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Sri Lanka's torture machine continues in peacetime

PHNOM PENH, 6 January 2016 (IRIN) - Sri Lanka's new government has been lauded for efforts at reconciliation after a devastating civil war. Yet, civilians are still being abducted, tortured and sexually abused by security forces, according to a report published today.

The abuses carry echoes of the not-so-distant past.

War erupted in the early 1980s in the island nation when the Tamil Tigers began fighting for an independent homeland for the ethnic Tamil minority, which had suffered discrimination under the Sinhalese majority. The conflict finally ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the Tamil Tigers, but by then more than 100,000 people had been killed, mostly civilians.

Thousands more civilians disappeared during the war in a practice that became known as "white vaning", because of the choice of vehicle used by the security agents.

Sri Lanka's government resisted international pressure to investigate crimes committed during the war. But the political dynamic changed a year ago when President Maithripala Sirisena took power after a closely fought election. His government has initiated programmes aimed at reconciliation, and even promised a truth commission.

[SEE: Will UN report bring justice for Sri Lanka war victims?](#)

[The new report](#) by the International Truth and Justice Project is based on testimonies from 20 victims who were abducted during the past year under Sirisena's tenure. It raises questions about how sincere the government is about reconciliation, and about how much control it has over security forces.

"Sadly Sri Lanka's notorious 'white vans' are still operating; it's very much business as usual," said ITJP's executive director Yasmin Sooka in a statement.

Sooka is a former member of truth commissions in South Africa and Sierra Leone, and was a legal adviser the United Nations secretary general on accountability in Sri Lanka after the war. The identities of most members of the ITJP are kept secret to allow them to work, but they include prosecutors and researchers who have worked with international war crimes tribunals. The ITJP is administered by the Foundation for Human Rights, which was set up by the South African government under the leadership of former president Nelson Mandela.

Here are some key points included in the report:

- All victims were Tamil and many had come home from other countries or came out of hiding in Sri Lanka, because they felt secure after the change in government. The most recent abduction was last month.
- Researchers interviewed 15 men and five women in four countries. In addition to other corroborating evidence

of torture, several victims had fresh wounds and two were still bleeding at the time of the interviews.

- Torture occurred in well-equipped rooms and included being hung upside-down and beaten, being branded with metal rods, and asphyxiated using a plastic bag soaked with petrol or chili. Both male and female victims were raped repeatedly.

- The perpetrators were members of the police and military intelligence, and some were senior officers. The torture took place in army bases in the former war zone, at Terrorism Investigation Division headquarters in the capital, Colombo, and in secret facilities throughout the country.

- The abductions were pre-planned operations and the torturers had information about many of the victims' political activities, including participation in peaceful protests or elections. Several victims were accused of attempting to start up the Tamil Tigers group again.

- All but one victim paid security forces for their release and escape from the country. The bribes ranged from \$2,500 to \$7,000 for release from detention and \$17,000 to \$35,000 to then be smuggled out of the country.

- The report concludes that there is a well-organised "machine" within the security forces that practices torture and extortion in order to terrorise and oppress Tamils. It urges the government to stop denying the extent of the problem and to take action immediately to halt the abuses and hold perpetrators accountable.

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