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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

“Not Genuine with Justice”

Sri Lanka’s Lack of Will to Prosecute Past Abuses

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Summary

Sri Lanka's violent past is back in the spotlight with the ongoing excavations in Chemmani on the Jaffna peninsula. Over 580 skeletal remains have already been recovered as of mid-August 2026, making Chemmani the largest mass grave in the country. The site is a reminder of the tens of thousands of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings linked to the 26-year civil war with the separatist Tamil Tigers and during the earlier Marxist insurgency in the south that remain unresolved.

The excavation work is slow and painstaking, often delayed by lack of funding or weather conditions. And it is painful as the team of archaeologists uncover personal belongings including school bags, toys, and coins that might provide some clues to help identify victims and the circumstances of their deaths.

For families that have long agitated for the truth about what happened to their disappeared loved ones, the delays in excavations and lack of forensic progress in identifying victims has furthered a trust deficit towards domestic initiatives. This has prompted demands for international investigations, particularly because of the decades of inaction by successive Sri Lankan governments—and at times active interference—in justice efforts.

One victim's family member expressed her frustrations: "There will be no justice for victims in Chemmani. The work done now is to keep the victims quiet and show the international community something is being done here. But the delays show the government is not genuine with justice."

Two years after the election of Anura Kumara Dissanayake to the presidency, his campaign pledges on truth and accountability are a little closer to being met. In September 2025, he once again committed to investigations. "I know that when digging the ground, old skeletons surface," President Dissanayake said. "Our aspiration is to build a state where such mass graves will never be created again."

The United Nations human rights chief, Volker Türk, who visited Sri Lanka in June 2025 before presenting his report to the UN Human Rights Council in September, noted that many families of the disappeared are still in search of their relatives:

> During my visit, I witnessed the continued suffering of victims of human rights violations and abuses. At a mass grave site at Chemmani, I met a family who were searching for and grieving the loss of a loved one. A woman from a southern province told me that after 30 years, she is still looking for her husband. Independent, transparent and credible investigations are critical to restoring trust.

Chemmani illustrates some of the challenges that have long plagued efforts for accountability for grave abuses in Sri Lanka, but also the potential for progress when leaders show the requisite political will. The Dissanayake administration has provided an opening not just in Chemmani, but in other cases of serious international crimes including the conspiracy around the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 269 people. The results to date are mixed. The administration's encouraging actions are only first steps, and significant barriers to genuine accountability remain.

If there is to be meaningful action and a measure of justice for the many thousands of victims and family members of victims of past atrocities in Sri Lanka, primarily but not limited to those committed during the armed conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in its military defeat in 2009, the Dissanayake government will need to show greater determination. There have been many previous first steps toward justice and accountability for grave human rights violations in Sri Lanka dating back decades, but all have faltered. A different outcome now will require mobilization both within Sri Lanka and by international actors including relevant UN institutions and governments involved in and concerned with Sri Lanka's future.

This report is based on 32 interviews with victims, family members of the disappeared, civil society activists, lawyers, and others working on emblematic cases. It provides an overview of seven prominent cases involving serious human rights abuse and failures of accountability where there has been a measure of progress since the Dissanayake government took office in 2024. The report also contains recommendations on next steps

including structural and legal reforms, an independent prosecutor's office, and prosecuting emblematic cases.

Obstructions to Justice

Sri Lankans have lived through decades of violence and armed conflict that were marked by serious violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law by both state security forces and non-state armed groups. However, barely any of those responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and other grave abuses were ever held to account, creating a culture of impunity that continues to the present.

Since the election of Dissanayake to the presidency in 2024, there has been some progress in a handful of emblematic cases, but the process has been slow and unclear whether it will lead to genuine accountability. It has often been stymied by interference by previous governments, particularly those led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015), and his brother, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019-2022), which buried investigations, tampered with evidence, and threatened witnesses and court officials.

There has long been public concern that the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka were part of a wider conspiracy involving senior intelligence service members seeking to create a climate of fear that would help Gotabaya win the upcoming presidential elections. After a militant Islamist group bombed six churches and hotels, killing 269 people and injuring hundreds, the police detained hundreds of Muslims. When Gotabaya won office in November 2019, he promptly buried the report of an independent commission set up by his predecessor to investigate the conspiracy allegations. Most significantly, he promoted Suresh Sallay, a military intelligence officer, to lead the State Intelligence Service.

It was only after Gotabaya resigned the presidency in 2022, following protests over a national economic crisis, that details of the alleged Easter Sunday conspiracy emerged. In 2023, a whistleblower told Channel 4, a British network, that he had witnessed Sallay meet the bombers before the attack. But the investigation into the alleged conspiracy proceeded only after Dissanayake won the 2024 presidential election. In February 2026, police arrested Sallay "for conspiracy and aiding and abetting the Easter Sunday attacks." Sallay has denied the allegations. In June, a Sri Lankan court banned Gotabaya and two

other military intelligence officers from foreign travel in connection with the ongoing investigations into the attacks.

“This is the result of the current systematic investigations carried out by the present government,” said Father Cyril Gamini of Sri Lanka’s Catholic Church, a prominent advocate for accountability for the Easter Sunday bombings. “We all know that the Easter Sunday investigations were halted when Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president.”

In the case known as the “Navy 11,” a group of Sri Lankan naval officers allegedly forcibly disappeared 11 people, mostly young men, in 2008 for ransom. In June 2026, a magistrate visited the “Gun Site,” the detention center where the Sri Lankan navy previously held forcibly disappeared people, while another magistrate included a former navy commander, Adm. Ravindra Wijegunaratne, as a suspect. For over a decade, Jennifer Jamaldeen Weerasinghe has been following the investigations and going to court to learn what happened to her son, Dilan, one of the 11 disappeared. At times, investigations implicated security force personnel, including commanders, who were either allegedly involved in the crime or the cover-up. But the government would routinely stall or squash cases, promoting key suspects or appointing them to senior civilian roles. “I have been fighting to find my son and for justice for so long,” Weerasinghe told Human Rights Watch. “The mothers have had to face threats and intimidation, but we continue our work as it is important to keep up the pressure.”

A number of families of those disappeared or killed, fearing that a domestic process would always suffer from political interference, have sought an international investigation including prosecutions at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Their activism, both in Sri Lanka and abroad, while it has helped to maintain public attention on international crimes, has come at a cost. Many still encounter threats, intimidation, surveillance, and other forms of harassment. In the case of the disappearance of political cartoonist and journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda, the trial of the alleged perpetrators has been repeatedly stalled. His wife, Sandya, who has faced repeated threats, wants the Dissanayake government to ensure that court proceedings are completed during its term. “My firm belief is that the case must be heard and completed soon because I don’t know what will happen if the political context changes,” she said.

Investigations have restarted in the egregious targeting of journalists during the conflict. Military intelligence officers are implicated in the 2009 assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge and the 2008 abduction of Keith Noyahr. However, the Gotabaya government committed apparent obstruction of justice by allegedly tampering with evidence and threatening witnesses and investigators.

Legacy of Impunity

Successive Sri Lankan governments promised investigations by setting up commissions of inquiry but failed to act on the bodies' recommendations. Sri Lankan human rights activists have increasingly viewed such commissions as empty gestures used by governments to push an official narrative of denial, or simply to delay or block justice.

