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Throughout 2014 the Sri Lankan government, headed by Mahinda Rajapaksa, continued to obstruct calls by NGOs and the international community for a full investigation into war crimes conducted during the country's long civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an armed group seeking to establish a separate Tamil state in the north. However, popular resentment against increasing authoritarianism and corruption contributed to the shock defeat of Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the January 2015 national elections and his replacement by Maithripala Sirisena, a former ally and SLFP member until his surprise defection to the opposition in November 2014. Though Sirisena's election on a ticket of 'compassionate governance' has been welcomed by activists, he has remained quiet on substantive issues of Tamil autonomy. Furthermore, while he has announced plans to conduct an inquiry into alleged war crimes – an apparent step forward after years of prevarication by the Rajapaksa government – the UN and other international investigators will not be involved in the process.

The divisive issue of justice for the families of victims of the decades-long conflict, many of whom belong to the Tamil or Muslim minorities, remains unresolved. In 2012, after much international and domestic pressure, the cabinet approved a presidential task force to monitor the implementation of recommendations made under the government's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), focused mostly on reconciliation after the war rather than accountability for human rights violations. In January 2014, the government released an update on the LLRC implementation and reported on some positive developments such as a national trilingual policy. But, as noted in the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' (OHCHR) report to the Human Rights Council in February 2014, the government had pledged to implement only 145 of the LLRC's 285 recommendations. The High Commissioner condemned its investigation as 'limited and piecemeal' and called for an independent international investigation into allegations of serious human rights abuses – a recommendation accepted by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) through a 27 March vote. In response, government officials refused to cooperate with the investigation and on 7 April the minister of mass media publicly threatened legal action against anyone testifying to the OHCHR. On 18 June, parliament passed a resolution opposing such an international investigation with Rajapaksa subsequently announcing on 19 August that OHCHR investigators would not be allowed into the country. Those thought to be cooperating with the UN have been threatened or faced reprisals. One example was Ananthi

Sasitharan, a Tamil Northern Provincial Councillor and human rights advocate, who was attacked in the media for planning to attend the HRC session in Geneva.

Despite the civil conflict formally ending five years ago, Sri Lanka's minorities continue to be harassed and intimidated by state security forces for activism or suspected separatism. In February and March, in what the OHCHR called the biggest search operation since 2009, the government arbitrarily detained over 65 people in the north of the country, claiming that the LTTE was trying to re-establish itself. Human rights defenders were caught up in the sweeps on suspicions of engagement with former LTTE fighters. On 13 March, Balendran Jeyakumari, a Tamil activist known for her work on the disappeared, was arrested by the Terrorist Investigation Division along with her 13-year-old daughter in Kilinochchi district. Shortly afterwards, human rights defenders Ruki Fernando and Father Praveen Mahesan, both from the minority Christian community, were arrested on 16 March after attempting to investigate Jeyakumari's whereabouts. A huge international outcry resulted in the release of Fernando and Mahesan, but at the end of the year Jeyakumari still remained in detention without charge. In March 2015 Jeyakumari was released on bail, although with strict conditions imposed.

Despite these and other cases of minority civil society crackdowns, the government submitted the Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Bill for consideration by parliament. Long awaited, the bill has been in preparation since 2006, and is set to give reparations to victims, as well as protection to witnesses from harassment, intimidation or coercion. The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a public policy research organization based in Colombo, said that while the draft was an improvement on previous versions, there are still some shortcomings that may jeopardize witness safety. The first hearings for the government's Commission on Missing Persons, to investigate disappearances in the Tamil-dominated north and east of the country, were also held early in the year, registering 19,471 such complaints by September. However, some observers questioned how effective it would be.

Since the end of the conflict with the LTTE, Sri Lanka's Muslim population has also experienced increasing hostility from Buddhist nationalists. Anti-Muslim violence and hate speech continued in 2014, including a riot in June when four Muslims were killed and over 80 injured in Aluthgama and surrounding areas in the south-west of Sri Lanka, led by the extremist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Protesting the alleged assault of a monk by a Muslim man, the BBS coordinated rallies through Muslim neighbourhoods, burning shops, homes and mosques. Though extreme, the violence was not an isolated incident. Between January and August, the OHCHR received reports of at least 88 cases of attacks, destruction of property or hate speech towards Muslims, while Christian groups reported 55 such cases. Rajapaksa announced the creation of a high-level panel to investigate the attacks, although the OHCHR reported in September that no prosecutions had yet taken place.

One of the drivers of continued human rights abuses in Sri Lanka is the fact that, five years after the conflict, the country remains highly militarized. Many aspects of civilian life are still controlled by the army, who are now guiding post-conflict reconstruction in the north. One of the most significant steps in this regard was Rajapaksa's decision to bring the Urban Development Authority (UDA) under the purview of the military in 2010. This has had serious implications for urban populations across the country, particularly minorities in the north and east, who resent the army's involvement in infrastructure development, land deals and a range of economic sectors, including hotels, coffee shops and Jaffna's burgeoning tourism industry. Urban areas in the north and east have faced acute stresses as migration from rural areas, the return of displaced communities and the recent settlement of majority Sinhalese from the south has resulted in rapid population growth.

These difficulties have been exacerbated by reported incidents of intimidation and exclusion by authorities in towns with large Muslim populations, such as Pottuvil, where in 2013 the military allegedly supported local Buddhist extremists in erecting Buddhist statues and broadcasting Buddhist prayers in public areas as a provocation. While well-managed urbanization in the region could produce significant social and economic benefits, current policies are likely to deepen religious and ethnic tensions.

Similarly, in the capital of Colombo, where more than half of the population lives in slums, the government has committed to eradicating the city's informal settlements by 2020. However, authorities have been criticized for pursuing an aggressive policy of settlement clearance that, rather than addressing the root causes of poverty and marginalization, has frequently targeted minorities and other vulnerable groups. In 2010, shortly after control of the UDA was passed to the Ministry of Defence, dozens of houses were bulldozed in Mews Street, Slave Island – reportedly all belonging to Muslim families, except for one Tamil-owned home – to accommodate the expansion of a school for the children of army officers. They were given only five days' notice of the evictions, despite having title deeds and residing in the houses for decades; other settlements with predominantly minority populations were also identified for redevelopment. As Colombo's urban beautification has continued with the construction of swathes of luxury apartments and other 'world-class' developments, slums have been demolished all over the city without consistent or adequate compensation to affected families. According to a comprehensive 2014 report by CPA, throughout Colombo – one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Sri Lanka – 'a significantly large section of the population being affected are Tamil and Muslim'.

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