

AI INDEX: ASA 37/10/97
11 APRIL 1997

SRI LANKA: HIGHEST NUMBER OF "DISAPPEARANCES" REPORTED SINCE 1990

The level of "disappearances" in Sri Lanka has hit a new high, Amnesty International warned as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights examined the country's human rights record.

Coinciding with the Sri Lankan Government's pledge at the Commission that "*full rigours of the law will be brought to bear*" on the perpetrators of human rights violations, Amnesty International submitted more than 400 cases of "disappearances" to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga asking her to bring those responsible to justice.

Since the security forces regained control over the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka between late 1995 and early 1996, the total number of "disappearances" reported to the organization has reached 648 -- the highest number since 1990.

"That more than 600 "disappearances" can occur in one year despite the government's claim that it is addressing the problem is outrageous. This highlights the need for action to be taken now -- to prevent these violations from continuing," Amnesty International said.

There is a clear pattern of the security forces resorting to "disappearances" in reprisal for attacks on the security forces by members by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In one incident which occurred on 19 July 1996, the day after the LTTE attacked the Mullaitivu army camp, at least 40 young men "disappeared" after they were rounded up by army personnel in Kaithady, and surrounding villages in the Thennamarachchi Division. They were allegedly taken to Navatkuli army camp but when relatives went to make inquiries, they were not given any information. Amnesty International fears that they may have been massacred.

Others "disappeared" after they were taken into custody during round-up operations. One case reported was from Ayam Madduvil North, Chavakachcheri on 19 April 1996. On that day, the army took away dozens of young men who were among scores of civilians who had taken refuge at Madduvil Amman temple, as instructed by the security forces at the start of the military operation code-named "Riviresa 2". At least 20 of them have never been seen since by their relatives.

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) reports that in 1990 it received 4,774 complaints from Sri Lanka. By 1991, this figure had gone down to 410 and had further declined since. During 1995, 36 cases had been reported. Even at this level, this represents one of the highest rates in the world.

“The situation is reminiscent of the mid-1980s,” Amnesty International said. “Between 1983 and mid-1987, we recorded 860 “disappearances” in the area, nearly all of whom are still unaccounted for. Now we have 600 in one year.”

Amnesty International is calling on the president to allow international and national observers, including the UNWGEID, to visit Jaffna and assist the government in enforcing measures to bring an end to “disappearances”.

“While the government has taken some measures to bring an end to “disappearances”, torture and other human rights violations, there is obviously a need for more vigorous action,” Amnesty International said.

“The government should start by amending the Prevention of Terrorism Act and Emergency Regulations which provide a context for these violations to occur. And it should come down heavily on members of the security forces responsible for such actions.”

ENDS\