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Sri Lanka - Country of Concern: latest update 31 December 2014

0.1 Latest Update: 31 December 2014

There was no overall improvement in the human rights situation in Sri Lanka during the last three months. The UN Human Rights Committee examined Sri Lanka's fifth periodic report from 7-8 October 2014. The [committee's observations](#) covered a wide range of issues, including investigations into abuses during the conflict, counter-terrorism measures, unlawful use of force, torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and persecution of journalists and human rights defenders.

There have been reports of violence following the proclamation in November 2014 of presidential elections due to be held on 8 January 2015. Local election monitors recorded 293 incidents of election-related violence. 168 of these were major incidents, including 21 instances of firearms being used, two attempted murders, 40 assaults, five incidents of arson, and one attempted abduction. The vast majority of attacks were allegedly by pro-government entities targeting the opposition. On 29 December, in a [press release](#), Commonwealth Secretary General Kamalesh Sharma said that the people of Sri Lanka must be able freely to exercise their franchise, "in an enabling environment marked by transparency, a level playing field, and adherence to the laws and norms that govern a credible and peaceful election". Meanwhile [press reports](#) quoted the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as having conveyed his "strong expectation" that the government of Sri Lanka would ensure "the peaceful and credible conduct" of elections.

[Freedom of expression](#) continued to be restricted with a number of attacks on civil society, artists and opposition politicians. Sri Lanka dropped two places from 160 (2013) to 162 (2014) in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom [Index](#) and is classified as a "very serious situation". There were a number of attacks on street drama teams and artists during the last three months. Transparency International Sri Lanka have faced challenges while conducting training courses, with death threats being issued to participating journalists and individuals involved in organising the programmes. The Committee to Protect Journalists, Front Line Defenders, the International Press Institute, and Reporters Without Borders, along with Transparency International, [expressed concern](#) about the escalating intimidation, and called on Sri Lankan authorities to take firm action to protect the safety of civil society.

Groups exercising their right of assembly also continue to face challenges. Protesting fishermen were pelted with stones, resulting in three being hospitalised. Two union leaders were allegedly subject to assault by unidentified groups on 25 October. The Free Trade Zone and General Employees Services Union, in a letter to the Inspector General of Police, noted that "it is clear that our trade union leaders are being suppressed systematically". Posters vilifying leading civil society figures organising an event to commemorate the disappeared were discovered on 25

October, and stones were thrown at the residence of Brito Fernando, the chief organiser of this event. On 22 December, students protesting over education rights were reportedly attacked by police. The students attempted to storm the University Grants Commission gates, and were initially dispersed with water cannons and tear gas, but were allegedly seriously assaulted, with 28 students being hospitalised. Student unions claim that it was “a disproportionate response”.

Evangelical churches continued to face [challenges](#); attacks on churches, prayer meetings, restrictions on their right to assembly, and onerous/unfair administrative burdens. Positively, the number of reported attacks on Muslims and their places of worship have reduced significantly.

Mayuri Inoka, the wife of a disappeared man, was abducted on 1 November, but managed to escape. She told the media that she was threatened with the same fate as her husband if she did not stop her campaign to find him. Mayuri's husband, Madushka, was allegedly abducted by members of the local police in 2013.

Concerns continued around the situation in northern Sri Lanka. Vauniya (Northern Province) Citizens' Committee chairman, G. Thavaraja, was assaulted and attacked with iron rods in October. Thavaraja, who was in the forefront of a campaign calling for the release of [Balendran Jeyakumari](#) (a human rights defender who has been detained for over 200 days without charges), was allegedly threatened with death if he continued his campaign. Newspapers and journalists in the north continued to face issues. In October, a senior journalist and media activist was allegedly interrogated by law enforcement officials on his journalism training and interactions with international media watchdogs. A number of newspaper agents in Jaffna and Kilinochchi have alleged harassment. Throughout the third week of October, a Tamil monthly newspaper faced harassment, and a distributor of the paper was attacked at Uruththirapuram, Kilinochchi, with his newspapers dumped in a nearby reservoir by an armed gang. Meanwhile the Ministry of Defence (MoD)