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Committed to Human Rights and Community
Development

Tamil Information Centre

PRESS RELEASE

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TICINDEX: PR/October 00/2

Bandarawela Massacre: Total disregard to the right to life

The international human rights community is shocked and distressed over the massacre of 31 young Tamils in the Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre situated three miles north-east of Bandarawela in Sri Lanka on 25 October. The gruesome massacre has shattered the feeling of security of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Amnesty International have called on the Sri Lankan authorities to conduct an impartial inquiry to bring those responsible to justice. In a statement issued through his spokesman Manoel De Almediae Silva, says he is "profoundly distressed" over the massacre and has appealed to everyone in Sri Lanka to refrain from any escalation of violence.

According to reports, 25 people were injured in the attack and another 20 are missing. The injured were removed to Diyatellawe military hospital because Bandarawela hospital refused to attend to the injured. Many of the Tamil youths were detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and many of them according to the government are *Tiger* suspects who have either been arrested or surrendered to the security forces and sent to the camp under Emergency Regulations. It was a deliberate and planned massacre by the police carried out to teach the Tamils a lesson, according to Tamil Information Centre sources visiting the scene.

The Bandarawela Rehabilitation centre, meant to be a showpiece to proclaim to the international community that Sri Lanka is a democracy that respects human rights and cares for all its citizens, including those young men who were killed. The Centre is also promoted as a facility meant for the rehabilitation of children involved in the conflict to be

rehabilitated and to integrate them into the society. The LTTE in its recent statement have denied that the victims have any links with them and say that they are innocent Tamils arrested on suspicion and detained. The Centre, as against the government claim, is widely considered as only another detention centre by Tamils. The centre is said to be under the direct supervision and command of Army officer Captain Ajith Abeyratne of the Sri Lankan army, while reports say that the camp management comprises representatives of the Presidential Secretariat, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, National Youth Services Council (NYSC) and the Child Protection Authority. According to reports, a police unit under a police sergeant and twelve home guards recruited from the neighbourhood were in charge of camp security. In addition, there were around 24 civilian staff who were mainly from NYPC.

Reports say that the inmates who had been held for several months without trial have been subjected to threats and intimidation by the home guards recently. The detainees therefore, demanded to be released and went on hunger strike which had resulted in clashes leading to the massacre of the detainees just past mid-night on 24 October.

Reports also say posters whipping up communal hatred appearing in Bandarawela town on the same day of the massacre had helped to mobilise around 2,000 Sinhalese villagers, including women, armed with clubs, knives swords and metal rods. The communal hatred messages were written on the reverse side of posters used by the Sinhalese nationalist organisation Sinhala Urumaya in the recent elections. The mob stormed the camp attacking and hacking the Tamils to death. Those who tried to escape were shot dead by home guards. It is alleged that guards had allowed the mob into the centre to carry out the rampage. The mob also set fire to the centre, which was gutted.

In July 1983, 53 Tamil political prisoners were massacred by fellow prisoners with the help of prison guards on the instructions of a government minister. No enquiry has been held into this incident despite repeated requests by human rights agencies. Since then, there have been a number of attacks against Tamil prisoners and in no incident has a proper enquiry been held and no person has been prosecuted.

After the Bandarawela massacre, President Kumaratunge said in a statement that “provocation from external forces had led to this situation”. The intension of such a statement, while there is evidence of complicity of prison authorities, seems to be to sweep this massacre also under the carpet. This is also a clear indication that Tamils are not safe in any place in southern Sri Lanka, particularly where they are held by state authorities. The Hill country Tamils are now living in extreme fear. In other areas of the Hill country, peaceful protests against Bandarawela massacre have come under severe attack. In Talawakelle, Sinhalese mobs attacked people attending a protest meeting, following which four people were killed in police firing. The mobs went on rampage looting, destroying and burning Tamil shops and properties in the town.

The Bandarawela massacre also illustrates, that the successive Sinhala-majority governments have not adequately attended to the promotion and protection of the rights of the Tamil people. Instead governments have directly involved themselves in the violation of the rights of the Tamil people for over half a century. The Tamil people have the right to the full realisation of their human rights and to international protection and to the elevation of an international order in which their rights are realised, protected and promoted. This massacre is also an indictment on the Western governments which have repeatedly claimed that the Sri Lankan state is able and willing to protect Tamils.

The Tamil Information Centre calls upon all members of the Human Rights Sub-

Commission and representatives of all governments who are signatories to the Human Rights Charter to censure the Sri Lankan government severely for its record on human rights and democratic rights and to link all aid given made conditional on promoting and protecting human rights and democracy.

The TIC also calls upon the international community to recognise the persistent discrimination and gross human rights violations against the Tamil people of Sri Lanka and to invoke the principle of self-determination while facilitating peaceful and constructive solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka.

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