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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SRI LANKA

With continued fighting between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east, the civil and human rights situation of the population in the Northern and Eastern Province remains deplorable. Over a million people have been displaced and some 100,000 refugees remain in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The articulation of Tamil grievances has not found resonance in the face of rising Sinhalese nationalism and President Premadasa's economic "reforms" have exacerbated economic and social polarization.

To maintain and increase its fighting capacity the Government has increased its military budget to approximately 5% of GNP while the LTTE has expanded its weapons support system and fundraising from around the world. In spite of their increased efforts, neither side in the conflict has been able to achieve military superiority.

The Sri Lankan armed forces are considered an occupying force by most Tamils in the northern and eastern regions. In the south, the 1989-90 campaign to extinguish the Sinhalese extremist JVP guerilla group was noted for its brutality. From the early 1980's onward, evidence has been accumulating to the effect that elements of the government and military explicitly support a program of institutionalized repression, torture and massacres. This has prompted a strong reaction by western donor agencies, reflected in criticism of government policies in the U.N. and elsewhere, as well as a reduction in official development assistance flows.

The Government recognizes that it can no longer afford the international opprobrium for its poor human rights performance, nor the loss of donor support. It has begun to ensure that greater respect is paid to civil and human rights by the armed forces and government apparatus. Disappearances in the northeast, though still unacceptably high, have fallen from 100 per month to less than 20; disappearances in the south have fallen to one or two per month. The Government has established a Human Rights Commission, which has yet to demonstrate its objectiveness and utility, and has struck the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Northeast Conflict, which is similarly unproven. Much remains to be done, especially with regard to military and police discipline and the treatment of detainees.

The judicial system in Sri Lanka is subject to government influence and interference and has been used as an instrument of government policy. Many perpetrators of human rights abuses have been denied due process of law and a significant number of critical allegations have not reached court. There is understandably little faith in the rule of law or the quality of justice in Sri Lanka.

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