The delays in investigations have in some cases seen no movement for years. On August 4, 2006, 17 staffers of the Paris-based humanitarian organization Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger, ACF)—16 Tamils and one Muslim—were summarily executed in their office compound in Muttur, Trincomalee district. All wore T-shirts and vests clearly identifying them as humanitarian workers. The military immediately blamed the LTTE for the killings, but in-depth field research by a Sri Lankan human rights group later demonstrated that the security forces were responsible for the extrajudicial killings and apparent coverup. However, the Mahinda Rajapaksa government insisted on blaming the LTTE. In June 2019, the attorney general ordered police to speed up investigations into the case. However, 20 years after the massacre, there is no progress.

Political leaders across parties have been clear that they will not allow any "war hero" from the conflict with the LTTE to be punished despite allegations of countless war crimes, especially during the final months of fighting. In the rare case of a criminal conviction of a soldier, Gotabaya used the presidential pardon to overturn the conviction of former Staff Sgt. Sunil Ratnayake for the murder of eight Tamil civilians, including three children, in Mirusuvil in December 2000.

International Interventions

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has repeatedly flagged concerns over the lack of domestic justice in Sri Lanka. The persistence

of victims' families, Sri Lankan activists, and concerned governments prompted the UN Human Rights Council to adopt resolutions since 2014 that maintain international oversight of the accountability process. In August 2025, the Office of the High Commissioner stated:

> Lack of accountability for past and present human rights violations at all levels remains a fundamental human rights issue in Sri Lanka, particularly in cases allegedly involving members of the security forces. The unwillingness or inability of the State to prosecute and punish alleged perpetrators is best illustrated by the continued lack of meaningful progress in many emblematic cases.

For over a decade, the Human Rights Council has adopted resolutions on Sri Lanka asking for progress on accountability and requesting the UN human rights office to carry out investigations (2014), to assess progress on the implementation of the recommendations on accountability (2019), and to collect, consolidate, analyze and preserve information and evidence for future accountability processes (2021). The OHCHR has repeatedly documented both past and recent violations, including ongoing threats, intimidation and surveillance faced by victims' families and civil society groups, and setbacks with domestic initiatives to pursue accountability.

In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 46/1 authorizing OHCHR to collect, analyze, and preserve evidence of international crimes committed in the country for future judicial proceedings. This resulted in the creation of the Sri Lanka Accountability Project (SLAP) to preserve and analyze evidence. Its mandate was renewed by Resolution 51/1 in October 2022 and Resolution 60/1 in October 2025 for a two-year term.

Path to Reform

In 2022, Sri Lanka faced a unique moment. A massive economic crisis fueled an unprecedented mobilization of the population, resulting in the government's collapse and the Rajapaksas' resignation. In September 2024, in the first national election since the uprising, Dissanayake was elected president. His National People's Power (NPP) political alliance also received a two-thirds mandate in parliamentary elections in November 2024.

The NPP election manifesto called for, “Promptly completing investigations into political killings and abductions of journalists, sportspersons and others that have not been solved for a long time and implementing the law against the criminals,” and “[i]nvestigating and serving justice to the political assassinations, disappearances and assaults that happened in the past in all areas including the North and East.” The NPP also pledged to establish a Directorate of Public Prosecution as a mechanism to eliminate delays within the judicial system and operate independently of the government.

This rupture in Sri Lanka’s political landscape could have been a turning point in overcoming the lack of progress in addressing past crimes. However, systematic ways of delaying and denying justice have largely continued under the Dissanayake government. Despite its two-thirds mandate, the government has not repealed abusive laws like the Prevention of Terrorism Act or enacted rights-respecting legislation that could end the culture of impunity. The Dissanayake government should use its mandate to break from the past and initiate genuine reckoning and reform.

As Volker Türk, the UN human rights high commissioner, said in his report to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2025, “Sri Lanka today has an historic opportunity to heal from the cycles of violence and impunity that have dominated for decades. The Government has a clear mandate from across the nation for transformative reforms, accountability, truth and justice.”

In September 2026, the high commissioner will once again provide an update on the situation in Sri Lanka to the Human Rights Council, an opportunity that UN member states should use to revisit the importance of accountability, reconciliation, and human rights in the country. It is a moment for the international community to stand in solidarity with victims of abuses by all sides in their pursuit for truth and justice, and to urge the Dissanayake government to take genuine and credible steps towards justice and accountability.

Recommendations

To the Government of Sri Lanka

- Provide adequate support and assistance to investigative authorities working on emblematic cases of crimes in violation of international law.
- Prioritize and advance the investigation and prosecution of emblematic cases in which credible evidence was gathered by previous state initiatives, including the findings of previous commissions established by earlier governments.
- Investigate and appropriately prosecute those responsible for intimidating and harassing victims and witnesses.
- Introduce laws to establish an independent public prosecutor's office with its own investigation team to address past abuses.
- Ensure that judicial institutions can function independently and without political interference.
- Strengthen victim and witness protection and end ongoing surveillance and harassment of victims, victims' families, and witnesses.
- Strengthen the work of magistrates, the Office of Missing Persons, Judicial Medical Officers, and others involved in investigations and excavations of mass graves by providing the necessary resources and facilitating technical assistance in terms of forensics and other related work.
- Introduce legal reforms and strengthen the national capacity to investigate and prosecute serious international crimes, including forensics, DNA testing, and preserving evidence.
- Introduce legal reforms to recognize enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity and to ensure that all modes of liability—including command responsibility—can be pursued under domestic law.
- Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act and initiate related legal reforms that are transparent, inclusive, and in adherence to international standards.
- Cooperate with the United Nations, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN special procedures, and permit members of the Sri Lanka Accountability Project to conduct in-country investigations.
- Implement the recommendations made by UN special rapporteurs and working groups who have visited and reported upon Sri Lanka, beginning with prosecuting

serious crimes of torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and custodial deaths.

- To ensure a fair justice process, adopt mechanisms included in consensus resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council, including a special court with "participation of international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators."

To Foreign Governments

- Support the UN Human Rights Council to advance accountability for crimes in violation of international law committed in Sri Lanka. Support the mandate to the OHCHR to collect, preserve, and analyze evidence of serious violations of international law committed in Sri Lanka, to identify perpetrators and appropriately prosecute those responsible.
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals credibly implicated in serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka.
- Pursue criminal investigations under the principle of universal jurisdiction against alleged perpetrators of serious international crimes committed in Sri Lanka and prosecute them where there is sufficient evidence.
- Provide resources and technical assistance with forensics, DNA testing, and evidence preservation.
- Call upon Sri Lanka to meet its international human rights commitments, including repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, to continue to enjoy privileged trading access such as the European Union's GSP+.
- Raise concerns about ongoing surveillance and harassment faced by victims, victims' families, and civil society groups, and other attempts to repress civic space and dissent.

Methodology

This report is based on over 30 interviews that Human Rights Watch conducted in July 2026 with relatives of victims of enforced disappearance, and other victims of human rights violations and abuses. We also interviewed human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and civil society activists in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. We also met with diplomats, researchers, and other expert sources in the capital, Colombo.

We informed all interviewees of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and that they could end the interview at any time. We provided no remuneration or other inducement. The interviews were conducted in English, Tamil, and Sinhala. We used trusted translators when required.

