

# Activists demand inquiry

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - Civil rights activists and church groups in Sri Lanka have demanded an independent and impartial inquiry with international participation into last year's disappearance of a Catholic priest and his companion in troubled Jaffna. The Christian Alliance for Social Action, an ecumenical lay group, and the Law & Society Trust, a nonprofit group for civil rights awareness, made their demand Aug. 21 in an open letter to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The letter came after a memorial meeting organized by the groups in Colombo Aug. 20, the first anniversary of the disappearance of Father Thiruchelvam Nihal Jim Brown of the Jaffna Diocese in the northern fringe of the Indian Ocean country.

Attending the memorial were about 150 people, including Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna as well as representatives of two dozen civil rights groups.

Father Brown, a parish priest of St. Philip Neri Church in the Allaipiddy islet off the Jaffna peninsula, went missing Aug. 20, 2006, along with his lay helper, Wenceslaus Vincent Vimalan, when they went to inspect the church, which was damaged in shelling a week earlier.

More than 20 people were killed when a shell allegedly fired by government forces hit the church. After the shelling, Father Brown led the entire population of the islet - more than 300 families - to neighboring St. Mary's Parish in Kayts, located 5 miles away, ignoring opposition from the Sri Lankan navy guarding the strategic island.

The letter said, "It is crucial to know the truth of what happened to Father Jim Brown and (his lay helper) - if they are still alive, where are they, and even if not, what happened and who is responsible."

It noted that the disappearance of the priest and his companion is "only one among the hundreds of disappearances in Jaffna and the rest of the country" amid the renewed fighting between the rebels of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and government forces after Rajapakse assumed office in November 2005.

Ainslie Joseph, a Catholic of the Christian Alliance for Social Action, told Catholic News Service, "Things cannot be allowed to go on like this, and it is time to speak up."

Joseph noted that the commission appointed by Rajapakse to investigate 16 prominent disappearance cases, including that of Father Brown, hasn't made any

headway.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed and more than 1 million have been displaced since 1983 when Tamil rebels demanded autonomy for areas in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Ethnic Tamils account for 17 percent of Sri Lanka's 19 million people, while the Sinhalese account for 70 percent of the population.