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UN must investigate Sri Lanka rights violations

The United Nations must set up an independent investigation into massive human rights violations committed by both government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam forces during the country's civil war, Amnesty International said on the first anniversary of the end of the conflict.

The failure to act has left victims of human rights violations with no access to justice, truth or reparations while hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans displaced at the end of decades-long conflict languish in camps or struggle to rebuild their shattered communities.

"The UN never revealed what it knew about the final days of the conflict, acknowledged the scale of the abuse that took place, or pushed for accountability," said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific.

"At the end of the war, atrocities against civilians and enemy combatants appeared to be fueled by a sense that there would be no real international consequences for violating the law."

Instead of investigating and prosecuting those suspected of violations during the war and providing reparations to victims, in the past 12 months the Sri Lankan government has jailed critics and clamped down on dissent.

"Many thousands of civilians died. However, attempts by the government to cover up the full extent of the violations by prohibiting independent monitoring means that the numbers of deaths may even be in the tens of thousands," said Madhu Malhotra.

One year on, the situation for civilian communities caught up in the conflict shows no sign of improving:

- Some 80,000 people remain in camps and funds for their support are running out.
- The rest of the 300,000 displaced civilians who have tried to resettle remain vulnerable and struggle to survive in communities where homes and infrastructure were destroyed.
- Thousands of people detained for suspected links to the LTTE remain in detention without access to the courts.
- The government continues to extend the state of emergency, restricting many basic human rights and freedom of speech.
- No meaningful action has been taken to investigate reports of war crimes.

Sri Lanka has not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, meaning the Court cannot act against those accused of rights violations without a referral from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Instead, the UNSC has failed to even publicly discuss impunity in Sri Lanka while the United Nations Human Rights Council went as far as adopting a resolution welcoming the Sri Lankan government's efforts at the end of the conflict without mentioning the need for justice and reparations.

Part of the reason for the lack of action has been the strong opposition to international intervention by allies of the Sri Lankan government including China, India and members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

On this first anniversary of the end of the conflict, Amnesty International is focusing worldwide attention on the continuing impunity in Sri Lanka and demanding justice for victims and the families of those killed, with members around the world holding events today and in the coming weeks.

Background: The Sri Lankan Armed Conflict

For decades, Sri Lankan government forces and their armed political affiliates have violated human rights with impunity, engaging in extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and torturing Tamils suspected of links to the LTTE.

The LTTE also launched indiscriminate suicide attacks on civilian targets like buses and railway stations, assassinated politicians and critics, and forcibly recruited children as fighters.

Violations of human rights and humanitarian law peaked in the final months of conflict, when some 300,000 displaced civilians were trapped between the warring parties.

As its forces were depleted by fighting, the LTTE intensified conscription of child soldiers. It used civilians as human shields against the Sri Lankan army's offensive, and shot people who tried to escape.

The Sri Lankan government declared a 'No Fire Zone', and directed civilians there, only for artillery fire to later hit these areas. Many thousands of people were killed. Hospitals were shelled, resulting in death and injuries among patients and staff. Survivors were detained in the government's massive military-run displacement camps where they arrived wounded, hungry, and ill.

Events