

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: 0001 HRS GMT 27 NOVEMBER 1997**Sri Lanka: The continuing spectre of “disappearances”**

An Amnesty International delegation which visited Sri Lanka recently has concluded that of the 600-odd people who have “disappeared” in the last 18 months after their arrest by the security forces, nearly all have died as a result of torture or been deliberately killed in detention.

According to the human rights organization, there is no evidence to suggest that sanction for the “disappearances” came from the political leadership, but the Sri Lankan government reacted too slowly to well-documented reports of a rise in “disappearances” in the Jaffna peninsula during mid-1996. As a result, by the time the authorities acknowledged the reality of what was happening there, around 600 people had “disappeared”, and hundreds more were victims of torture at the hands of the security forces.

“Although we welcome the government’s decision to make public reports into thousands of cases of “disappearance” from 1988-1994, and several other measures taken since coming to power to strengthen human rights protection, it is vitally important that the government addresses the underlying structures and practices in the security forces,” Amnesty International said.

According to the organization, the events of 1996 indicate the need for an active approach to tackling the root causes of human rights violations in Sri Lanka – the lingering sense of impunity among perpetrators and the legislation allowing for people to be detained incommunicado for long periods of time.

“In the past, Sri Lanka became a country notorious for “disappearances” – a country racked by the terrible anguish suffered by relatives who never knew the fate of their loved ones,” Amnesty International said. “The government must seize the initiative now to ensure that nobody has to go through this harrowing ordeal again.”

The Sri Lankan government has taken some steps to clarify the fate of the “disappeared”, establishing a Board of Investigation (BOI) to investigate around 760 complaints. The BOI to date has traced 180 of the “disappeared”.

“Disappearances” usually took place in reprisal for attacks on the military by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) armed opposition group – for example the killing of more than 1,300 soldiers during an attack on Mullaitivu army camp in July 1996.

The LTTE have also been responsible for gross human rights abuses in Jaffna and elsewhere, including indiscriminate killings of civilians during attacks on checkpoints or army patrols and summary executions of suspected informants.

After the Mullaitivu attack, the army told villagers in the Navatkuli area to gather at a local school, where they were made to file past masked informants. After a night of severe beatings in the main army camp nearby, most of those detained were released, however 39 remain unaccounted for despite numerous requests for information made by their relatives.

According to local people interviewed by Amnesty International, the bodies of some of the “disappeared” are dumped in disused wells and lavatories in or around army camps.

One 21-year-old man told how he was arrested on the way to visit his grandmother in July 1996. He was beaten with a rifle, partially suffocated with a plastic bag, throttled with a cloth and then stabbed with a bayonet in his neck and head. Semi-conscious he felt someone slice two of his fingers off to steal his rings. When he regained consciousness he found he had been dumped in a latrine.

Although the rate has dropped, Amnesty International continues to receive reports of “disappearances” in Jaffna, with around 41 cases in the first seven months of 1997, four of whom have been traced by the BOI. The organization believes that the lack of monitoring of the welfare of detainees has contributed to the high number of “disappearances”, and is calling for presidential directives aimed at safeguarding the welfare of detainees -- such as “arrest receipts” to be issued whenever someone is taken into custody -- to be implemented fully.

.../ENDS

For a copy of the report, Sri Lanka: Government’s response to widespread “disappearances” in Jaffna, or to arrange an interview, please call:

Press Office, International Secretariat:

Tel: (+44) 171 413 5566