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Sri Lanka: Appeal for a full inquiry into prison killings

Amnesty International today appealed to Sri Lanka's Minister of Justice to order a full and impartial inquiry into the killing of three Tamil detainees on 12 December at Kalutara prison, south of the capital, Colombo.

In its letter to Professor G. L. Peiris, the human rights organization expressed concern for the safety of other detainees who witnessed the killings and are currently under guard by prison staff who may have been involved in the act. Amnesty International urges that all necessary steps be taken to protect these witnesses.

During a magisterial inquiry into the killings, several detainees who reportedly saw the killings refused to give evidence out of fear for their lives. To Amnesty International's knowledge, those responsible have not yet been identified.

Muthulingam Dharmalingam and Shanmugarajah Sivanesan, from Jaffna, and Sharif Jehan, a displaced person from Mannar, were among 137 Tamil detainees held at Kalutara prison. The three were reportedly hacked to death in front of Ward D at around 1pm on 12 December by a group of Sinhalese common criminal prisoners in what appears to have been a premeditated attack.

Prison staff and army personnel deployed at the prison appear to have failed to take measures to protect the Tamil detainees at the time and, according to some reports, were even actively involved in the attack which lasted more than an hour.

According to some sources, prison staff had opened the gate to Ward D around 11am, and ignored pleas made in the next two hours by several of the Tamil detainees to lock the gate. Reports also indicate that an armed soldier on sentry duty on the southern side of the prison ignored pleas for protection from the three detainees while they were hacked to death in front of him.

Army personnel and prison staff are also said to have failed to take action against a group of civilians who had gathered outside the prison and were throwing stones and other objects into the prison throughout the attack.

Amnesty International noted in its letter that some action was taken by the prison authorities to defuse the situation -- such as the swift transfer of most of the Sinhalese convicted prisoners to other prisons. Nevertheless, the human rights organization urges the government to initiate a review of measures to safeguard the security of political prisoners held in the same prisons as common criminal suspects and convicts, albeit in separate wards. ENDS.../