



# Tamil Information Centre

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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Arrest or Disappearance Telephone Hotlines: Positive Step by the Sri Lankan Government**

The Tamil Information Centre welcomes the decision of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights to establish 24-hour telephone hotlines at the Disaster Management Centre in Colombo for a period of eight months with effect from 7 May 2008 for the declared purpose of dealing with requests for information or clarification from family members of persons taken into custody by police or any other government authority or who have been abducted or disappeared. According to information released by the Ministry, persons seeking information may call telephone number 011 2676513 or 060 2119246 from any part of the island throughout the week and would be able to receive information in Sinhala, Tamil or English. It is also stated that the Ministry has taken this step to ensure that laws on arrest and detention and the Presidential Directives on Arrest and Detention are fully implemented, particularly in relation to arrests under Emergency Regulations.

Telephone hotlines have been established in the past in relation to human rights, particularly by the police and the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission. Local human rights agencies say that these were not effective and did not contribute to the solutions of the problems. The information released by the Ministry has the following sentence regarding telephone calls: "The operators can also direct callers to access law-enforcement authorities in order to initiate/cause investigations into alleged disappearances or cases of abduction". It is unclear as to whether the calls will be simply transferred to other authorities or the callers would be provided clear advice. The TIC urges the Ministry to issue a further statement clarifying and explaining what practical assistance would be provided to the callers.

The widespread and continuous pattern of enforced "disappearances" by the security forces and para-militaries against suspected members and supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and opponents of the government are a matter of serious concern. "Disappearances" have been used by government security forces as a method in the attempt to weaken the LTTE and instill fear in the Tamil community. Enforced or involuntary disappearances constitute a violation of the rules of international law that guarantee the right to recognition as an individual before the law, the individual's right to liberty and security and the right not to be subjected to torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.

The TIC has constantly called upon the government to establish mechanisms for human rights safeguards, witness protection and to investigate and clarify the fate and whereabouts of the thousands of people who have disappeared, and bring perpetrators to justice. Since January 2006, more than 1,100 Tamils have disappeared, majority of them in the Jaffna peninsula. Family members of victims have found themselves powerless and in a judicial limbo because the justice system has failed to establish the whereabouts of their loved ones.

The announcement of the hotline numbers is a positive step. The TIC hopes that this would be a first step towards further changes leading to a new policy and a new mechanism against disappearances that bring those responsible for the crime to justice.

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