In most cases, we have concealed the identity of interviewees due to security concerns within Sri Lanka. We also reviewed court documents, government publications, media reports, and documentation produced by Sri Lankan civil society organizations.

I. Lingering Failure to Ensure Justice in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island country in South Asia with a population of roughly 22 million.[1] The majority of the population, 74 percent, are of Sinhalese ethnicity and are predominantly Buddhist. About 12 percent are Tamils, who are mainly Hindu with a significant Roman Catholic minority. Over 10 percent of the population is Muslim.[2]

Sri Lanka has a history of conflict based on ethnicity and religion. Violence by non-state armed groups has led to brutal responses by the security forces.

Decades of Violence: Civil War, Insurgencies, Bombings

From 1987 to 1989, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front, JVP) led a brutal Marxist insurgency in southern Sri Lanka. The then-government crushed the uprising by first deploying the police and then the military in joint operations that forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed thousands of people.[3] A revamped JVP is presently the main constituent party of the ruling National People's Power (NPP) administration.

Discriminatory policies and violence toward Tamils sparked an armed conflict between the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government that racked the country from 1983-2009.[4] The civil war ended in May 2009 with the complete military defeat of the LTTE.

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[1] Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Census of Population and Housing 2024, March 20, 2026, https://www.statistics.gov.lk//Resource/en/Population/CPH_2024/CPH2024_Final_Eng.pdf (accessed July 9, 2026).

[2] Ibid.

[3] See generally Amnesty International, Sri Lanka: Extra-judicial Executions, 'Disappearances' and Torture, 1987-1990, September 1, 1990, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/021/1990/en/ (accessed July 16, 2026); see also Asia Watch, *Human Rights in Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/s/srilanka/srilanka913.pdf; Asia Watch, *Human Rights Accountability in Sri Lanka*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992) https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/s/srilanka/srilanka925.pdf.

[4] See United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, March 31, 2011, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/poc-rep-on-account-in-sri-lanka.php; United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)," A/HRC/30/CRP.2, September 16, 2015, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session30/documents/a-hrc-30-crp-2.pdf (accessed July 16, 2026). "Sri Lanka: Tamil Tigers Abuse Civilians in Stronghold," Human Rights Watch news release, December 15, 2008, https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/12/15/sri-lanka-tamil-tigers-abuse-civilians-stronghold; Human Rights Watch, *Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility for "Disappearances" and Abductions in Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/05/recurring-nightmare/state-responsibility-disappearances-and-abductions-sri-lanka.

This conflict was marked by widespread violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law by the security forces, the LTTE, and other armed groups. Government forces were responsible for arbitrary arrests and detention; torture; extrajudicial killings; rape and other forms of sexual violence; enforced disappearances; and indiscriminate attacks on civilians.[5] The LTTE committed suicide bombing attacks and targeted killings of civilians; torture; use of child soldiers; forced evictions; and the use of human shields.[6]

On April 18, 2019, multiple bombs went off in the capital, Colombo, and Negombo and Batticaloa, in what became known as the Easter Sunday attacks.[7] These attacks claimed 269 lives and left over 500 injured. The Islamist National Thowheeth Jama'ath was accused of carrying out the attacks.[8] Several investigations into the incident raised questions about the role of the security forces. The February 2026 arrest of the former head of military intelligence has suggested a wider conspiracy by the earlier Gotabaya government.[9]

History of Impunity

Sri Lankan government security forces—the military, police, and intelligence services—have a long history of committing serious abuses but have rarely been held to account.[10]

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[5] Human Rights Watch, *"We Will Teach You a Lesson": Sexual Violence against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013), https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/26/we-will-teach-you-lesson/sexual-violence-against-tamils-sri-lankan-security-forces; Human Rights Watch, *Besieged, Displaced, and Detained: The Plight of Civilians in Sri Lanka's Vanni Region* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/23/besieged-displaced-and-detained/plight-civilians-sri-lankas-vanni-region.

[6] Ibid. Human Rights Watch, *War on the Displaced: Sri Lankan Army and LTTE Abuses against Civilians in the Vanni* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/19/war-displaced/sri-lankan-army-and-ltte-abuses-against-civilians-vanni.

[7] Sri Lanka attacks: More than 200 killed as churches and hotels targeted, *BBC*, April 22, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48001720 (accessed July 16, 2026).

[8] Michael Safi, "Easter Sunday bomber radicalised in Australia, Sri Lanka PM suggests," *Guardian*, April 27, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/27/easter-sunday-bomber-radicalised-in-australia-sri-lanka-pm-suggests (accessed July 16, 2026).

[9] "Sri Lanka's former intelligence chief arrested over 2019 Easter attacks," *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/25/sri-lankas-former-intelligence-chief-arrested-over-2019-easter-attacks (accessed July 16, 2026).

[10] Law & Society Trust, "A Legacy to Remember; Sri Lanka's Commissions of Inquiry, 1963 – 2002," September 2010, Colombo, http://www.lawandsocietytrust.org/PDF/a%20legacy%20to%20remember%3B%20sri%20lanka's%20commissions%20of%20inquiry.pdf (accessed July 9, 2026).

During the civil war, the government often initiated investigations only to then let them slowly fade and disappear. The government constantly repeated the claim that witnesses were unwilling to come forward, a circumstance that was directly related to the free rein allowed to abusive security force members, as well as the inability of the justice system to provide adequate witness protection. Instead of assisting witnesses, state investigators often tried to discourage them from testifying or sought to discredit them.[11]

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who presided over the military defeat of the LTTE, actively obstructed any attempts at justice. After the conflict, his government confined nearly 300,000 internally displaced Tamil civilians to large detention camps. More than 11,000 LTTE suspects were detained at checkpoints and in the camps without due process, such as the right to legal counsel and the right to have a court review their detention.[12]

Post-war administrations have done no better at investigating and prosecuting security force personnel for human rights violations. After Mahinda was re-elected in 2010, threats and attacks against outspoken and critical civil society figures increased, and the government used anti-terrorism laws and emergency regulations against peaceful critics, further shrinking the space for public debate. The hostile, sometimes deadly, media environment drove dozens of journalists into exile.[13]

When Maithripala Sirisena won the presidency in 2015, his government reversed the crackdown on civil society; backed a consensus resolution at the UN Human Rights Council on human rights, accountability, and reconciliation; and pledged reforms. The police began several investigations into prominent cases of human rights violations, including some discussed in this report. But these initial steps did little to advance accountability in the country due to a lack of political will.[14]

The few gains made during the Sirisena administration were reversed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of Mahinda, who was elected president in 2019. He repeatedly

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[11] Human Rights Watch, Improving Civilian Protection in Sri Lanka: Recommendations for the Government and the LTTE, September 2006, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/asia/srilanka0906/index.htm (accessed July 19, 2026).

[12] Human Rights Watch, *War on the Displaced.*

[13] "Sri Lanka: President's New Term Time for Accountability," Human Rights Watch news release, January 27, 2010, https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/01/27/sri-lanka-presidents-new-term-time-accountability.

