

## NEWS

# CHOGM urged to 'raise concerns' on violations

AMNESTY International has written to the Commonwealth heads of state, drawing attention to the human rights violations in Sri Lanka and urging them to raise their concerns about these with their Sri Lankan counterparts.

The letter also encourages them to support the calls for "greater accountability for abuses of human rights".

The letter was written as the heads of commonwealth countries gathered at the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) meeting at the Port of Spain in Trinidad & Tobago.

"In particular, we wish to alert you to continuing serious problems affecting the safety and dignity of Sri Lankans displaced by armed conflict," the letter said.

It goes on to describe the situation in Sri Lanka, since the end of the war and describes the various violations of the liberty of the Tamil civilians that have allegedly been carried out by the Sri Lankan Government.

"...six months after the end of the war, Sri Lanka continues to confine people who fled fighting in closed displacement camps in uncomfortable and sometimes hazardous conditions," the letter says.

"Camp shelters have deteriorated as Sri Lanka has entered the rainy season, and the UN reports that funds for shelter repair are running out," the letter notes.

The London-based NGO also describes its own "Unlock the Camps" global campaign, which aims to end the arbitrary detention of the Tamil people.

The letter sets out the conditions of restricted movement for the people remaining in the camps.

"The camps remain military in nature. The military controls all decision-making related to management of the camps and the fate of displaced people in those camps; the military severely restricts the residents from leaving the premises even to seek medical care, and denies the displaced population basic legal safeguards," the letter said.

Citing the widespread government reports that people have been released from the camps, Amnesty International raises its concerns.

"Amnesty International has received reports that displaced people have been subjected to rescreening by local authorities to

determine whether they had links to the Liberation Tigers," the letter said.

"There are also reports that some people who have been released, have been denied necessary documents to ensure that they are safe from re-arrest," Amnesty noted.

"The Sri Lankan government has prevented humanitarian organizations from talking to displaced persons, and obstructed their ability to conduct crucial human rights protections activities, such as providing legal aid or assisting with family reunification," the letter notes.

The letters also raises concerns about the screening process set up to identify Tiger cadres from among the detainees.

"Amnesty International has received repeated, credible reports from humanitarian workers about the lack of transparency and accountability in the screening process, which is conducted outside of any legal framework and the increased dangers to detainees when they are held incommunicado," said the letter.

The letter raises the need for investigations into war crimes committed by both sides during the conflict. It also raises concerns about the Sri Lankan government's attacks on critics and the continuing reliance on special security legislation.

"Special security legislation ... remains in place and grants extraordinary powers to the authorities to arbitrarily arrest and detain individuals almost indefinitely," the letter notes.

It points to the "chilling" effect on freedom of expression the targeting of journalists, lawyers, witnesses and human rights defenders.

Amnesty International ended the letter by arguing that the Heads of Government should use this meeting as an opportunity to discuss this situation with their Sri Lankan counterparts and convince them to address the "urgent concerns" brought up.

Saying that the "time to act" is now, the letter concludes by calling on the CHOGM representatives to act on these concerns and encourage Sri Lanka to restore liberty, allow access and end arbitrary detention. It also calls for their support in ensuring accountability and accomplishing the needed reforms, including bringing about an international mandate for investigations and prosecution.



There are concerns that Jaffna, with its high militarisation, is to be a role model for other Tamils areas

## Jaffna an open prison say visitors

ACTIVISTS who visited Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka, after years away, expressed dismay at it being an open prison with a need for 'special visas'.

A group of 27 media persons from the Sri Lankan south made these observations as part of a visit to the Jaffna Peninsula.

During their stay, they spoke to many residents, journalists and politicians, who all described the tragic situation.

Nearly 14 years after Jaffna was taken under Sri Lankan Army control, the peninsula is still an 'open prison' they said.

"It was like visiting another country," says Ananda Jayasekara, who works for Transparency International Sri Lanka, one of the journalists who travelled to the northern peninsula.

The media and its functionaries in Jaffna peninsula continue to face restrictions and harassment, the visitors noted.

They also noted that residents of the peninsula have to obtain travel 'pass' to travel, like visa, from the military authorities to leave Jaffna.

"You need a special permit, it is like getting a visa, to enter Jaffna and it is only valid for a month," said Jayasekara.

The media group also noted that people are not allowed by the Army to freely choose their mode of travel to and from Jaffna, particularly travel through A9 road.

They also added that at night Jaffna residents feel unsafe outside their homes, citing 'unidentified elements'.

The continuing internment of Vanni residents in the Vavuniya camps is also a source of concern

for Jaffna residents, the visitors reported.

With respect to the Tamil civilians transferred from the Vavuniya internment camps to Jaffna, the visitors found they had no arrangements made for them in Jaffna, resulting in their continuing hardship. Further, nothing has been done to enable them to continue their livelihoods like fishing and farming in their own places, the newly 'resettled' said, which added to their troubles.

Especially for Jaffna residents who have been separated from spouses, sons, daughters and parents, who were taken away from the Vavuniya camps by the Sri Lankan military, their anxiety is compounded by the lack of news about their safety.

On the whole the people of Jaffna peninsula no longer trust the government, its visiting politicians and their empty promises, the visitors said. But they are still strongly committed to a permanent solution to the Tamil problem, they said.

Jayasekara also commented that the unusually high cost of transport made many suspicious over the motives of the authorities.

The return air ticket costs 19,500 Sri Lankan rupees, a price most in Sri Lanka cannot afford.

It seems as if the Government are actively discouraging Jaffna residents from leaving the peninsula, he said, claiming it added to the notion that the peninsula is in fact an "open prison".

This is echoed in the fact that despite government promises of an ease on travel restrictions in Jaffna, residents have reported that they still have to obtain pass-

es from the Sri Lankan Army in order to use the A9 road, he said.

Lorries owned by Jaffna traders were also not allowed through by the SLA, despite the fact they were issued with road-worthy certificates by the army, the visitors noted.

Even anti-LTTE activists, Nirmala Rajasingham and her husband Rajesh Kumar, also known as Raghavan, have been highly critical of the Government's control of Jaffna.

"People in Jaffna plan for the future - trying to send their children for higher education, getting their children married or trying to build a house. Jaffna people go about it with such vigour, but I couldn't see that happening anymore," commented Rajasingham.

"... many say their friends and relatives who were with them the previous day suddenly disappeared the next," she noted.

"Many people behave like deaf and blind as they no longer have a voice... In fact, people look like they are living day by day, as if there is no future for them."

"While travelling to Jaffna, all I saw was huge destruction," Kumar said.

"You need to wait at least three hours to board the plane. And all the buses only leave once a day, so that security officials could check the buses at once and relax for the rest of the day," he told the BBC.

Even pro government EPDP minister Douglas Devananda was refused permission to simply show IDPs housed in camps, to where they would hopefully be resettled. The displaced from Thenmaradchi were evicted once the SLA took control of the area.