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## **Sri Lanka: Strong International Role Needed in Inquiry on Aid Worker Killings**

### ***Impact on Relief Efforts a Major Concern***

New York—The Sri Lankan government should appoint an independent commission with international participants to investigate the brutal killing of 17 aid workers in the northeast town of Mutur, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the government's decision to allow an Australian forensic expert to participate in the investigation, but urged that the expert be empowered to present his or her findings to an independent commission.

“While government condemnation of the killing of the aid workers is welcome, the true test will be whether it brings those responsible to justice,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “There have been far too many cases where the government said it would bring perpetrators to justice and then the process stalled. This time it must be different.”

The aid workers were Sri Lankan staff of the international network of humanitarian organizations Action Against Hunger (Action Contre La Faim or ACF), which has been providing post-tsunami relief and reconstruction assistance.

The bodies of 15 of the aid workers, including four women, were discovered on Saturday, August 5. Most were reportedly found with gunshot wounds to the head, suggesting execution-style murders. All the victims were found wearing ACF T-shirts. The bodies of two additional workers were reportedly found in a car nearby. Sixteen of those killed were ethnic Tamil, one was Muslim.

The killings occurred during a lull in the fighting between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the armed opposition Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northeast district of Trincomalee.

According to local sources, about two dozen LTTE fighters who were seen moving about Mutur town left around noon on Friday, August 4. Sri Lankan army forces entered the town that evening. Local residents reportedly saw the ACF workers alive on Friday morning and found their bodies the following morning.

Under international humanitarian law applicable in the current hostilities in Sri Lanka, the summary execution of any person is a war crime. Humanitarian relief workers and their facilities are entitled to special protections against attack.

“The horrific killing of the aid workers will inflict harm far beyond the town of Mutur,”

said Adams. “With more people at risk each day, this attack on the humanitarian community will make survival more difficult for an untold number of people.”

On July 20, the LTTE had closed a reservoir sluice gate, cutting the water supply to between 16,000 and 30,000 people in government-controlled territory. In response, Sri Lankan armed forces began air strikes against LTTE positions in the area and on July 30 launched a major ground offensive. LTTE counterattacks in early August resulted in a fight for control of Mutur town.

Widespread impunity for serious human rights abuses committed by both the security forces and the LTTE is a major, longstanding problem in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government has a poor record of investigating and successfully prosecuting serious violations of human rights and the laws of war, particularly when members of the security forces are implicated.

These concerns were highlighted in court proceedings this year in the prosecution of members of the state security forces for the summary execution of five Tamil youths in Trincomalee in December. The only witness willing to testify for the prosecution has been repeatedly threatened and harassed, including very recently.

Human Rights Watch called for an independent investigation into the killings of the ACF relief workers that includes impartial international participants of high standing. A successful prosecution of the ACF killings will also require meaningful and proactive witness protection measures, Human Rights Watch said. The government must take necessary steps both to protect all persons and their families who have agreed to testify, and to create an environment where other witnesses will be willing to come forward.

“International participation is crucial for the investigation to be considered credible,” said Adams. “If the Sri Lankan government is serious, it will establish an independent commission to make sure such atrocities don’t happen again.”

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