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Commonwealth leaders must stop Sri Lanka hosting key summit



Thousands trapped in camps were injured or killed in the last days of Sri Lanka's war

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The Commonwealth risks becoming 'irrelevant' if its leaders allow Sri Lanka to become its next host, Amnesty International said today ahead of the organization's biennial summit.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) begins in Perth, Australia today, with Sri Lanka due to chair the next summit in 2013 despite an appalling human rights record.

"It's absurd to even consider allowing Sri Lanka to host CHOGM as long as it fails to account for alleged war crimes," said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

"Today Commonwealth leaders are faced with a choice – reform the Commonwealth so that it can effectively address human rights violations by its members, or risk becoming irrelevant."

Sri Lanka, along with India, is reportedly trying to block the proposal to establish a human rights envoy aimed at making the Commonwealth more effective on human rights.

A report by an advisory group of 11 Commonwealth countries makes over 100 recommendations aimed at reforming the organization, including bolstering the organization's ability to tackle violations of its core principles by member states.

The document, which was supposed to be discussed at this weekend's CHOGM, is still officially secret, but leaks suggest it proposes a new human rights monitor.

"Sri Lanka and India's pre-emptive attack on these reforms - before they've even had a chance to be discussed - shows they would have a lot to lose if their human rights records were open to scrutiny," said Madhu Malhotra.

In the final weeks of Sri Lanka's war with the Tamil Tigers, some 300,000 people were trapped by the fighting in government declared 'safe zones'. They were deprived of basic facilities and systematically bombarded by the army's heavy artillery, leaving more than 10,000 dead.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has publicly pledged to resist any international efforts to prosecute Sri Lankan 'war heroes'.