
Amnesty International

MONTHLY ACTION

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October 2013

SRI LANKA: COMMONWEALTH MEETING AND THE JOURNALIST WHO DISAPPEARED

The Sri Lankan government has for years created an image of human rights progress in a country where instead torture, crushing dissent, and impunity remain an everyday reality. As Sri Lanka gears up to host a meeting of Commonwealth leaders from 15 -17 November, it's time for the government to come clean about torture, unlawful detention and the countless other abuses that continue to plague the island unchecked – and stop them.

Beneath the gloss of progress promoted by Sri Lanka's authorities lurks a grim reality – of torture, detention without charge or trial, unlawful killings and other abuses which perceived opponents of the government risk every day because they dare to stand up for their rights.

It is time to demand progress and a better future for the people of Sri Lanka.

Prageeth Eknaligoda is one of those people. A journalist and cartoonist, he went missing on his way home from work on January 24th 2010. This was two days before the presidential election. His family have not seen or heard from him since. Prageeth was an outspoken critic of the government and Amnesty International believes he may have been made to disappear because his writings displeased somebody with power.

The Sri Lankan police have made little effort to investigate his disappearance. Prageeth's wife, Sandya, believes this reluctance suggests that the government was involved.

November's meeting of Commonwealth leaders in Sri Lanka is our opportunity to demand accountability in the country and call on them to ensure that disappearances like Prageeth's are properly investigated without further delay.

What you need to do:

Enclosed with this mailing are two template appeal letters. One to Commonwealth Secretary General, Kamallesh Sharma and the other to Foreign Secretary, William Hague. If you can personalise it, even better! Please read the background information and ask your group members to sign and send the appeal letters. Please also be sure to send us copies of any responses.

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GOT QUERIES OR WANT TO DO MORE?

If you have any queries about this action, please contact:
Activism Team at activism@amnesty.org.uk

Background Information

Appalling abuses happen every day in Sri Lanka. This can't go on. In September, we handed in a global petition to representatives of the Sri Lankan government at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, calling on them to take up Amnesty International's six-point agenda for change to demonstrate human rights progress in the country.

The clock is now ticking. It's up to Sri Lanka's authorities to take these demands to heart, acknowledge the abuses, and demonstrate that they are improving human rights in the country ahead of the Commonwealth meeting.

Six – point *Agenda for Change*: <http://amnesty.org/en/sri-lanka-tell-the-truth>

The government may have won its 26-year war against the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, but the abuses that became entrenched over that period persist.

Journalists, lawyers, grassroots activists – anyone who dares to criticise the authorities – can be picked up under draconian security laws, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and detained for years without access to the outside world. Sometimes the authorities bypass legal avenues, resorting to anonymous harassment and assaults. Reports of people being bundled into white vans and later dumped, or never seen again, are alarmingly frequent. Local residents told Sri Lankan press that they saw a white van without number plates close to Prageeth's house at around the time of his disappearance.

Prageeth had been due to attend a religious ceremony on his way home that evening, but he called a colleague shortly beforehand to say that he could no longer attend as he had to travel to the Koswatte district of Colombo with an unnamed friend. During the conversation his phone cut out; this was the last contact anyone had with him. Since then his phone has not functioned. In the days leading up to his disappearance he had told a close friend that he believed he was being followed.

The international community has been calling on Sri Lanka to commit to real human rights progress but much more needs to be done. The spotlight is now on the Commonwealth as Sri Lanka hosts the Heads of government meeting in November 2013.

What is the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)?

Every two years Commonwealth leaders meet to discuss global and Commonwealth issues, and agree collective policies and initiatives. CHOGMs act as the principal policy and decision-making forum to guide the strategic direction of the association. They are organised by the host nation in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Issues discussed can include international peace and security, democracy, climate change, human rights, good governance, sustainable development, gender equality and much more.

Chairperson-in-Office

By hosting the biennial event Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, will become Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office for the next two years. The Chairperson-in-Office plays a representational role, especially in other intergovernmental organisations, in the period between Heads of Government Meetings.

Preventing this from happening at CHOGM 2013 may be one of the few realistic outcomes of the CHOGM meeting. AI usually does not take a position on which countries hold positions in international organisations (i.e. UN HRC elections), but in this case our argument is based on scale and gravity of the violations (i.e. crimes against humanity against which no meaningful action has been taken). Achieving this objective would inevitably send a strong message that Sri Lanka is not fit for taking up this role; it would allow Amnesty to demonstrate yet another signal of international criticism of Sri Lanka's human rights record.

The Sri Lanka team at the International Secretariat will be carrying out significant high-level advocacy with the Commonwealth (CW secretariat and key member states) to ensure there is an appetite for such a call and that the CW can identify an alternative country to take on as Chair. Amnesty International UK will be lobbying the UK government and will be clear that this is one tangible outcome of the meeting that we would like to see.

Membership work is critical and a global petition will be launched after the September UN Human Rights Council session. **The target for this petition will be the Commonwealth's Secretary General Sharma.** The CW will also be sensitive to perceived risks to their reputation. Therefore targeting the CW's highest bureaucrat, Kamallesh Sharma, is likely to be an effective tactic.

Solidarity with Prageeth's wife, Sandya.

Want to show solidarity with Prageeth's wife, Sandya? From 1 November until 31 December Prageeth's case will be featured in this year's Write for Rights Campaign as a 'second tier' case where there will be opportunity to take action and show solidarity with Prageeth's wife. Contact the Supporter Care Team at sct@amnesty.org.uk and ask for Prageeth's case sheet from November 1 to take part.

Hold a screening of 'No Fire Zone'

Carefully evidenced and powerfully measured, 'No Fire Zone' is a feature length film about the final awful months of the 26 year long Sri Lankan civil war told by the people who lived through it. It is a meticulous and chilling expose of some of the worst war crimes and crimes against humanity of recent times - told through the extraordinary personal stories of a small group of characters and also through some of the most dramatic and disturbing video evidence ever recorded.

Footage recorded by both the victims and perpetrators on mobile phones and small cameras – viscerally powerful actuality from the battlefield, from inside the crudely dug civilian bunkers and over-crowded makeshift hospitals.

This was supposed to be a war conducted in secret. The Government excluded the international press, forced the UN to leave the war zone and ruthlessly silenced the Sri Lankan media – literally dozens of media workers were killed, exiled or disappeared. While the world looked away in the first few months of 2009 around 40,000 to 70,000 civilians were massacred – mostly by Sri Lankan government shelling, though the Tamil Tigers also stand accused of war crimes.

The film starts in September 2008. An air of deep foreboding hung over Kilinochchi– the de facto capital of the Tamil homelands of Northern Sri Lanka. The armed forces of the ultra-nationalist Sinhalese government of Sri Lanka were on the move, and the brutal secessionist army of the Tamil Tigers was on the retreat. After a twenty-six year revolt – the scene was set for the final awful endgame. Contact Supporter Care Team at sct@amnesty.org.uk for a copy of the film.