[14] John Fisher, "Spinning in Sri Lanka," *Daily FT*, April 7, 2018, https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Spinning-in-Sri-Lanka/14-652902 (accessed July 15, 2026).

expressed his determination to protect "war heroes" from prosecution and derailed several police investigations into conflict-related violations that exposed evidence of official responsibility for summary killings and enforced disappearances.[15] Gotabaya himself has faced allegations related to his former role as defense secretary during the final months of the war with the LTTE, and other abuses including his alleged role in the Easter Sunday bombings. The Canadian government has imposed sanctions against the two Rajapaksa brothers.[16]

In 2022, Sri Lanka experienced an economic crisis that saw widespread citizen mobilization in many parts of the country.[17] With mounting economic hardships and months-long protests, Gotabaya resigned the presidency on July 9, 2022.[18] Soon after, Ranil Wickremasinghe was appointed by parliament to serve for the remainder of the presidency term.[19] In 2023, he negotiated a loan from the International Monetary Fund and embarked on economic and governance reforms.[20]

In September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the NPP alliance, was elected president.[21] His party pledged to uphold human rights through ambitious legislative reforms, and to complete "investigations into political killings and abductions."[22] The party manifesto promised structural reforms including creation of a Directorate of Public

[15] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers: Blocking Accountability for Grave Abuses in Sri Lanka* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/02/01/open-wounds-and-mounting-dangers/blocking-accountability-grave-abuses-sri-lanka.

[16] Meenakshi Ganguly, "Canada Sanctions Two Sri Lankan Ex-Presidents for Rights Violations," Human Rights Watch dispatch, January 27, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/17/canada-sanctions-two-sri-lankan-ex-presidents-rights-violations.

[17] Bhavani Fonseka, "Sri Lanka's Crisis and the Power of Citizen Mobilization," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/06/sri-lankas-crisis-and-the-power-of-citizen-mobilization (accessed July 9, 2026).

[18] George Wright, "Sri Lanka: President Rajapaksa to resign after palace stormed," *BBC*, July 10, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62108597 (accessed July 9, 2026).

[19] Frances Mao and Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Sri Lanka: Ranil Wickremesinghe elected president by MPs," *BBC*, July 20, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62202901 (accessed July 9, 2026).

[20] International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Completes the First Review Under the Extended Fund Facility Arrangement with Sri Lanka," December 12, 2023, https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/cr/2023/english/1lkaea2023003.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[21] "Anura Kumara Dissanayake takes oath as Sri Lanka's next president," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/23/anura-kumara-dissanayake-takes-oath-as-sri-lankas-next-president (accessed July 11, 2026).

[22] A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life, NPP Manifesto, 2024. https://muragala.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NPP_manifesto_English_2024.pdf (accessed August 11, 2026).

Prosecution to eliminate delays within the judicial system and establishment of offices in the provinces that would remain independent of the Attorney General's Office.[23]

Two years since taking office, limited progress has been made with these pledges. Despite having a two-thirds majority in Parliament, the Dissanayake government has been slow with completing investigations into emblematic cases and initiating prosecutions. Several cases, including the Trinco Five case and the killing of 17 ACF aid workers, highlighted in this report, have seen no movement. Further, despite public pronouncements in the cases involving the assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge and the abduction of Keith Noyahr, no indictments have been filed in court. Concerns remain in the other cases that are before courts, from threats to victims and witnesses to due process safeguards. Despite the mandate of the Dissanayake government, the delays with justice expose a lack of sustained political will toward genuine reckoning and reform.

International Legal Framework

Sri Lanka is bound by international human rights law and international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war. It is party to the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,[24] the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,[25] the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,[26] and other treaty and customary international human rights law.[27]

International human rights law also enshrines the right to an effective remedy, which obligates the state to prevent, investigate, and punish serious human rights

[23] Ibid.

[24] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), entered into force March 23, 1976. Sri Lanka acceded to the ICCPR on June 11, 1980.

[25] Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ("Convention against Torture"), G.A. Res. 39/46, U.N. Doc. A/39/51, entered into force June 26, 1987. Sri Lanka ratified the Convention against Torture on February 2, 1994.

[26] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, opened for signature February 6, 2007, 2716 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force December 23, 2010. Sri Lanka ratified the treaty on May 25, 2016.

[27] See, for example, Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, adopted Aug. 30, 1955, by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, U.N. Doc. A/CONF/611, annex I, E.S.C. res. 663C, 24 U.N. ESCOR Supp. (No. 1) at 11, U.N. Doc. E/3048 (1957), amended E.S.C. res. 2076, 62 U.N. ESCOR Supp. (No. 1) at 35, U.N. Doc. E/5988 (1977).

violations.[28] States are also obligated to provide reparations to victims of human rights violations, such as compensation for damages.[29]

Duty to Investigate and to Establish Accountability

Under international law, Sri Lanka has a duty to investigate serious violations of human rights and to appropriately punish the perpetrators.[30] The right to life is an inherent, core, and non-derogable human right, regardless of the circumstances. The United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions says that the duty to investigate is "triggered" not only in a clear case of an unlawful death, but also where there are "reasonable allegations of a potentially unlawful death," even without a formal complaint.[31]

States are also obligated to ensure that enforced disappearances are considered crimes by law, and to prosecute any person who commits, orders, attempts to commit, or otherwise participates in an enforced disappearance, or has responsibility as a superior.[32]

International law considers a forced disappearance to be a continuing offense so long as the state continues to conceal the fate or the whereabouts of the "disappeared" person.

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[28] See UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31, Nature of the General Legal Obligation on States Parties to the Covenant, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13 (2004), para. 15. See also Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity ("Impunity Principles"), U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1, February 8, 2005, adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights in Resolution E/CN.4/2005/81, April 15, 2005, principle I; Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law ("Reparations Principles"), adopted December 16, 2005, G.A. res. 60/147, U.N. Doc. A/RES/60/147 (2005), principle 11.

[29] UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31, Nature of the General Legal Obligation on States Parties to the Covenant, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13 (2004), para. 16.

[30] The duty to try and punish those responsible for grave violations of human rights has its legal basis, inter alia, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 2); and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Articles 4, 5, and 7).

[31] United Nations, Minnesota Protocol, UN Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, 2016, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/MinnesotaProtocol.pdf (accessed August 11, 2026).

[32] Independent expert Manfred Nowak in his 2002 report on enforced disappearances to the UN Commission on Human Rights stated: "As the [UN] Human Rights Committee rightly concluded, in the case of particularly serious human rights violations, such as enforced disappearances, justice means criminal justice, and purely disciplinary and administrative remedies cannot be deemed to provide sufficient satisfaction to the victims. Perpetrators of enforced disappearance should, therefore, not benefit from amnesty laws or similar measures." UN Commission on Human Rights, "Report submitted January 8, 2002, by Mr. Manfred Nowak, independent expert charged with examining the existing international criminal and human rights framework for the protection of persons from enforced or involuntary disappearance, pursuant to paragraph 11 of Commission resolution 2001/46" (New York: United Nations, 2002), E/CN.4/2002/71.

