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Sri Lanka: Act now to prevent escalation of violence and abuse

Colombo: The Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam must act urgently to stop the downward spiral of violence and human rights abuses in the north and east of the country, said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International as she concluded her four-day visit to Sri Lanka.

“Both sides use Human Rights as a political weapon -- each accusing the other of abuses but doing little to stop the spate of killings, abductions and harassment over the past year.”

Ms. Khan’s visit follows a research mission by Amnesty International earlier this year to the north and east of the country to look into human rights concerns arising from the security situation as well as internal displacement resulting from the conflict and the tsunami disaster.

“People are being killed nearly every day in attacks that are rarely investigated and almost never prosecuted. The expansion of the range of people being targeted and the geographic spread of killings and attacks to the north are alarming trends. In this climate of fear, the voices of civil society and ordinary people are being stifled.”

The Amnesty International delegation listened to reports of rising tensions between communities. Muslim groups expressed concerns about murder, marginalisation and discrimination. As one man put it to Amnesty International’s research team: “The Sinhalese are afraid of the LTTE, the Tamils are afraid of the government, and the Muslims are afraid of both.”

People of all communities are deeply fearful of what lies ahead.

The inequitable, and at times inadequate, response to hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict and by the tsunami disaster last year has added to the volatility of the situation.

“The situation is very grim and time is running out,” said Ms. Khan. “We called on President Mahinda Rajapakse to seize the initiative urgently to de-escalate the violence.”

“We have urged the government to be open and flexible on monitoring mechanisms and on establishing effective systems of accountability, including through independent investigations,” said Ms. Khan. “Without a rapid reduction of human rights abuses, the prognosis for peace is poor.”

The President assured Amnesty International of his readiness to address all allegations of human rights violations by the Sri Lankan security forces. “While we welcome his assurances, we want to see concrete action on the ground.”

“A significant number of attacks and killings are happening in government-controlled areas,” said Ms. Khan. “Although there is confusion as to who is behind these attacks, there can be no doubt about the clear responsibility of the state to investigate and prosecute. There also can be no doubt about the obligations of the LTTE, as an armed group, to respect international human rights and humanitarian law at all times, and to avoid targeting civilians, wherever they may be.”

In talks in Kilinochchi with S.P. Thamilselvan, head of the LTTE political wing, Amnesty International pressed for accountability and respect for human rights and international humanitarian law by the armed group.

Amnesty International raised concerns about the failure of the LTTE to halt recruitment of children and to release and rehabilitate children within their ranks, as agreed in the Plan of Action with UNICEF. “The recruitment of children must stop,” said Irene Khan. “Attention must also be given to protection of children’s right to education, shelter and non-discrimination.”

“The LTTE and the government must both consider how best to make the human rights guarantees in the Ceasefire Agreement work,” she said. “Differences between the parties on whether the Agreement should be revised or more effectively implemented should not in any way be an excuse to avoid or abuse human rights obligations.”

“Recent killings and attacks in Jaffna are an indication of the volatility of the current situation.”

“Prospects for conflict prevention will depend on how fast and how far the government and the LTTE are willing to address the extremely fragile security situation now in the north and east,” Ms. Khan said.

Background

The Amnesty International delegation was led by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International. She was accompanied by Lars Normann Jørgensen, Director of Amnesty International Denmark; Purna Sen, Programme Director for the Asia-Pacific; and Liz Rowsell and Kavita Menon, campaigners on the South Asia team. The delegation met with, among others, President Mahinda Rajapakse, Minister for Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera; former prime minister and leader of the opposition Ranil Wickremasinghe, members of the diplomatic community, and human rights and civil society organisations based in Colombo, Jaffna and Batticaloa. The delegation travelled to Jaffna and Kilinochchi. They met with LTTE representatives, including S.P. Thamilselvan, head of the LTTE political wing; E. Pararajasingham, head of the judiciary; P. Nadesan, head of the Police Force, and with members of the North East Secretariat of Human Rights. Delegates also visited an LTTE-run prison. They also visited two camps for internally displaced people, one for those displaced by conflict and the other for survivors of the December 2004 tsunami.

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