

SAVE THE DOCTORS CAMPAIGN

Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa
President, Sri Lanka

Dear Sir:

Safety and Release of Medical Staff in Sri Lanka

We, the undersigned, are deeply concerned about the safety of medical staff who served thousands of seriously injured patients during the last weeks of the war in Sri Lanka. Despite the danger to their lives, these dedicated healthcare workers adhered to their ethical responsibility to protect the lives of their patients under all circumstances. In particular, we are concerned for the safety of three government-employed physicians who were seen at Omanthai crossing point in Sri Lanka on May 15, 2009:

Dr. Thangamuthu Sathiyamoorthy - Regional Director of Health Services, Kilinochchi District;
Dr. Veerakaththi Shanmugarajah - Medical Superintendent at Mullaitivu Hospital;
Dr. Thurairajah Varatharajah - Regional Director of Health Services, Mullaitivu District.

Drs. Sathiyamoorthy and Shanmugarajah were detained by the Sri Lankan army on May 16. Dr. Varatharajah was seriously injured and airlifted by the Sri Lankan Air Force from Omanthai.

We ask that you show compassion for these physicians who were recognized by the United Nations for providing exemplary medical service under the most difficult war conditions. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), these physicians coordinated with the ICRC to evacuate nearly 14,000 patients and their caregivers from the war zone between mid-February and May 9 [1].

On July 8, the physicians, still in custody, were brought before the international media for a government press conference. They recanted on statements made earlier about civilian casualties and denied any artillery fire on their medical facilities. The doctors' statement has since been called into question for contradicting facts independently verified by the United Nations and Amnesty International [2].

On August 24, the physicians were conditionally released from custody. Their movement is restricted and they are required to report to the Central Investigating Division (CID) each month. The physicians are due in court on November 9 for allegedly providing 'false information' to the international community regarding civilian deaths [3]. We remain deeply concerned about their present vulnerability to threat, harm and disappearance.

We urge that the physicians not be punished, coerced or ill-treated for their role in tending to the injured and dying, or for communicating the humanitarian situation during the war in Sri Lanka. We ask that you respect medical neutrality and not prosecute these physicians for abiding by their ethical duty to protect their patients under all circumstances. We call on you to ensure their protection and release these physicians unconditionally.

Sincerely,

[1] ICRC. Monica Zanarelli, ICRC Deputy Head of Operations for South Asia. <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/sri-lanka-interview-220509>

[2] AI. Statements by detained doctors underline need for independent inquiry. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/015/2009>

[3] PHR. Confined Sri Lankan Doctors Acted in Accordance with Medical Ethics. <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/news-2009-08-25.html>