The perpetrators of enforced disappearances should not benefit from any special amnesty or other measures that might exempt them from a criminal proceeding or sanction.[33]

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances calls on states to investigate abductions and other acts that fall into the definition of an enforced disappearance committed by non-state actors and to bring those responsible to justice.[34]

Redress for Victims

Under international human rights law, Sri Lanka is obligated to provide reparations to victims of serious human rights violations by state officials. The ICCPR requires states to provide an "effective remedy" for violations of rights and freedoms and to enforce such remedies.[35] The UN Human Rights Committee has noted that "reparation can involve restitution, rehabilitation and measures of satisfaction, such as public apologies, public memorials, guarantees of non-repetition and changes in relevant laws and practices, as well as bringing to justice the perpetrators of human rights violations."[36]

Guidance on reparation to victims can be found in the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law. The Basic Principles reaffirm that a state should provide adequate, effective, and prompt reparation to victims for acts or omissions constituting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law norms.[37]

The right to reparation is of particular importance as a way of establishing truth and responsibility in the case of enforced disappearances, which are "continuing human rights

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[33] Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearances, article 18.

[34] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, article 3.

[35] ICCPR, articles 2(3) and 9(5).

[36] U.N. Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31 on Article 2 of the Covenant: The Nature of the General Legal Obligation Imposed on States Parties to the Covenant, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/74/CRP.4/Rev.6 (2004).

[37] U.N. Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, G.A. Res. 60/147, U.N. Doc. A/RES/60/147 (December 16, 2005).

violations committed with the very intention of evading responsibility, truth and legal remedies."[38]

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances specifically reaffirms the right of victims—defined in the Convention as "any individual" who has suffered harm as the direct result of an enforced disappearance—to obtain reparation and compensation in the form of material and moral damages as well as restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction, including restoration of dignity and reputation, and guarantees of non-repetition.[39]

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances also establishes the responsibility of the state to "take all appropriate measures to search for, locate and release disappeared persons and, in the event of death, to locate, respect and return their remains," and recognizes the right of victims "to know the truth" regarding the circumstances of the enforced disappearance, the progress and results of the investigation, and the fate of the disappeared person.[40]

Violations of International Humanitarian Law

During the armed conflict with the LTTE, Sri Lanka was obligated to abide by international humanitarian law, which regulates the conduct of hostilities and protects persons affected by armed conflict, including civilians and captured combatants. Sri Lanka and the LTTE were bound by Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which applies to internal armed conflicts, and by customary international humanitarian law.[41]

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[38] United Nations Commission on Human Rights, "Report submitted January 8, 2002, by Mr. Manfred Nowak, independent expert charged with examining the existing international criminal and human rights framework for the protection of persons from enforced or involuntary disappearance, pursuant to paragraph 11 of Commission resolution 2001/46" (New York: United Nations, 2002), E/CN.4/2002/71. Nowak further emphasizes that in the case of disappearances the reparation is of utmost importance "not only as a matter of redress for the individual victims, but also as a pre-condition for establishing truth, justice and peace in the societies affected by such practices."

[39] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, Article 24.

[40] Ibid. Sri Lanka ratified the Convention in 2016 and introduced enabling domestic legislation in 2018 that criminalizes enforced disappearances.

[41] Sri Lanka ratified the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 in 1959. Customary international humanitarian law has been set out in International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary International Humanitarian Law, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).

Under the laws of war, states are obligated to investigate alleged war crimes committed by their armed forces or nationals, or on their territory, and appropriately prosecute those responsible.[42] Statutes of limitations do not apply to war crimes.[43]

Aside from their direct criminal responsibility for crimes committed within the context of the conflict, such as the issuing of orders to carry out unlawful actions, commanders or other superiors may be guilty of failing to prevent or punish crimes committed by their subordinates. Command responsibility is an established principle of customary international humanitarian law and has been incorporated into the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the International Criminal Court.[44]

[42] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 158.

[43] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 160.

[44] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 153; Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 28.

II. A Lack of Political Will for Accountability

Through the decades of armed conflict and political violence in Sri Lanka, government officials have failed to hold perpetrators of egregious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law to account. Political involvement and interference with investigations and prosecutions have raised serious concerns over the integrity of the justice process.

A prominent example is the continuing lack of accountability for the 2006 execution of 17 Sri Lankan members of the Paris-based humanitarian agency Action Contre La Faim (Action Against Hunger, ACF). For 20 years, successive Sri Lankan governments have repeatedly failed to conduct a proper investigation and bring those responsible to account.

Local police in Muttur, Trincomalee District, who were first at the scene, said the ACF staff members—16 Tamils and one Muslim—had been shot execution-style at close range.[45] The government quickly accused the LTTE, which had occupied the town for several days prior to the killings. The international Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission reported that by that afternoon, government security forces had regained full control over Muttur. A local magistrate in March 2007 acknowledged "flaws during the inquiry" including in ballistics testing, which was critical for determining the likely user of the murder weapon.[46]

In 2008, the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) (UTHR(J)) published a detailed investigation alleging that security forces had massacred the ACF staff.[47] Despite the growing evidence of security force involvement, in 2009, a commission appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, while stating it had insufficient evidence to identify the perpetrators, effectively exonerated the security forces and indicated that LTTE forces or Muslim militia carried out the killings.[48]

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[45] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), "From Welikade to Mutur and Pottuvil: A Generation of Moral Denudation and the Rise of Heroes with Feet of Clay" Special Report 25, May 31, 2007, https://www.uthr.lk/special-reports/special-report-25 (accessed July 8, 2026).

[46] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[47] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), "Unfinished Business of the Five Students and ACF Cases A Time to call the Bluff," Special Report 30, April 1, 2008, https://www.uthr.lk/special-reports/special-report-30 (accessed July 8, 2026).

[48] "Sri Lanka: No Progress in Prosecuting Aid Worker Massacre," Human Rights Watch news release, August 1, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/01/sri-lanka-no-progress-prosecuting-aid-worker-massacre.

In 2013, ACF published a report that concluded that the 17 aid workers "were likely assassinated by members of Sri Lankan security forces and the criminals must have been covered up by Sri Lankan top authorities."[49] A report by the UN found that the government investigation into the massacre was flawed and lacked independence: "Evidence was either not collected, was tampered with or disappeared from the police investigation."[50]

Commissions of Inquiry

Successive Sri Lankan governments have appointed investigations and commissions of inquiry as their default response to criticism by victims, civil society, and the international community, but none of them have led to prosecutions.[51]

President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga appointed three zonal commissions in 1994 and an all-island commission in 1998 to investigate enforced disappearances and other abuses linked to the crushing of the 1987-89 JVP insurgency. The reports of the commissions documented numerous and systematic violations by the state and the targeting of thousands of people.[52]

The Mahinda Rajapaksa administration appointed the Udalagama Commission in 2006 to investigate 15 emblematic incidents of killings, enforced disappearances, and other serious abuses by both security forces and the LTTE. He also appointed an International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) to ensure the commission's independence and legitimacy. In March 2008, the IIGEP members withdrew saying that "the proceedings of inquiry and investigation have fallen far short of the transparency and compliance with

[49] James Ross, "Sri Lanka's 17 Murdered Aid Workers, Unforgotten," Human Rights Watch dispatch, December 4, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/12/04/dispatches-sri-lankas-17-murdered-aid-workers-unforgotten (accessed July 8, 2026).

[50] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)," A/HRC/30/CRP.2, September 16, 2015, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session30/documents/a-hrc-30-crp-2.pdf (accessed July 19, 2026).

[51] Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, "Still Seeking Justice in Sri Lanka: Rule of Law, the Criminal Justice System and Commissions of Inquiry since 1977," International Commissions of Jurists, 2010; International Commission of Jurists, "Authority without Accountability: The Crisis of Impunity in Sri Lanka," 2012.

