

Open Letter to President Mahinda Rajapakse to stop the expulsion of Tamils from Colombo

Honorable Mahinda Rajapakse,
President of Sri Lanka

On receiving reports of the expulsion of Tamils from various locations in Colombo this morning, June 7 2007, members of our organizations visited the Wellawatte, Pettah and Peliyagoda areas and spoke to various persons who had been affected by the process and the police in the area. This move is directly attributed to the statement made by the IGP on the 1st of June, claiming that Tamil people cannot remain in Colombo without a valid reason. On May 31 Tamils from the North and East residing in lodges in Pettah were forced to leave, as lodge owners were reportedly instructed by the police to not to shelter people from the North and East who had no “valid reasons” for being in Colombo.

According to the information we have received, in an operation that commenced in the early hours of the morning, police and army officers visited various lodges occupied predominantly by Tamils in Colombo and forcibly removed Tamils from these guesthouses. In several instances, eyewitnesses reported that these were not from the local police stations.

Hundreds of Tamils from the Northern and Eastern Provinces, who had been staying in Colombo for a range of reasons were forcibly loaded onto buses and taken to Peliyagoda. A Police Officer at the Peliyagoda Police reported that at least 8 buses with approximately 50 people in a bus left Peliyagoda. Later today, we heard that the IGP had clarified to the party leaders meeting in the parliament that 6 buses had left for Vavuniya, 1 bus to Batticaloa and 1 bus to Trincomalee. At 8.30am in the morning, an officer at the Wellawatte Police reported that 3 buses with approximately 60 people left for Trincomalee and that they would be sent to Jaffna by ship. Later on in the day, the Wellawatte Police reported a figure of 83. However, as of now, there is no confirmation of the numbers of people who were put on the buses, nor of their names.

Many of the lodge managers, and remaining inmates, complained to us that people were given less than half an hour to pack all their belongings and board the CTB buses that were parked outside these lodges. They were also not told their exact destination, only that the return to their homes was being 'arranged'.

The criteria for their expulsion seemed to be determined arbitrarily by the police and army. Even in some cases where lodgers were able to explain their presence in Colombo to establish their bona fides, they were told that Tamils who were not permanent residents of Colombo had no right to be in Colombo and had to leave. According to a senior official at the Wellawatte Police, the criteria for determining return was: those who wished to return but did not have the funds to do so; those who had no rationale for remaining in Colombo; and those who said they were remaining in Colombo out of fear.

The Police claimed that they were simply assisting Tamils return to their home towns, and that they had come to know about these desires during checking carried out. The reports from residents, owners and staff of lodges, eye witnesses to the expulsion however are in complete contrast to these accounts. People were forced to leave, even those who were in Colombo for health reasons and were not fit to travel.

While we are full cognizant of the current security situation and the need to maintain close surveillance of the city and its environs, in terms of the human rights principles that guide us in our work as human rights defenders, we are convinced that the above process is NOT capable of guaranteeing security and rather creates further polarization between the different ethnic communities that share this island, and heightens the sense of marginalization and alienation of Tamil people of this country.

We reaffirm the principle enshrined in the Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees all Sri Lankans the right to choose their own residence (temporary or permanent), and freedom of movement and maintain that what has taken place in Colombo today is a flagrant violation of this principle, and a disgrace to humanity.

We call on you, as our head of State, to take all steps available to call an immediate halt to this practice, and to offer facilities of return to Colombo to anyone who has been forcibly removed from Colombo in this process.

Sincerely yours,

Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA)
Free Media Movement (FMM)
INFORM Human Rights Documentation Center (INFORM)
Institute of Human Rights (IHR)
International Movement against All forms of Racial Discrimination (IMADR)
Law & Society Trust (LST)
Rights Now (RN)

7th June 2007