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Sri Lanka: Government Must Respond to Anti-Tamil Violence

Security Forces Stand by During Mob Attacks in Trincomalee

(New York, April 25, 2006) – The Sri Lankan government has failed to respond adequately to recent attacks by armed groups on ethnic Tamils and their homes and businesses in Sri Lanka's eastern Trincomalee district, Human Rights Watch said today.

“The failure of the security forces in Trincomalee to protect the Tamil population should raise alarm bells at the highest levels of government. The government has a responsibility to protect all Sri Lankans, no matter whether they are Tamil, Muslim or Sinhalese.”

Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

rights organizations reported that attacks from April 12 to 16 left at least 20 civilians dead (including seven women), among them Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese. Some 75 persons needed hospital attention for injuries.

“The failure of the security forces in Trincomalee to protect the Tamil population should raise alarm bells at the highest levels of government,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government has a responsibility to protect all Sri Lankans, no matter whether they are Tamil, Muslim or Sinhalese.”

Human Rights Watch called on the government to ensure a prompt, independent and impartial commission of inquiry into the violence and the security forces' response, with powers to recommend prosecution and compensation.

The attacks destroyed some 100 homes and left more than 3,000 people homeless. According to the Trincomalee chamber of commerce, 32 businesses and shops were damaged, destroyed or looted.

Police and other security forces reportedly stood by as Tamils were attacked on April 12 after an alleged Tamil Tiger bomb at a Trincomalee market killed five persons. Witnesses said that within 15 minutes approximately 100-150 ethnic Sinhalese men armed with clubs and long knives attacked Tamil businesses and homes in Trincomalee town and district. Sri Lankan human

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Police and armed forces stood by while the burning and killing occurred, waiting from 45 to 90 minutes before taking action. The alarm bell at the Hatton National Bank reportedly rang for two hours without response, while a policeman reportedly told a security guard at the Bank of Ceylon not to resist intruders.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's response to the violence has been grossly inadequate. According to media reports, President Rajapakse sent high-ranking security officials and other senior officials to Trincomalee in the days following the reprisal attacks. However, Human Rights Watch is unaware of any strong public statements by the president or direct steps to increase security in the district. Some persons displaced by the violence reportedly did not receive emergency government assistance for four days.

"Given continuing ceasefire violations and rising ethnic tensions, communal violence could spiral out of control unless there is a swift and strong government response," said Adams. "Yet in the days since mobs began targeting Tamils in Trincomalee for arson and murder, President Rajapakse has taken no decisive action."

Human Rights Watch said that to bring the perpetrators to justice and to demonstrate to Tamils and others that it is committed to equality under the law, the government should ensure a prompt, independent and impartial commission of inquiry into the violence and the response and behavior of the police and armed forces before, during, and after the incident. The commission, which should have at least one international member to reassure the public of its impartiality, should have powers to recommend prosecution and compensation.

Human Rights Watch also called for the prompt re-establishment of a fully functional Human Rights Commission to provide the necessary monitoring and leadership expected from this body since the outbreak of violence in Trincomalee.

The organization also called on Sri Lankan authorities to improve security in Trincomalee district, particularly for vulnerable populations, and to facilitate greater communication and cooperation among the government and civil society groups, including Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim organizations. Human Rights Watch repeated its call to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the Tamil Tigers) to end all attacks on civilians.



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