[52] Final Report of the All-Island Commission of Inquiry into Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons in the Western, Southern and Sabaragamuwa Provinces (1997); Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons in the Central, North Western, North Central and Uva Provinces (1997); Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons in the Northern & Eastern Provinces (1997).

basic international norms and standards."[53] The Udalagama Commission's mandate expired in June 2009 after beginning investigations in only 7 of 15 cases.[54]

In 2010, Mahinda appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in response to international criticism over human rights and humanitarian law violations that had occurred during the war.[55] The LLRC report, issued in 2011, documented a range of violations and made several recommendations, but largely exonerated government forces for laws-of-war violations.[56]

Subsequently, in 2013, the Mahinda administration created the Presidential Commission to Investigate Complaints Regarding Missing Persons, known as the Paranagama Commission. The commission failed to ensure witness and victim protection, leading to intimidation and surveillance of participants.[57]

In 2016, the Sirisena government established the Consultation Task Force for Reconciliation Mechanisms to make recommendations on transitional justice mechanisms and reconciliation, which handed over its final report to the government in 2017. The government failed to act on many of its recommendations, including to establish a special court with the participation of international judges.[58]

In 2020, the Gotabaya administration appointed a commission not to focus on victims of abuses but to investigate allegations of "political revenge" against security personnel between 2015 and 2019 under the Sirisena government, which had initiated some investigations into emblematic cases.[59] The recommendations of the body, the

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53 International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, "Public Statement," March 6, 2008.

54 Chandani Kirinde, "The Commission acted as a deterrent: Justice Udalagama," *Sunday Times*, June 21, 2009, https://www.sundaytimes.lk/090621/News/sundaytimesnews_16.html (accessed July 4, 2026).

55 "Ban appoints panel to advise on human rights issues during Sri Lankan conflict," *UN News*, June 22, 2010, https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/06/342572 (accessed July 4, 2026).

56 "Sri Lanka: Report Fails to Advance Accountability," Human Rights Watch news release, December 16, 2011, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/12/16/sri-lanka-report-fails-advance-accountability (accessed July 5, 2026).

57 Centre for Policy Alternatives, A Commentary on the Presidential Commission to Investigate Complaints Regarding Missing Persons, March 2014.

58 Final Report of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms, November 17, 2016, https://war-victims-map.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CTF-Final-Report-Volume-I-Nov-16.pdf (accessed July 20, 2026).

59 Centre for Policy Alternatives, A Commentary on the Presidential Commission of Inquiry and the Special Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization, July 2021.

Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Political Victimization, were later nullified by the Sri Lanka Supreme Court as unlawful and a violation of fundamental rights.[60]

Intimidation, Delays, Lack of Witness Protection

A key impediment to accountability has long been the threats and intimidation faced by victims and witnesses and, in some instances, investigators, lawyers, and reporters.

Individuals pursuing accountability came under particular pressure after Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected president in 2019. A senior investigative officer in the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), who had investigated and arrested alleged military perpetrators, had to flee to country. The head of the CID was demoted, transferred, and arrested.[61] Victims, civil society activists, lawyers, and journalists faced intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. There were serious allegations that the government tampered with or destroyed evidence.[62] The government used the presidential pardon to overturn convictions in serious human rights cases, as seen with the Mirusuvil massacre case.[63]

The delay in investigations and prosecutions meant that many victims and witnesses have passed away awaiting justice. There is also a serious conflict of interest within the attorney-general's office because it has multiple roles as prosecutor, chief legal advisor to the government, and defender of the government and the state. In recent years, civil society organizations have also raised concerns around judicial independence, including

[60] Supreme Court FR 27/2021; Nelka Medagedara, "SC nullifies recommendations of PCoI into Political Victimization," *Daily News*, August 10, 2024, https://dailynews.lk/2024/08/10/lawnorder/605813/sc-nullifies-recommendations-of-pcoi-into-political-victimization/ (accessed July 5, 2026).

[61] Top CID investigator Nishantha Silva leaves country, *The Morning*, November 24, 2019, https://www.themorning.lk/articles/59653 (accessed July 12, 2026).

[62] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[63] "Sri Lanka pardons soldier who killed Tamil civilians," *AFP*, March 27, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/27/sri-lanka-pardons-soldier-who-killed-tamil-civilians (accessed July 18, 2026).

reports of intimidation.[64] The Dissanayake government's pledge to introduce a public prosecutor's office is yet to materialize.[65]

Trinco 5

Sri Lankan governments have failed to identify, investigate, and prosecute those responsible for extrajudicial execution of five Tamil students at the beachfront in Trincomalee town on January 2, 2006, known as the Trinco 5 case. There were several witnesses to the killings, including two youths who survived severe injuries after Sri Lankan security forces shot them.[66]

On July 4, 2013, a police officer and 12 police Special Task Force (STF) personnel were arrested for the killings. All were released on bail on October 14, 2013.[67] In September 2015, an OHCHR investigation determined that there were "reasonable grounds to believe that security personnel, including STF personnel, carried out the murder of the five students."[68]

During the trial of the 13 in July 2019, the court refused to hear the testimony of eight of the 36 witnesses.[69] Among them were the two surviving eyewitnesses. Trincomalee Chief Magistrate M.M. Mohommed Hamza dismissed all charges against the defendants, stating that there was insufficient evidence to proceed with the case.[70]

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[64] ICJ, "Parliamentary privilege used to undermine independence of the judiciary," August 30, 2023, https://www.icj.org/sri-lanka-parliamentary-privilege-used-to-undermine-independence-of-the-judiciary/ (accessed August 11, 2026); Maheesha Mudugamuwa, "Justice in Sri Lanka: The battle over Sri Lanka's superior courts," *The Morning*, July 19, 2026, https://www.themorning.lk/articles/YSgGUjhD4TiODxsjCIww (accessed August 11, 2026)

[65] Varuna Dayaratne and Irangika Range, "Expert committee to introduce new Public Prosecutor's Office," *Daily News*, June 12, 2026, https://dailynews.lk/2026/06/12/local/1009682/expert-committee-to-introduce-new-public-prosecutors-office/ (accessed July 4, 2026).

[66] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[67] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[68] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)," A/HRC/30/CRP.2, September 16, 2015, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session30/documents/a-hrc-30-crp-2.pdf (accessed July 19, 2026).

[69] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," CPA March 2023.

[70] Ibid.

Dr. Kasippillai Manoharan, whose son Manoharan Ragihar was among the victims, had testified that government forces were responsible for the killings.[71] Soon after, security forces began to threaten him and families of the other victims. After months of death threats, Dr. Manoharan and his family left the country and found asylum abroad.[72] So did the families of the other victims and the two survivors. Dr. Manoharan, who continued to pursue justice for the killing of his son, passed away in 2025.

