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(Hong Kong, August 10, 2006) That a senior Sri Lankan police officer has received death threats is another sign of the totally degraded rule of law in the country, the Asian Human Rights Commission said on Thursday.

The Hong Kong-based regional rights group issued an appeal after an anonymous caller to the police headquarters in Colombo on Wednesday warned that a deputy inspector general (DIG) from the Tamil community would soon be killed.

"There are only two officers fitting this description, and one of them is a vocal critic of police rights abuses and corruption, so we believe that he is the likely target," Nick Cheesman, a projects officer with the AHRC said, referring to DIG Jayakumar Thangavelu.

Thangavelu is a member of the recently-constituted Human Rights Committee of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights.

The AHRC said that the threat should be taken seriously.

"This is a country where human life and security have no meaning and anyone can be assassinated at any time," Cheesman said.

"When torture victim Gerald Perera was threatened in this manner it didn't take long for the killers to get him," he said.

Perera was gunned down on a bus in November 2004 after rebuffing attempts by police officers to stop him from appearing as a witness in a criminal case against them.

Investigations uncovered that police officers had planned and ordered the murder; they are now standing trial.

"The police in Gerald's case even taught the murderer how to shoot," Cheesman said.

Cheesman also recalled the killing of high court judge Sarath Ambepitiya a few days before Perera, the August 2005 killing of the country's foreign minister, and more recent attacks on senior security personnel.

"This is what happens when the rule of law in a country falls beyond the point of repair," Cheesman observed.

"It is imperative that the government places complete reform of the judicial and policing systems as its top priority," he insisted.

"The AHRC has for years warned the authorities of the consequences of failing to address the massive defects in these integral institutions, but they haven't taken the warnings seriously," Cheesman said.

The AHRC has sent letters over the latest death threat to senior authorities in Sri Lanka, and has called for members of the public to express their concern by writing to the attorney general, police chief and others.

It has asked that the two possible targets be given protection that would not disrupt their usual work.

"We are not proposing that senior police officials use this as an opportunity to quarantine excellent officers in the name of providing protection, such as by keeping them under de facto house arrest," Cheesman said.

"They need security, but they should still be able to carry on with regular duties," he concluded.