

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 11 September 1991

Distr: SC/PO

**ESRI LANKA: @HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ESCALATE IN THE NORTHEAST**

Human rights abuses have increased alarmingly in northeastern Sri Lanka with thousands extrajudicially executed or "disappeared" since armed conflict between the security forces and Tamil separatists resumed in June 1990, Amnesty International said today. Entire families, from babies to villagers in their 70s, have been arrested by the army, "disappeared" or killed in custody during recent months.

"The massive wave of human rights violations in southern Sri Lanka, which left tens of thousands dead or vanished after arrest between 1987 and 1990, is now sweeping the northeast," the worldwide human rights organization said in its latest report. Amnesty International was allowed to visit to Sri Lanka in early June this year for the first time since 1982. Its researchers found substantial evidence of abuses by both the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who control large areas of the north.

People suspected of having links with the Tamil guerrillas have been arrested, shot, stabbed, hacked to death or burnt alive by government forces. Between July and October 1990 some 3,000 Tamil people were estimated to have been killed or "disappeared" in Amparai district alone. Reports of further mass killings have since been reported to Amnesty International from every district in northeastern Sri Lanka.

Government forces, helped by paramilitary Muslim and Tamil groups opposed to the separatists, seem to be acting with total impunity, the organization said. Virtually none of those responsible for any of the countless cases of arbitrary arrest, torture and killing have ever been brought to justice.

The vast majority of victims are Tamils, in whose name the LTTE say they are fighting for a sovereign state. The LTTE has itself consistently carried out arbitrary execution-style killings of hundreds of civilians, including large numbers of Sinhalese and Muslims as well as Tamils it labelled "traitors". The insurgents are also responsible for many "disappearances" and the torture of prisoners.

In June 1990 the LTTE massacred more than a hundred police officers it had taken prisoner in what marked the renewal of civil war in the northeast. As the hostilities escalated former Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne announced "all-out war" in the region.

"The ensuing military campaign led to mass killings and arrests, large-scale round-ups of civilians and an almost total breakdown of civil administration", Amnesty International said. "Over a million people became refugees in their own country."

In one incident over 160 people, including babies, children, old men and women, were taken into custody from four villages in the Batticaloa district. Heavily armed soldiers raided the villages on 9 September 1990 and ordered all residents to gather on the road. They were taken to an army camp and have not been seen since. Amnesty International fears that they may have been killed like hundreds of other civilians previously arrested in similar circumstances.

The authorities did nothing to clarify the whereabouts of the villagers. One of the victims was Natkunasingsam Sithradevi, a mother in her twenties, who "disappeared" together with her six-year-old son, her three-year-old daughter and her new-born baby son.

In June 1991 soldiers from an army camp in the same district went on the rampage in the villages of Mahladithivu and Muthalaikuda after two of their unit were killed by a landmine nearby. At least 67 civilians were massacred and several others remain unaccounted for. A commission of inquiry established by the authorities is currently hearing evidence from survivors and witnesses.

**Amnesty International urges the Sri Lankan government to issue firm directives regularly to its security forces to respect human rights in all circumstances. Army, paramilitary forces and the police should be given clear instructions that no human rights abuses will be tolerated and that those found responsible will invariably be brought to justice.**

**“Regardless of the atrocities committed by armed groups it is the responsibility of the government to safeguard the rights of its citizens”, the organization said.**

**Amnesty International is also appealing to the LTTE to halt immediately its practice of incommunicado detention, torture and killing of prisoners.**

**EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 1991**