

PRESS RELEASE
AHRC-FP-005-2006

A Forwarded Press Release by Human Rights Watch

SRI LANKA: Slipping into all-out war

By Meenakshi Ganguly, Researcher, Asia Division

Monday 28th August 2006

The half-million residents of the Jaffna peninsula are stranded and their supplies of food, water and medicine are dwindling. According to the UN Refugee Agency at least 170,000 others have been displaced and thousands of them lack food and shelter. A humanitarian disaster, the familiar handmaid of conflict, is in the making.

Just a week after Israel and Hezbollah went to war, a four-year-old ceasefire in Sri Lanka collapsed almost unnoticed. There were air strikes, shelling, ground combat and murders. Many believe that a return to the all-out war between the government and Tamil Tigers that blighted Sri Lanka for 20 years is inevitable.

The conflict flared when the Tigers closed a reservoir sluice gate, cutting off water supplies in a government area. The government reacted with air attacks and an artillery exchange followed. At the same time, government forces have been implicated in massacres, while the Tigers are once again committing suicide bombings in the capital, Colombo.

As the numbers of desperate refugees grew, the bodies of 17 staff members of the international aid organisation Action contre la Faim were found in Muttur, most of them apparently shot execution-style. The identity of the killers remains unknown, but circumstantial evidence points to government soldiers.

On 12 August Kethesh Loganathan, a Tamil human-rights activist, was murdered in an attack that bore the hallmarks of a Tamil Tiger operation - the Tigers do not tolerate moderate Tamil leadership. When I spoke to Loganathan in June, he was depressed about the peace process. "There was a policy of pacification and appeasement of the LTTE [Tamil Tigers] by both the government and the international community which has only encouraged human-rights violations. It has got to the point where we will end up with multiple sources of violence, including, I fear, sections of the defence establishment running amok," he said.

Now, while the world gears up for the deployment of 15,000 peacekeepers in Lebanon, most of the tiny contingent of 57 ceasefire monitors in Sri Lanka has simply withdrawn.

What could be done? The EU, the US and India are trying to restore the ceasefire, but that is not enough: we need to disrupt the cycle of abuses that feeds the conflict. The UN could dispatch a team to Sri Lanka to investigate ceasefire violations, and it could approve a strong human-rights monitoring and protection mission that would operate in government and Tiger-held areas alike and would be separate from peace talks. This would not end human-rights abuses but it would deter them. Crucially, it could also help create the space for independent Tamil voices.

Meenakshi Ganguly is south Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch