

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	662
Land:	Sri Lanka
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	World Report 2022 – events of 2021
Udgivet:	1. januar 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. april 2022

The cover features a photograph of two women in a close embrace. The woman on the left is wearing a yellow shirt and a blue surgical mask, with her hand raised in a peace sign. The woman on the right is wearing a light blue patterned shirt and is holding a bouquet of red roses. The background is slightly blurred, showing green foliage and a tree trunk. A solid blue rectangle is in the top left corner, and a solid black rectangle is at the bottom.

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WORLD REPORT

2022
EVENTS OF 2021

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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This 32nd annual World Report summarizes human rights conditions in over 100 countries and territories worldwide in 2021.

It reflects extensive investigative work that Human Rights Watch staff conducted during the year, often in close partnership with domestic human rights activists.

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EVENTS OF 2021

Sri Lanka

In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council, responding to continuing abuses and the failure of accountability in Sri Lanka, [mandated](#) the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to collect and prepare evidence of grave crimes for use in future prosecutions.

Under the administration of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lankan security forces harassed and threatened human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and the families of victims of past abuses, while suppressing peaceful protests. The government continued to target members of the Tamil and Muslim minority communities using the country's overbroad counterterrorism law, and policies that threaten religious freedom and minority land rights.

In June, President Rajapaksa [pardoned](#) 16 people convicted under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. However, all those pardoned were either nearing the end of their sentences or had already exceeded their term. The president also pardoned political ally Duminda Silva, who had been convicted for the 2011 murder of a rival politician.

The country struggled to cope with surging Covid-19 cases, which contributed to widespread economic distress, but a response to the pandemic under military control led to further serious rights violations.

Accountability and Justice

UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 46/1](#), adopted on March 23, strengthens the capacity of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to collect, consolidate, analyze, and preserve evidence of international crimes committed in Sri Lanka, and to develop strategies for future accountability processes. Numerous grave abuses were committed by both sides during the 26-year civil war, which ended in 2009, and by the government in its aftermath.

After Rajapaksa's election in November 2019, he withdrew Sri Lanka from a 2015 council resolution agreed by the previous government to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation. Rajapaksa said he would not tolerate any action against "war heroes" and instead appointed several officials implicated in war crimes to his



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OPEN WOUNDS AND MOUNTING DANGERS

Blocking Accountability for Grave Abuses in Sri Lanka

administration. The UN human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, [noted](#) that “Sri Lanka remains in a state of denial about the past, with truth-seeking efforts aborted.”

In January, the cabinet approved the recommendations of the [Commission of Inquiry to Investigate Allegations of Political Victimization](#), which President Rajapaksa set up to [derail criminal investigations](#) into abuses. These included [cases](#) in which evidence implicates the president himself. A resolution to implement the commission’s recommendations is before parliament.

Presidential appointments severely undermined the independence of human rights institutions, including the Office of Missing Persons, which is responsible for investigating thousands of enforced disappearances. The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions is reviewing the status of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka after its independence was removed by a constitutional [amendment](#) in 2020.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

The [government](#) continued to harass, [threaten](#) and surveil [victims’ families](#), as well as lawyers and [groups](#) representing them. Intelligence agencies and the military interfere in the work of civil society organizations, particularly in the north and east, and suppress perceived dissent. Human rights organizations reported regular visits to their offices by security agencies including the police Terrorism Investigation Division. The government attempted to disrupt foreign funding of rights groups on the pretext of countering “terrorist financing.”

Counterterrorism Laws

The [Prevention of Terrorism Act](#) (PTA) has for decades been used to [enable](#) prolonged arbitrary detention and torture. In 2021, President Rajapaksa issued two ordinances that would make the law more abusive.

An order issued in [March](#), which has been challenged in the Supreme Court, would allow two years of “rehabilitation” detention without trial for anyone accused by the authorities of causing “religious, racial, or communal

disharmony.” In June, the president [announced](#) that a police facility in Colombo would become an additional site for holding PTA prisoners.

Many prisoners, especially from minority communities, remain in pretrial detention lasting many years under the PTA, or are serving lengthy terms following convictions based on confessions obtained using torture. In August, Inspector General of Police C.D. Wickramaratne [said](#) that 311 people were in custody, under investigation, or awaiting trial for the deadly 2019 Easter bombings that killed over 250 people.

Freedom of Expression and Association

The government suppressed freedom of expression, including by detaining and interrogating [journalists](#). The government introduced [regulations](#) to prevent sharing information related to the pandemic. The [Bar Association of Sri Lanka](#) said police orders to combat “fake news” “could be misused by police officers in order to stifle the freedom of speech and expression.”

In February, authorities attempted to ban a protest [march](#) by Tamil conflict victims, activists, and others. Numerous participants were arrested or harassed by police or intelligence agencies.

In July, trade unionists, activists, and teachers were arrested during a protest in Colombo against legislation they said would militarize higher education and were [detained](#) at quarantine facilities after being granted bail by a magistrate. In August, police [arrested](#) trade unionists and students are protesting the bill.

Deaths in Custody

The [police were implicated](#) in several [unlawful deaths](#), including three men whose deaths in May and June were linked to disproportionate and abusive enforcement of measures to control Covid-19. Other cases were linked to an [abusive anti-drugs policy](#). After two suspects were shot dead in police custody in May, the [Bar Association of Sri Lanka](#) said the cases “have all the hallmarks of extra-judicial killings.”

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Same-sex relations are criminalized in Sri Lanka, and a law banning “impersonation” is used to target transgender people. Authorities use these powers to harass, detain, and extort gay, lesbian and transgender people, who also face societal discrimination.

Labor Rights

The government [ordered](#) garment factories, which employ one in seven Sri Lankan women, to remain open when most other parts of the economy were shut down to control the spread of Covid-19. [Outbreaks](#) were reported at numerous factories, as well as in the congested boarding houses where many workers live. [Labor rights activists alleged](#) that employers were under-testing and under-reporting cases to maintain production levels. Garment workers reported lost pay and benefits when they fell sick or needed to quarantine, and that the police or military personnel intimidated them to stop them from speaking out.

Women’s Rights

The cabinet approved reforms to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) to make 18 the minimum age for marriage, ensure women sign their marriage registration certificates, ban polygamy, and end the Quazi system of male-only judges in Islamic family courts. However, the proposed reforms were not published, nor presented to parliament.

Key International Actors

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [warned](#) of “clear early warning signs of a deteriorating human rights situation,” and called upon UN member countries to consider imposing targeted sanctions against alleged perpetrators, and to pursue prosecutions in national courts under universal jurisdiction. A group of nine UN rights experts [wrote](#) to urge “the Sri Lankan authorities to stop rolling back hard fought progress made in recent years.”

The core group on Sri Lanka (the UK, Canada, Germany, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Malawi) at the Human Rights Council successfully led the adoption

of [Resolution 46/1](#), which established an international evidence-gathering mechanism, which has now been established as the [OHCHR Sri Lanka Accountability Project](#). Among Sri Lanka's key trading partners, India and Japan abstained, while China opposed the resolution.

In June, the European Parliament passed a [resolution](#) calling upon the European Union to ensure Sri Lanka abides by its human rights commitments under [the GSP+ program](#). However, the EU, like other foreign partners including the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, was reluctant to publicly call upon the Sri Lankan government to end abuses.