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UN: Truth and justice needed to resolve Sri Lanka rights crisis

The UN Human Rights Council must act immediately to end the crisis of impunity that plagues Sri Lanka more than two years after the end of the bloody civil war in the country, Amnesty International told the Council today.

Sri Lanka's government has failed to provide justice for victims of ongoing human rights violations, has not provided adequate assistance to all communities affected by the conflict, and has significantly weakened independent public institutions, the organization said after remarks by Sri Lankan Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe.

The minister told the Council that his government's response to human rights concerns was "second to none" in the post-conflict period.

"Any sustainable peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka will depend on a genuine, independent effort being made to learn the truth about serious violations during the civil war and deliver justice to the victims and their families," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Director.

"National efforts to date have fallen far short of the mark, and the ongoing culture of impunity in Sri Lanka is shielding those responsible for past and ongoing abuses from being brought to justice."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has indicated he will officially transmit to the Human Rights Council the findings of his expert panel's report that finds "credible allegations" of war crimes and crimes against humanity by all sides to the Sri Lankan conflict.

As of today, the report has not been officially transmitted, although no explanation has been given for the delay.

"The Secretary General's panel of experts produced a strong, credible, well-founded report, and it is now time for the Human Rights Council to begin discussing these allegations fully with the Sri Lankan government," Zarifi said.

Since the armed conflict ended in May 2009, Amnesty International has documented ongoing human rights violations, especially in the north and east of the country.

These include humanitarian workers being denied access to communities who returned after the fighting, allegations of ill-treatment including sexual assault by security forces, and lack of consultation with local communities in the resettlement process. Media critics face threats while the government has failed to prosecute killings of journalists.

Since 2009 alone, Sri Lanka's national Human Rights Commission has received more than 8,000 complaints.

Sri Lankan authorities have failed to implement the interim report of its internal inquiry into civil war abuses, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). A report published by Amnesty International last week exposed how the LLRC is fundamentally flawed and is yet to provide accountability.

Sri Lanka's government has ignored commitments it made after the UN Human Rights Council reviewed the country's human rights situation in 2008, including a pledge to prosecute those responsible for a variety of crimes under international law.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government recently lifted the state of emergency that had been in place for nearly three decades, but other repressive laws are still active, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Detainees have been held arbitrarily for prolonged periods – sometimes years – without charge.

“It's time for the Human Rights Council to actively promote truth, justice and reparations for the country's thousands of victims of grave human rights violations that took place both during and after the civil war,” said Zarifi.