An auto-rickshaw driver named Balachandran, who came forward with information linking the security forces to the attack, was abducted from his home on August 24, 2006, by men in a white van, and shot dead.[73] Subramaniyam Sugirdharajan, a journalist who covered the case, was also shot and killed by unknown gunmen.[74]

Stalled Legal Reforms

Since the end of the civil war, various governments have pledged to revise draconian laws and rectify the abuse of such laws and then backtracked.[75] For instance, like its predecessors, the Dissanayake government promised to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) but has continued to rely on it to arrest and detain individuals.[76] A proposed draft bill titled the Protection of the State from Terrorism Act was released in 2025 and contained an overbroad and vague definition of terrorism including crimes that do not constitute terrorism. The bill's provisions could be construed as prohibiting political activism; extraordinary powers to arrest and arbitrarily detain individuals; wide powers to stop, search, and enter premises; sweeping powers to proscribe organizations; among others that did not meet international standards.[77]

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[73] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), "The Five Students Case in Trincomalee," Special Report No. 24, April 19, 2007, https://www.uthr.lk/special-reports/special-report-24 (accessed July 8, 2026).

[74] Reporters Without Borders, "Tamil journalist gunned down in Trincomalee after covering paramilitary abuses," January 24, 2006, https://rsf.org/en/tamil-journalist-gunned-down-trincomalee-after-covering-paramilitary-abuses (accessed July 19, 2026).

[75] Human Rights Watch, *"If We Raise Our Voice They Arrest Us": Sri Lanka's Proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/18/if-we-raise-our-voice-they-arrest-us/sri-lankas-proposed-truth-and-reconciliation (accessed July 20, 2026).

[76] A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life, NPP Manifesto, 2024. https://muragala.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NPP_manifesto_English_2024.pdf (accessed August 11, 2026).

[77] "Sri Lanka: Proposed Counterterrorism Law Risks More Abuses," Human Rights Watch news release, January 18, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/18/sri-lanka-proposed-counterterrorism-law-risks-more-abuses.

Despite decades of reported cases of enforced disappearance, Sri Lanka only criminalized enforced disappearances in 2018, and no cases have yet been brought to court.[78] Sri Lankan law still does not recognize enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity nor does the law cover modes of liability such as command responsibility.[79]

Disregarding International Scrutiny

The repeated failures to provide justice for serious abuses and the entrenched impunity in the country have resulted in constant international scrutiny.

In May 2009, days after the end of the civil war, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Sri Lanka and underlined "the importance of an accountability process for addressing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law."[80] Facing severe criticism for the UN's failures to help protect civilians during the last phase of the war, the secretary-general in June 2010 appointed a three-member panel of experts to advise him on addressing alleged violations of international human rights and humanitarian law during the last stages of the Sri Lankan conflict. Their report concluded that violations committed during the conflict may have amounted to war crimes and recommended an "independent international mechanism" to conduct investigations, as well as to collect and safeguard evidence.[81]

In 2012, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution calling on Sri Lanka to implement the recommendations of its Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission report (LLRC).[82] The government did not respond. Instead, when Navi Pillay, then-UN high commissioner for human rights, visited Sri Lanka in August 2013, she found an alarming

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[78] UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Experts of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances Welcome Sri Lanka's Law on Enforced Disappearance, Ask about Reports of Arbitrary Detentions and Intimidation of Victims' Families," September 29, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/meeting-summaries/2025/09/experts-committee-enforced-disappearances-welcome-sri-lankas-law-0 (accessed July 17, 2026).

[79] "Sri Lanka: Proposed Counterterrorism Law Risks More Abuses," Human Rights Watch news release, January 18, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/18/sri-lanka-proposed-counterterrorism-law-risks-more-abuses.

[80] Joint statement by UN Secretary-General, Government of Sri Lanka, Relief Web, May 26, 2009, https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/joint-statement-un-secretary-general-government-sri-lanka (accessed July 15, 2026).

[81] UN, Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, March 31, 2011, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/poc-rep-on-account-in-sri-lanka.php (accessed July 16, 2026).

[82] UN Human Rights Council Resolution 19/2, Promoting reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka, A/HRC/19/L.2, March 8, 2012, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/19/L.2 (accessed July 9, 2026).

increase in the harassment and intimidation of civil society groups, the media, and religious minorities.[83]

Noting the lack of genuine progress, the Human Rights Council passed Resolution 25/1 in March 2014 requesting OHCHR to investigate the allegations of human rights abuses.[84] The OHCHR investigation on Sri Lanka detailed horrific wartime abuses committed by both sides and called for a comprehensive transitional justice process including individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, and institutional reform. The report noted the "total failure of domestic mechanisms to credibly investigate, establish the truth, ensure accountability and provide redress to victims."[85]

After Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated in presidential elections in January 2015, the new Sirisena government agreed in October 2015 to a consensus UN Human Rights Council resolution, known as 30/1, setting out detailed steps to pursue accountability and reconciliation, as well as security sector reform.[86] The government committed to establishing four mechanisms, including a special court with "participation of international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators;" a truth mechanism; the Office on Missing Persons; and the Office for Reparations. The government reaffirmed its commitments by co-sponsoring two further consensus resolutions, known as 34/1 in 2017 and 40/1 in 2019.[87] However, only two of the four mechanisms—the Office of Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations—were ever established.

Once Gotabaya was elected president in 2019, his government promptly rejected the commitments made at the UN Human Rights Council.[88] In the face of growing concerns

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[83] "Sri Lanka heading in 'authoritarian direction', says UN human rights chief," *UN News*, August 12, 2013, https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/08/447932 (accessed July 9, 2026).

[84] UN Human Rights Council Resolution 25/1, Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, A/HRC/RES/25/1, March 26, 2014, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/25/1 (accessed July 9, 2026).

[85] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)," A/HRC/30/CRP.2, September 16, 2015, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session30/documents/a-hrc-30-crp-2.pdf (accessed July 19, 2026).

[86] Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 1 October 2015, A/HRC/RES/30/1, October 14, 2015.

[87] Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on March 23, 2017, A/HRC/RES/34/1; Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on March 21, 2019, A/HRC/RES/40/1.

[88] "Sri Lanka says it will withdraw from UN rights resolution," *Al Jazeera*, February 20, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/20/sri-lanka-says-it-will-withdraw-from-un-rights-resolution (accessed July 9, 2026).

over the increase in human rights violations under his administration, the council adopted resolution 46/1 in March 2021 that authorized OHCHR to collect, analyze, and preserve evidence of international crimes committed in the country for future judicial proceedings.[89] This resulted in the creation of the Sri Lanka Accountability Project (SLAP), whose mandate has been renewed by the Human Rights Council in resolution 51/1 in October 2022 and resolution 60/1 in October 2025 for two years.

The Dissanayake government has refused to cooperate with the SLAP but has pledged to ensure a domestic justice process. Blaming previous administrations for failing to establish a "credible national mechanism," the foreign minister, Vijitha Herath, told parliament in October 2025 that the government, while rejecting SLAP, is committed "to secure broad support for resolving these issues that have hitherto been internationalized due to politicization, through independent domestic processes and institutions." "As a political movement that was long subjected to state repression and human rights violations," he assured his government's "genuine commitment to human rights and the genuine empathy we have for victims across all communities."[90]

[89] United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 46/1, Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, March 26, 2021, A/HRC/RES/46/1 https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/46/1 (accessed on July 9, 2026).

[90] Special Statement made by Hon. Minister, Mr. Vijitha Herath in the Parliament on Geneva Decisions, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sri Lanka, October 9, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.lk/en/minister-9-10-2025 (accessed August 12, 2026).

