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Sri Lanka: Report - 'A climate of fear in the East'

Amnesty International welcomes the recent announcement that representatives of the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have agreed to meet in Switzerland this month to review the implementation of the cease-fire. The organisation urges that the issue of human rights monitoring be urgently addressed at these talks.

Amnesty International today published its report *Sri Lanka: A climate of fear in the East*, which documents the findings of an Amnesty International research mission in August 2005 to investigate reports of an escalation in political killings in the East of the country. The report documents human rights abuses including politically motivated killings, torture, abductions, and the recruitment of children as soldiers as well as harassment and extortion, resulting in the growing climate of fear. The report concludes that there is an urgent need for effective human rights monitoring.

Following this mission, Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General, visited Sri Lanka in December 2005 shortly after Presidential elections on 17 November. She met the newly-elected President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapakse, and other members of the government to discuss a range of concerns including political killings, recruitment of child soldiers, impunity for past abuses, failure of the justice system and the possible reactivation of the death penalty.

In discussions with the President and Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Amnesty International raised concerns regarding the escalation of political killings in the East, which at the time of the visit had spread to the North as well, and recommended an independent monitoring mechanism to investigate human rights abuses. This suggestion -- which was received positively -- was made in light of the fact that the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and other existing bodies do not have the necessary remit or access to address the issue of impunity for human rights abuses across Sri Lanka. Both the President and the Foreign Minister emphasized their commitment to a review of the implementation of the cease-fire and a renewed effort towards peace talks.

Amnesty International's Secretary General travelled to Kilinochchi to meet with Mr Thamilselvan, head of the LTTE political wing, and other LTTE representatives. She raised Amnesty International's concerns about the escalation of political killings and emphasized the LTTE's obligations to respect international human rights standards and humanitarian law. She also raised with Mr Thamilselvan the importance of an independent monitoring mechanism. Mr Thamilselvan said that the LTTE would be prepared to consider such an option if other parties to the discussion were in agreement with this approach.

Amnesty International stressed that recruitment of children is a war crime and urged the LTTE not to recruit children, to release those it holds and to make a strong statement against this practice. Mr

Thamilselvan denied that such recruitment was taking place and invited Amnesty International to conduct a fact-finding mission to the areas under their control, to investigate allegations of child recruitment and other human rights concerns. Amnesty International has conducted research in LTTE controlled areas in the past and is considering a further fact-finding mission.

Amnesty International also met with a range of individuals and organizations in Sri Lanka, including the Norwegian Ambassador, Mr Hans Brattskar; Head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), Mr Hagrub Haukland; and United Nations representatives. Amnesty International's Secretary General met human rights groups and other members of civil society who reported that the climate of fear is deeply affecting their activities so that many people are afraid to speak out. They described a situation where victims and their relatives are left without justice, and emphasized the tensions rising between communities especially in the East.

During December 2005 and January 2006 there has been an escalation of killings in the North and East of the country, with over 120 people dying in less than two months, according to the SLMM. People have been fleeing their homes to safer areas within Sri Lanka and in India, and there have been new reports of children being recruited as soldiers, as well as reports of 'disappearances' and an increase in abductions. The need for fuller protection of human rights and for prompt and detailed investigations of violations has become even more pressing in these circumstances.

To see the report about political killings and other human rights abuses in the East, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa370012006>.

Public Document

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