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Sri Lanka: Amnesty International condemns mass arrests

Amnesty International condemns the mass arrests of more than 1000 Tamils by the Sri Lankan police, allegedly in response to the suicide bombings carried out in Colombo on 28 November 2007, for which the government has blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the arrests have been made on arbitrary and discriminatory grounds using sweeping powers granted by the emergency regulations. Those arrested may be detained in inhumane conditions; denied access to lawyers, courts and family members; and face the risk of torture, other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and prolonged arbitrary detention.

According to reports, "Tamils were bundled in bus loads and taken for interrogation". More than 400 of those arrested, including 50 women, have been taken to the Boosa Camp near Galle in the south, a facility that is reportedly overcrowded, lacking proper sanitation facilities and adequate drinking water.

While the government has the right to carry out security measures it must never do this in violation of basic rights. Detainees are reportedly being held 'on suspicion' under the Emergency Regulations, and no formal charges have been pressed against any of them. Lawyers have told Amnesty about the lack of clarity surrounding the types of detention orders people are held under. This contradicts a July 2006 Presidential Directive under which the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission (SLHRC) must be informed of any arrest and of the place of detention within 48 hours, and families must be allowed to communicate with detainees.

Amnesty International reminds the Sri Lankan authorities that any arrest and/or detention must be in strict compliance with its obligations under international human rights law, and in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sri Lanka is a state party.

The Sri Lanka authorities must:

- o Immediately release those arrested, unless they are charged with recognizably criminal offences and remanded in custody by a civilian court;
- o repeal or revise the Emergency Regulations so as to bring them into line with international human rights law and standards;
- o adhere to the Sri Lankan President's Directive on the registering of detainees and informing their families and the SLHRC of the place of arrest.

Public Document

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