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Sri Lanka: Halt pre-election attacks on political activists

Police are investigating grenade attack on the home of Tiran Alles, a prominent opponent of the ruling party who has been receiving death threats for several months.

“These attacks highlight the prevalence of political violence in Sri Lanka even after the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers,” said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International’s deputy Asia-Pacific director.

“Attacks by paramilitary groups or thugs attached to politicians jeopardize prospects for a free and fair election.”

A number of NGO workers have spoken to Amnesty International about their fears over violence and intimidation ahead of the 26 January elections. Transfer of weapons from military sources (particularly army deserters) has led to an increase in armed crime including grenade attacks on political opponents.

Attacks have taken place in many parts of the country and supporters of various opposition parties. According to CMEV, supporters of the ruling party, the United People’s Freedom Alliance, have suffered 354 attacks, the largest number of incidents.

In eastern Sri Lanka, an area often receiving less media attention, the TMVP (Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal), has been accused by local activists and observers of ballot rigging, intimidation and violence in Ampara and Batticaloa districts.

The TMVP, a Tamil political party comprised of ex-rebels, is now engaged in electoral politics. The party has split into two factions led by men facing accusations of serious violations of human rights and the laws of war: Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan (alias Karuna Amman), a member of parliament for the Eastern Province and Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (alias Pillayan), Chief Minister of the Eastern Province.

“The government overlooked the atrocities alleged against these two men and brought them into the political mainstream, and now it appears unable to hold them to account,” Madhu Malhotra said.

“The unwillingness and inability to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violence gives carte blanche to armed groups or thugs to continue attacks”.

Abuses by paramilitaries are not the only source of violence. The role of armed groups who operate with the complicity of political candidates is a growing concern. For example, Amnesty International received reports that political organizers linked to the UNFP have been responsible for most of the preelection violence in the eastern district of Ampara