and journalists threatened, attacked, intimidated, harassed and killed. Even humanitarian workers have not been immune," said Ms Khan as Amnesty International received reports of an international non-governmental organization volunteer having been shot in Trincomalee.

The discriminatory forced displacement of Tamils from Colombo on 7 June is illustrative of the lack of protection faced by ordinary Sri Lankans caught in the conflict, who are looking to escape the fighting and abuses committed by the LTTE, including recruitment of children as soldiers.

"The alarming escalation of human rights abuses over the past 18 months clearly shows that existing domestic mechanisms for protecting civilians and delivering justice are wholly inadequate and have failed to deter perpetrators," said Ms Khan.

"The Commission of Inquiry set up by the President last year has failed to reduce impunity human rights abuses. In fact, its credibility and effectiveness has been challenged by the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons set up by the President himself."

"In this deteriorating situation, an independent presence to monitor and investigate human rights abuses by all sides is critical."

"Amnesty International urges President Rajapakse to open an immediate dialogue with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to set up an international field operation that has a mandate to monitor and investigate human rights violations."

"The presence of a significant, independent, transparent and fully-resourced international human rights field operation will help to strengthen national institutions responsible for accountability and justice. It must extend to areas of LTTE control," said Ms Khan.

"The government's efforts to date have been woefully inadequate. President Rajapakse has an opportunity to change that."

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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