

EXTERNAL

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"Disappearances"

16 September 1996

SRI LANKA

Ponnuthurai Sinnathurai, aged 47, tailor  
Muhunthan, tailor's assistant

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According to a recent report by the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) (Jaffna), Ponnuthurai Sinnathurai, a tailor from Sangathanai, Jaffna district, and his assistant, Muhunthan, "disappeared" after they were seen being taken away in an army truck in the evening of 31 July 1996. Despite numerous appeals at various army camps in the area, their whereabouts remain unknown.

Earlier that day, both men were seen assisting soldiers who came to collect some clothes tailored by them. According to witnesses, at least one soldier later returned with a truck from the direction of Chavakachcheri army camp. Ponnuthurai Sinnathurai and Muhunthan together with their bicycles were loaded into the truck and taken away.

On 13 September, Amnesty International appealed to the Human Rights Task Force (HRTF) to investigate these "disappearances". It was informed on 16 September that their names are not on the lists of people detained in the Jaffna district as provided by the security forces. According to presidential directives, the HRTF has to be informed of arrests and detentions within 48 hours.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the security forces regained control over the Jaffna peninsula from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in late 1995 - early 1996, there have been several reports of arbitrary arrests, torture, rape, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions. These reports have been hard to verify due to strict control on travel to and from the area. Only few journalists have been permitted to visit the peninsula, and when doing so they were only given limited freedom of movement.

The report by the UTHR (Jaffna) is the first substantial report by a non-governmental organization on the current human rights situation in the area. Amnesty International has not been able to independently verify the information in the report, but believes it to be reliable.

The UTHR (Jaffna) have documented human rights abuses by the security forces and by the LTTE since 1988. Their latest report issued on 29 August commends the security forces for respecting human rights in the first few months after taking control of the area. But, it expresses concern that incidents of torture and "disappearances" increased in certain parts of the peninsula after the army suffered a major military defeat at Mullaitivu in July 1996. The report also describes several summary executions by the LTTE of people considered by that organization to be "traitors".

To date, the HRTF, a body set up to safeguard the welfare of detainees, with regional offices in various parts of the country, has reportedly not been allowed to open an office in the Jaffna peninsula. Amnesty International appreciates the difficulties experienced by the HRTF when investigating reports of "disappearances", particularly in areas where it does not have an office. It is also concerned that the lack of presence of organizations such as HRTF in these areas may contribute to a feeling among the security forces deployed there that they can act with impunity away from the scrutiny of civilian organizations.

Amnesty International is urging the government to open a HRTF office in Jaffna. This would allow HRTF officers to visit places of detention on a regular basis and thus prevent torture and "disappearances". It would also provide an on-the-spot channel of communication for the civilian population to make complaints and inquiries from the security forces. In addition, observers should be allowed to visit the areas.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:**

- expressing serious concern about the "disappearances" of Ponnuthurai Sinnathurai and Muhunthan;
- urging that the government swiftly investigate their whereabouts, and that, if there are no recognisable criminal charges against them, they be immediately and unconditionally released;
- urging the government to establish a HRTF office in the Jaffna peninsula and to press upon the security forces to give its officers full cooperation.

**APPEALS TO:**

Her Excellency President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga  
 Presidential Residence  
 "Temple Trees"  
 Colombo 3, Sri Lanka  
**Faxes: + 94 1 33 37 03**  
**Telegrams: President Kumaratunga, Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
**Salutation: Your Excellency**

The Hon (General) Anuruddha Ratwatte  
 Deputy Minister of Defence  
 Ministry of Defence  
 15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha  
 Colombo 3, Sri Lanka  
**Faxes: + 94 1 54 15 29 or 68 77 68**  
**Telegrams: Deputy Defence Minister, Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

R K Chandrananda de Silva  
 Secretary, Ministry of Defence  
 No 15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha  
 Colombo 3, Sri Lanka  
**Faxes: + 94 1 54 15 29**  
**Telegrams: Secretary Defence Ministry, Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
**Salutation: Dear Secretary**

Lt-General Rohan Daluwatte  
 Army Commander  
 Army Headquarters  
 Flagstaff Street  
 Colombo 1, Sri Lanka  
**Telegrams: Army Commander, Colombo, Sri Lanka**  
**Salutation: Dear Army Commander**

**COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of Sri Lanka accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 29 October 1996.