

AI INDEX: ASA 37/02/98
3 FEBRUARY 1998

Sri Lanka: Government forces kill eight civilians - justice needed now

Today's report that eight Tamil civilians, including three teenagers, were deliberately shot at close range by police and home guards at Tampalakamam on 1 February is deplorable, Amnesty International declared.

The human rights organization is calling on the Sri Lankan authorities to take all necessary action to ensure those responsible are brought to justice.

"This incident is reminiscent of the killing by army and home guards of 24 civilians, including 13 children, two years ago in the same area and still the suspects have not been punished," the organization said. "It is important that the alleged perpetrators are taken into custody as quickly as possible so they are not able to intimidate witnesses."

Among those killed were six people attending a house warming party in a house near the police post at Pokkuruni, a hamlet of Tampalakamam, Trincomalee district. Around 6.30am, around 20 police and home guards who appeared drunk reportedly took the victims, including two brothers as young as 13 and 17, inside the police post and shot them in the compound. They later went from house to house and beat up villagers. Soon after, two other villagers were killed near the church at Puddukudiruppu, another hamlet of Tampalakamam.

Initially, the Kantalai police were apparently pressuring families to sign statements claiming that those killed were members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or that they were killed by the LTTE, an armed opposition group fighting for an independent state in the north and east of the country.

A report on national television news yesterday also stated that six members of the LTTE were killed during a "confrontation" at Tampalakamam. After an intervention by high-ranking officials, however, the bodies were taken to Trincomalee hospital where post-mortem examinations revealed that all victims died as a result of shooting at close range.

The officer-in-charge of Kantalai police station reportedly confirmed at a magisterial inquiry today that police and home guards were responsible for the killings. However, to Amnesty International's knowledge, none of those alleged to be responsible have been arrested. According to some reports, they have been transferred to Kantalai police station where they continue to be on active duty.

The inquest is scheduled to continue on 6 February. The magistrate has reportedly indicated that an identification parade will be held. Several witnesses claim they can identify some of those responsible.

Amnesty International is urging the authorities to ensure that adequate compensation be granted to the relatives of the victims.

ENDS.../