

Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)



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Statement regarding detention of Tamils in Sri Lanka, August 2009.

The Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia) shares the grave concerns of many in Australia for the wellbeing of the approximately 300,000 Tamils still detained in camps in Sri Lanka.

The health effects of warfare, which these people have endured, are multiple. They include physical injuries, exposure, deprivation, shortage of medical and other health care facilities, and psychological injuries. Overcrowded refugee camps are often breeding grounds for infectious illness, particularly with the added burden of flooding such as has occurred recently in the Menik Camp. It is reported that access to clean water and food is limited for many in the camps.

Medecins Sans Frontiers report a shortage of medical staff inside the camps, with health care needs that cannot be met. With inadequate medical resources, many war-related injuries will not receive proper care, causing prolonged suffering for the victims. In addition, the psychological scars of war - including grief for killed relatives, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic disorders - bring enormous suffering. For many there is the agony of not knowing whether friends and relatives are dead or alive. In war's most vulnerable victims, the children, these problems are often hidden.

It is reported also that freedom of movement is severely restricted for many of the refugees. This can only aggravate their sense of imprisonment.

MAPW is particularly concerned for the fate of medical doctors who had provided services to civilians trapped in the war zone and had also provided eyewitness accounts to the media of their suffering. These doctors are now being held by the government under emergency regulations, without charge. Amnesty International has expressed concern that they are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment. MAPW supports the call on the Sri Lankan government to either charge the doctors with a recognizable criminal offence, or release them immediately.

Similarly, we share grave concern also at reports from Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka that intimidation and harassment of media and journalists continue with increasing ferocity.

The resumption of normal civilian life is imperative for all the people of Sri Lanka. Refugee camps cannot provide for their needs. MAPW urges the government of Sri Lanka to implement their speedy return to their homes and livelihoods. Far from providing "security" for the future, internment camps can breed hatred, which will undermine the peace and security of all Sri Lankans. Building peace with justice, rather than hatred, must be the first priority for this war-torn country.

Dr Sue Wareham
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Australian affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)