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Sri Lanka: judgment in landmark case -- another step against impunity

This morning's sentencing of seven people involved in a notorious "disappearance" case is another important milestone in Sri Lanka's human rights history, Amnesty International said today.

Six members of the security forces and one school principal were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for the "disappearance" of 25 people, including 24 students between the ages of 15 and 17. Ratnapura High Court found the seven accused guilty of abduction with intent to murder and wrongful confinement at Sevana army camp, Embilipitiya, Ratnapura district, between late 1989 and early 1990.

"Today's decision in Sri Lanka should set an example to the international community that impunity for past abuses can be ended when there is the political will," Amnesty International said.

"Shielding perpetrators undermines the rule of law and human rights protection. It leaves victims and their families bitter and unforgiving, deepening their alienation from the state."

"We hope this judgment will also reinforce the message sent by the government to the army and police that human rights violations will not be tolerated," said Pierre Sané, Amnesty International's Secretary General, in a letter to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

Mr Sané also paid tribute to the parents and other relatives of the young people who "disappeared" in Embilipitiya, their lawyers and members of human rights organizations who, despite threats, continued to campaign for those responsible for these ghastly crimes to be brought to justice.

Mr Sané also acknowledged the key role played by Justice Soza, the then chair of the Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) who pushed the authorities for the process of truth and justice in this case to take its course.

The 1992 Annual Report of the HRTF named eight soldiers and two officers of the Sevana army camp as responsible for the abduction of 18 students and had recommended a full-scale investigation to assess criminal responsibilities of the persons identified.

Amnesty International is calling upon the Sri Lankan authorities to extend their apparent determination to bring an end to impunity for human rights abuses by ratifying the Statute of the International Criminal Court and by assuming a leading role in advancing the work on the draft United Nations (UN) Convention on the Enforced Disappearance of Persons at the forthcoming UN Commission on Human Rights.

Background

This was the first judgement relating to "disappearances" that occurred in the late 1980s when these grave violations reached tragic proportions in southern Sri Lanka in the context of the armed insurgency by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), People's Liberation Front.

In July 1998, Amnesty International welcomed the judgment by the Colombo High Court in relation to the rape, “disappearance” and murder of Krishanthi Kumarasamy and “disappearances” and murder of her mother, brother and neighbour in September 1996.

The organization has since reported an encouraging further decline in the number of “disappearances” being reported from Jaffna.

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