

# URGENT ACTION

## DOCTORS REMAIN AT RISK IN SRI LANKA

**Five doctors being held, under emergency regulations, by the Sri Lankan government for providing erroneous information on civilian casualties remain vulnerable to torture or other ill-treatment. The Sri Lankan government has a record of mistreating detainees and witnesses.**

Doctors who provided the only medical services for hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped by the armed conflict in North Eastern Sri Lanka remain in detention and their safety is at risk. The doctors were treating sick and wounded civilians caught in fighting between the Sri Lankan government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), until they travelled out of the 'No Fire Zone' with approximately 5,000 other civilians in May. The doctors were apprehended by the Sri Lankan authorities at the Omanthai crossing point on May 15.

Due to the difficulties in attaining information about their capture and detention Amnesty International originally reported that three doctors (**Dr. Veerakkathipillai Shanmugarajah**, **Dr. Thurairaja Varatharaja**, and **Dr. Thangamuttu Sathyamoorthy**) had been detained by Sri Lankan authorities. It has since been discovered that five doctors were taken into custody. Also detained were **Dr. Kathirvel Ilancheliyan Vallavan** and **Dr. S. Sivapalan**.

On July 8 the Sri Lankan authorities held a press conference; the doctors appeared before the media and recanted their earlier reports from the conflict zone. Amnesty International is concerned about how genuine these "confessions" were, given the doctors' prolonged detention; their vulnerability to torture and other ill-treatment by Sri Lankan officials, who have a record of mistreatment of detainees and witnesses; and the contradiction between the doctors' recent public statements and independently verified facts.

Senior government officials have raised the threat of pursuing serious charges, including treason against the men, despite acknowledging the doctors' claim that they were operating under pressure from the LTTE. The doctors still remain in detention without charge.

### **PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in English, Sinhalese, Tamil or your own language:**

- √ Expressing concern for the safety of Dr. Veerakkathipillai Shanmugarajah, Dr. Thurairaja Varatharaja, Dr. Thangamuttu Sathyamoorthy, Dr. Kathirvel Ilancheliyan Vallavan, and Dr. Sivapalan, who have not been charged since their detention on 15 May 2009;
- √ calling on the authorities to release the doctors immediately, unless they are to be charged with recognisably criminal offences.
- √ calling on the Sri Lankan government to repeal or revise emergency regulations and other special security legislation so as to bring them into line with international human rights law and standards.

### **PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 23 September 2009 TO:**

His Excellency the President Mahinda  
Rajapaksa  
Presidential Secretariat  
Colombo 1  
Sri Lanka  
Fax: +94 11 2446657

**Salutation: Your Excellency**

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa  
Minister of Defence  
Ministry of Defence, Public Security,  
Law and Order  
15/5, Bauddhaloka Mawatha,  
Colombo 03, Sri Lanka  
Fax: +94 11 245 1529

**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.** Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 129/09. Further information: <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/011/2009/en>

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INTERNATIONAL**



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### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Before their capture the doctors had provided eyewitness reports to the media and the international community from hospitals and makeshift medical centres in the conflict zone. Contrary to information from the government, their reports detailed the suffering of ordinary civilians, many of whom died from war-related injuries. Their reports also highlighted shelling of areas with large concentrations of non-combatants.

In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ending nearly 26 years of armed conflict. Intense fighting in north eastern Sri Lanka from July 2008 was marked by grave violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law. In early 2009, up to quarter of a million people were trapped between government security forces and the LTTE. The Sri Lankan government restricted independent journalists or monitors from reporting on the situation. As a result an almost total blackout of information prevented the population of Sri Lanka and the world from knowing the full scale of the humanitarian crisis in the Wanni region of north east Sri Lanka. In September 2008 the government forced the withdrawal of all humanitarian agencies with the exception of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) from the Wanni.

In April 2009, as fighting intensified, tens of thousands of civilians began escaping to government held areas. By the end of May there were nearly 300,000 displaced people in more than 40 camps spread across four districts.

In 2007, following a visit to Sri Lanka, the Special Rapporteur on Torture, Manfred Nowak reported that “safeguards against torture either do not apply or are simply disregarded [...] and leads to a situation in which torture becomes a routine practice in the context of counter-terrorism operations.”

The government is reported to be screening the displaced civilian population in order to identify suspected LTTE fighters. There is currently no standard registration process for the displaced from the Wanni.

Throughout Sri Lanka, freedom of expression is under severe threat. As a result the conflict and its aftermath have not been fully reported within Sri Lanka and those who attempt to do so have frequently found themselves targeted by government authority.

Further information on UA: 129/09 Index: ASA 37/018/2009 Issue Date: 12 August 2009

