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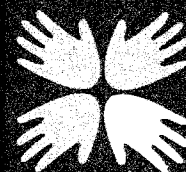
**A Visit to the Foreign
Office**

**Torture Once Again
Rampant in the Sri
Lankan Conflict**

**New Safeguards
Needed to Protect
Torture Survivors
from Detention**

The Power of Words

**Science and Ethics: The
Case of Psychology**



MEDICAL FOUNDATION

for the care of victims of torture rebuilding lives

Torture Once Again Rampant in the Sri Lankan Conflict by Aliya Frostick

The scale of the resumption of torture in Sri Lanka following the breakdown of the cease-fire between Tamil insurgents and government forces, and the emergence of state-sponsored paramilitaries such as a breakaway Tamil group led by Col Karuna, is revealed in the number of cases seen recently by the Medical Foundation.

A survey of 140 Sri Lankan clients referred to the MF in the past year shows that all parties to the conflict have reverted to human rights abuses after a lull of several years in which torture was largely confined to police investigating criminal matters.

Despite the upsurge, the Home Office last year removed 385 Sri Lankans who had been unsuccessful in claiming asylum, among the largest number of people returned to any one country in 2006. Many had spent their time in the UK in detention as part of the "fast track" asylum process.

In 2007 removals have continued, as well as the fast tracking of some cases, although the conflict has steadily worsened.

The Home Office's Operational Guidance Notes (OGN), which inform immigration decisions, still state that the capital, Colombo, is a viable location for returning failed asylum seekers, although the latest travel advice issued by the Foreign Office reports "widespread disruption".

That disruption largely takes the form of raids and street checkpoints to guard against insurgent infiltration. Emergency regulations implemented in 2005 permit the detention without charge of anyone suspected of "terrorist activity".

Tamils from outside Colombo are particularly suspected, yet the OGN continues to vouchsafe that "claimants who fear persecution at the hands of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in LTTE dominated areas are able to relocate to Colombo or other government controlled areas".

Now more international human rights organisations are highlighting the abuses resurfacing in a country where Tamil militants took up arms against the Sinhalese majority more than 25 years ago in attempt to carve out their own territory in the North and North East.

In August, Human Rights Watch accused the Sri Lankan government of unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and other serious human rights violations, and called for a UN mission to monitor events on the ground. Amnesty International has urged the UN's Human Rights Council to

call on the Sri Lankan government to address the "grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict". The Asian Human Rights Commission has described the Sri Lankan government's commitment to investigating human rights abuses at present as no more than "mere words".

In 2000, the MF published research highlighting the use of torture by both the Sri Lankan forces, and the LTTE, which documented the methods used. Today, a new wave of clients bears witness to its resurgence.

The current client caseload suggests that increasingly it is civilians with no real political connection who are the targets of the Sri Lankan security forces, the LTTE and state-sponsored paramilitaries such as the "Karuna Group."

The overwhelming majority of clients seen at the MF were Tamil, with just three giving their ethnicity as Sinhalese. In 79 cases out of 115 where the perpetrator was named, the Sri Lankan Army were alleged to be responsible for the torture. The LTTE were implicated in 15 of those cases, the Sri Lankan Navy in 14, and the Karuna Group in 11. In a number of cases, once targeted by one faction, victims subsequently fell under suspicion from other groups because of speculation about what they might have said while being held.

Some of those Sri Lankans interviewed reported being coerced into working for the LTTE as an alternative to having family members "conscripted". Others said they were targeted as suspects, often because of the activities of spouses or relatives. Several women who were detained by security forces or paramilitary groups while seeking to find their husbands were raped by the very authorities they sought help from.

The torture techniques reported by this recent group of arrivals to the UK match those found by the MF in its 2000 findings. The prevalence of rape, with at least 24 female clients and 22 male clients reporting they fell victim.

Fifty-five clients reported being beaten with implements ranging from truncheons to electric cable, 30 reported being burnt with cigarettes, and 20 said they were partially suffocated by a plastic bag soaked in petrol being placed over the head. Suspension by the ankles was also common.

Those interviewed by the MF remind us once again of the ongoing strife in Sri Lanka. It also reminds us of why we must impress on the Home Office the urgent need to identify torture survivors early on in the asylum process so that they are not detained, and are adequately supported and cared for.