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Involuntary Disappearances in Sri Lanka Looming Large Again

The International Federation of Tamils (IFT) urgently appeals to the International Community (IC) to take immediate action to prevail on the President of Sri Lanka and his Armed Forces to stop its witch-hunt on the unarmed civilian Tamils in Sri Lanka. More than 920 Tamils have been arrested and detained in Colombo alone in an overnight search. Sri Lanka armed forces are descending on Tamil homes in the middle of the night, privacy of the Tamil bedrooms is trespassed, men and women, young and old, in their night-clothes are bundled up in awaiting vehicles and taken away for interrogation and detention. Although the government tells the international media that many are being released after an identity check-up, they are being arrested over and over again, and subjected to an ordeal of being fingerprinted, photographed, and videoed.

In the north-east, there is an alarming rate of increase on the "Missing List" of persons arrested by the Sri Lanka armed forces. Relatives are not given the details of whereabouts of those arrested. Many have been killed and bodies thrown in isolated places. Before the relatives remove such bodies from the mortuaries, they are being forced to sign papers admitting those killed belonged to the LTTE.

Sri Lanka troops patrolling in army vehicles shoot at random, killing and wounding innocent Tamil civilians in the north-east. Check points have multiplied. All passengers, young and old, including patients to hospital are forced to alight from vehicles for a thorough body search by Sinhalese soldiers and policemen who do not speak Tamil, the language of the north-east.

A rule of terror on Tamils has been unleashed by President Mahinda Rajapakse who has come to power with the unflinching support of extreme nationalists and Buddhist chauvinists. IFT appeals to the IC to act immediately and prevent further state sponsored murder, torture and incarcerations.

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Notes

1. Over 920 Tamil men and women living in Colombo were arrested by Sri Lankan army and police on New Year's Eve 2005. Witnesses report that persons who protested against being arrested were beaten up by soldiers. **'Operation Strangers in the Night 3'** between midnight on Friday and noon on Saturday the 31st is the largest single ethnic detention carried out in Colombo this year. Tamils were bused through the night to eight separate detention centres. The house to house round up was implemented by over three thousand Sri Lankan Army and police in areas of Colombo that are known to have large Tamil residential populations namely Welawatte, Bambalapitiya, Maradana, Kotahena, Grandpass and Mutuwal. This follows smaller rounding up operations of about 100 Tamil people last week. An estimated several tens of thousands Tamil people live in Colombo, many of them refugees from the Jaffna peninsula following the army occupation of the peninsula in 1995. All Tamils living in Colombo are required to carry identity passes. Police sources confirmed that the persons who did not have valid identity documents in their possession during their arrest will be detained for further interrogation. Of the 920 detainees on the 31st 2005, at least 105 are women

2. In a separate development, the NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) has confirmed that 25 Tamil persons have disappeared in the army-controlled Tamil region of Jaffna last month. Whereas relatives state these persons had been taken by the Sri Lankan army for questioning, the army denies all knowledge of their whereabouts.

Before the cease fire in 2002 Sri Lanka had one of the highest rates of disappearances in government custody in the world. Disappearances reached a peak in 1996 within one year of the army regaining control of Jaffna. A report by Amnesty International on disappearances in 1995 to 1996 when government forces regained control of Jaffna stated: "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.

3. In some instances, persons held in prison without being charged have been murdered in prison by guards and/or ethnic Sinhala mobs with impunity. The most notable case is the Bindunewewa Prison Massacre where racially motivated mobs killed ethnic Tamil prisoners held under the PTA. Many of the prisoners killed were under eighteen (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3834205.stm). No one has yet been successfully prosecuted. Although prison officials who stood by and in some instances participated in the massacre were initially found guilty of murder, the supreme court freed them on appeal. Other cases include the Welikade prison massacre.

A 2002 Amnesty International report on rape in police custody may be found on <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa370012002>. This should be read in conjunction with Sri Lanka: Torture in custody (AI Index: ASA 37/10/99) AI states the government has not formulated a policy to deal with this. There has been no successful prosecution in this area.
