

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE

7 October 2008

Sri Lanka: Karuna's presence in Parliament a travesty of justice

The Sri Lankan Parliament should reject, through a vote of no confidence, the membership of Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, otherwise known as Karuna, who is alleged to have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Karuna was sworn into Parliament this morning, 7 October, as a United Party Freedom Alliance (UPFA) Member of Parliament through the national list slot vacated by JVP MP Wasantha Samarasinghe.

He is currently the leader of the Tamil People's Liberation Tigers (TMVP). As commander of the TMVP, and previously as a commander in the LTTE, Karuna is suspected of a string of human rights abuses and war crimes, including the abduction of hundreds of teenagers to serve as child soldiers, and for the torture, holding as hostage and killing of hundreds of civilians in Sri Lanka.

"Karuna should stand trial," says Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Director. "The fact that a suspected war criminal should be entering Parliament sends an appalling message – that war crimes, rather than being investigated and punished, are actually rewarded. It also contributes to endemic impunity, which has characterised the approach of all parties to the conflict for decades."

Amnesty International is aware of numerous allegations against Karuna. The organization urges the Sri Lankan authorities to investigate thoroughly, promptly, impartially and independently all allegations of crimes committed by Karuna and his forces including:

Torture committed after March 2004 when Colonel Karuna is believed to have allied himself with the state armed forces

Hostage taking committed after 1988, including when he was a member of the LTTE

Recruitment of child soldiers

"By bringing a vote of no confidence in Karuna, investigating his record publicly and referring this case to the judiciary, parliamentarians would give Sri Lankan citizens an assurance that they are committed to upholding the rule of law," said Sam Zarifi.

Karuna, like anyone suspected of a criminal offence, is entitled to be presumed innocent, until and unless his guilt can be proved beyond reasonable doubt in a trial which upholds international standards of fairness.

Background

Karuna was a prominent leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an armed opposition group fighting for an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka. He left the LTTE to set up his own splinter group, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, or People's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (TMVP), which also has a political wing. Since April 2004, the group appears to have been operating with the support of the Sri Lankan Army to challenge the LTTE in eastern Sri Lanka.

He was residing in the United Kingdom when he was taken into custody and charged by UK authorities in November 2007 in relation to immigration offences, for which he was subsequently convicted.

Amnesty International urged the UK authorities to investigate Karuna for his alleged war crimes and expressed disappointment on his deportation. Despite six months of investigation, the United Kingdom authorities were not able to amass sufficient evidence to determine whether it is possible to mount a successful prosecution of a Sri Lankan commander suspected of torture, hostage taking and war crimes under international law.

Karuna was deported from the UK on 3 July 2008.

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