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Sri Lanka: Release thousands being held under repressive laws

Amnesty International is calling on the Sri Lankan government to immediately release thousands of people currently being held in detention without charge or trial and to amend its repressive anti-terrorism laws to conform to international standards.

An Amnesty International briefing paper, *Forgotten Prisoners*, released today, highlights how some of those detained are being held secretly where they are vulnerable to a range of abuses, including torture or being killed in custody.

More than 1,900 people already arrested and detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) remain in custody pending investigations, according to the last relevant official statements from May 2010.

“Sri Lanka’s so-called national security laws, and in particular the PTA, are being used to harass, intimidate and punish critical voices,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

“Thousands of people are languishing in detention without charge or trial under these laws, outside even the protections offered by the Sri Lankan legal system and in clear violation of recognised international human rights standards.”

Sri Lanka has been under a state of emergency almost continually since 1971, and successive governments have used national security as an excuse to introduce a range of broad of emergency regulations.

This has led to the erosion and even suspension of people’s rights to freedom of thought, conscience and expression, as well as their right to live free from arbitrary arrest and detention.

The national security laws grant state authorities sweeping powers of detention and permit people to be held in secret locations. Security agents, often without proper uniforms or identification, can detain and hold suspects for months or years without a warrant or being produced before a magistrate.

“Amnesty International recognizes the right and duty of the Sri Lankan government to protect its citizens from violence by armed groups, but these laws, and in particular the PTA, are too often abusive and too rarely result in proper convictions of alleged wrongdoers,” said Sam Zarifi.

“Despite the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May 2009, the government has failed to demonstrate its commitment to human rights and the rule of law by getting rid of the PTA.”

Amnesty International will again be raising its concerns about Sri Lanka’s emergency laws at a 9 March session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, including at a seminar about the laws and their application that will include lawyers from Sri Lanka.

Note to Editors:

Forgotten Prisoners is available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/001/2011/en>

A short, Amnesty International video highlighting the abuse of Sri Lanka's anti-terrorism laws is available at: <https://adam.amnesty.org/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=124877>