

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Sri Lanka: Amnesty International condemns killings of civilians

Amnesty International is alarmed by the increasing number of civilians killed as a low-intensity armed conflict appears to be escalating, despite a 2002 ceasefire agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). More than 200 people have been killed over the past month alone, the majority of them civilians, and more than 20,000 others have been displaced from their homes. Amnesty International fears that a collapse of the ceasefire agreement and return to full-scale armed conflict would have further devastating consequences for civilians.

In separate incidents over the past weekend, 13-14 May, at least 18 civilians were reportedly killed in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Thirteen Tamil civilians were reportedly killed in a spate of incidents on Kayts Island, a small islet off the northwestern coast of the Jaffna Peninsula that is strictly controlled by the Sri Lanka Navy, which has a major base there. On 13 May, at about 8.30 p.m., unidentified gunmen reportedly entered the home of Sellathurai Amalathas in Allaipiddy and opened fire. Eight people were killed on the spot, including a four-month-old baby and four-year-old boy, and one other person died later in hospital. In another incident, at around 10:30 p.m. the same night, unidentified gunmen reportedly entered the home of 72-year-old Murugesu Shanmugalingam in Puliyanoodal, also on Kayts Island, and shot him and two other members of his family dead. Ten shops in Puliyanoodal were reportedly burnt down. In Vangalady, gunmen reportedly entered the home of Ratnam Senthuran, a tea shop owner, and shot him dead. Other members of his family also were shot and injured, but managed to escape.

The government has condemned the Kayts Island killings and announced that a police investigation is underway. Amnesty International welcomes these initial steps but notes that there is a disturbing pattern of incomplete or ineffective investigations by the government, with the result that perpetrators of such violence generally operate with impunity. In accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Sri Lanka has ratified, the government must carry out independent, impartial and effective investigations into all killings; the results of these investigations should be made public, and those found responsible for the attacks must be brought to justice. Without effective investigations and prosecutions, the cycle of retaliatory violence that so endangers the lives of civilians is likely to escalate.

The LTTE has accused the Sri Lanka Navy of responsibility for the attacks on Kayts Island, a charge which the Navy has denied. However, Amnesty International has received credible reports that Sri Lanka Navy personnel and armed cadres affiliated with the Eelam People's Democratic Party, a Tamil political party that is opposed to the LTTE, were present at the scene of the killings. The government in turn has suggested that the LTTE orchestrated the attack in order "to divert international opinion".

Regardless of who is responsible for the attacks, the Sri Lankan government has obligations under international law to take steps to prevent such killings, to ensure that those who commit them are brought to justice, and that the families of those killed are able to obtain redress.

Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict—including the government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE, and other armed groups—to take all possible measures to avoid harm to civilians and respect international humanitarian law, which prohibits murder or violence to those taking no active part in hostilities.