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U.N. Rights Chief Urges Monitors for Sri Lanka

By Somini Sengupta

NEW DELHI — The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called Monday for international monitors for Sri Lanka, where the bodies of 11 Muslim men were found hacked to death in the country's east. Government and ethnic rebels traded blame for the massacre.

“There is an urgent need for the international community to monitor the unfolding human rights situation, as these are not merely cease-fire violations, but grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law,” the commissioner, Louise Arbour, said at the opening session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Sri Lanka has a team of unarmed monitors from Nordic countries, whose job is to investigate violations of the 2002 cease-fire between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. But the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, as it is called, has no mandate to look into human rights violations.

In the latest phase of its ethnic conflict, now more than 20 years old, Sri Lanka has witnessed a re-emergence of some of its most frightening ghosts: disappearances, abductions and killings by unidentified gunmen. Nearly 2,000 people, a majority of them civilians, have been killed since the beginning of the year, according to the Nordic monitoring team.

On Monday, the New York-based Human Rights Watch called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to dispatch “a mission of inquiry into recent massacres and other atrocities.” The group also urged the Sri Lankan government to accept the deployment of a United Nations human rights monitoring mission to areas of conflict.

The killing of 17 aid workers in eastern Sri Lanka last month drew attention to the dangers facing aid agencies in the country. Ms. Arbour said that “restrictions on humanitarian access have been imposed by both sides,” making things worse for civilians trapped by fighting.

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