III. New Opportunities to Advance Justice

Sri Lanka's long list of unresolved human rights cases confirms the multiple setbacks faced by victims in their pursuit for truth and justice, and the entrenched culture of impunity. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted in 2025:

> Lack of accountability for past and present human rights violations at all levels remains a fundamental human rights issue in Sri Lanka, particularly in cases allegedly involving members of the security forces. The unwillingness or inability of the State to prosecute and punish alleged perpetrators is best illustrated by the continued lack of meaningful progress in many emblematic cases.[91]

While most investigations and prosecutions are still stalled nearly two years after the NPP took office, developments in a handful of emblematic cases have been encouraging.

The Easter Sunday Attacks, 2019

On April 21, 2019, coordinated suicide bombings by a militant Islamist group struck three churches and three luxury hotels across Sri Lanka. Police arrested hundreds of Muslims after discovering that the bombers belonged to the little-known group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath.[92]

However, there were persistent allegations that the attacks appeared politically motivated to help Gotabaya Rajapaksa's bid for the presidency later in the year. In 2023, a Channel 4 documentary in the UK aired allegations of complicity in the bombings by military intelligence and the Rajapaksa political family.[93] In 2023, Pope Francis called on the authorities in Sri Lanka to ensure justice for the attacks: "Please, out of love for justice, out

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[91] UN, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Situation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka, Annual Report, August 12, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-21-auv.pdf (accessed July 9th, 2026).

[92] "Sri Lanka: Muslims Face Threats, Attacks," Human Rights Watch news release, July 3, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/03/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks.

[93] "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Dispatches," *Channel 4*, August 15, 2023, https://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-easter-bombings-dispatches (accessed July 17, 2026).

of love for your people, let it be made clear once and for all who were responsible for these events," he said. "This will bring peace to your conscience and to your country."[94]

In 2019, families of victims and Catholic clergy petitioned the Supreme Court, accusing the Sirisena administration of misgovernance and negligence. President Sirisena appointed a Presidential Commission of Inquiry in September 2019, which recorded hundreds of testimonies. However, by the time the commission delivered its final report in February 2021, Gotabaya was in office.[95] The findings identified failures at the highest levels of government, but the Gotabaya administration did not act on the report.

In January 2023, the Supreme Court held former President Sirisena and four other senior defense officials liable for failing to act on available intelligence that could have prevented the bombings.[96] It ordered Sirisena to pay 100 million Sri Lankan rupees (US$273,000) in compensation. The others, including the inspector general of police, the defense secretary, and the heads of state intelligence agencies were ordered to pay a total of 210 million Sri Lankan rupees (US$574,000).[97]

On July 31, 2026, the inspector general of police and the defense secretary were convicted for murder and attempted murder by the Special High Court in a split decision.[98] Questions remain as to why others who were found liable by the Supreme Court were never criminally charged.[99]

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[94] Robin Gomes, "Pope urges for truth behind Sri Lanka's Easter bombing," *Vatican News*, April 25, 2022, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-04/pope-francis-meets-sri-lanka-delegation-victims-easter-bombings.html (accessed July 18, 2026).

[95] "PCoI report probing Easter Sunday attacks handed over to Speaker," *Times Online*, February 23, 2021, https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news-online/PCoI-report-probing-Easter-Sunday-attacks-handed-over-to-Speaker/2-1132221 (accessed July 8, 2026).

[96] "Sri Lanka ex-leader ordered to compensate Easter bombing victims," *Al Jazeera*, January 12, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/12/court-rules-sri-lanka-ex-leader-failed-to-stop-easter-attacks (accessed July 8, 2026).

[97] Ibid.

[98] Dilshan Tharaka, "Pujitha, Hemasiri sentenced to death," *Daily News*, August 1, 2026, https://dailynews.lk/2026/08/01/breaking-news/1031255/pujitha-hemasiri-sentenced-to-death/ (accessed August 3, 2026).

[99] Editorial, "Justice, Accountability and Consistency," *Daily FT*, August 3, 2026, https://www.ft.lk/ft_view__editorial/Justice-accountability-and-consistency/58-795501 (accessed August 3, 2026)

Another criminal trial against 24 individuals accused of participating in the Easter Sunday bombings has been before the High Court Trial-at-Bar.[100] However, the defense counsel for the accused withdrew in February 2026, citing the practical impossibility of attending daily hearings alongside existing court commitments.[101] Four of the accused filed a Fundamental Rights petition before the Supreme Court seeking an interim stay of proceedings, arguing that continuing the trial violates their rights to equality before the law, a fair hearing, and the presumption of innocence.[102]

In February 2026, the Criminal Investigation Department arrested retired Maj. Gen. Suresh Sallay on charges of conspiracy and for abetting the Easter Sunday attacks.[103] Sallay, who was appointed intelligence chief by the Gotabaya administration, was initially implicated in the Channel 4 documentary.[104] The police said that they had further evidence to support his detention.

On June 3, 2026, the Fort Magistrate Court banned Gotabaya Rajapaksa and two others—Col. Mohamed Ansar and Premananda Udalagama, a former intelligence officer—from foreign travel in connection with the ongoing investigations into the case.[105] It is the first time that the authorities have formally linked the former president to the Easter bombings. Gotabaya has filed a writ petition in the Court of Appeal to prevent his arrest.[106] At the time of writing, the matter was still pending before the court.

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[100] Detailed information on the case and related issues can be accessed here: https://easterattack.info (accessed on July 9, 2026).

[101] "Easter Sunday Attacks Trial: Defence Team Steps Down Amid Intensifying Proceedings," *Sri Lanka Brief*, February 5, 2026, https://srilankabrief.org/easter-sunday-attacks-trial-defence-team-steps-down-amid-intensifying-proceedings/ (accessed July 9, 2026).

[102] "Easter Sunday attacks: Four suspects file FR petition," *Sri Lanka Brief*, March 23, 2026, https://srilankabrief.org/easter-sunday-attacks-four-suspects-file-fr-petition/ (accessed July 9, 2026).

[103] "Sri Lanka's former intelligence chief arrested over 2019 Easter attacks," *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/25/sri-lankas-former-intelligence-chief-arrested-over-2019-easter-attacks (accessed July 16, 2026).

[104] "Sri Lanka Easter Sunday Bombings: Dispatches," *Channel 4*, August 15, 2023, https://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-easter-bombings-dispatches (accessed July 18, 2026).

[105] "Travel Ban Imposed on Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Easter Sunday Attacks Probe," *Sri Lanka Brief*, June 3, 2026, https://srilankabrief.org/travel-ban-imposed-on-gotabaya-rajapaksa-in-easter-sunday-attacks-probe/ (accessed July 17, 2026).

[106] "Court of Appeal postpones further hearing on Gotabaya Rajapaksa's petition," *Newswire*, June 24, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/06/24/court-of-appeal-postpones-further-hearing-on-gotabaya-rajapaksas-petition/ (accessed July 17, 2026).

Sallay is presently detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He has challenged the detention order in the Court of Appeal.

Assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge, 2009

Masked assailants on motorbikes killed Lasantha Wickrematunge, a prominent news editor, on January 8, 2009, after forcing his car off the road in Mount Lavinia near Colombo. Local civil society groups have reported that the killers were allegedly members of military intelligence.[107]

Wickrematunge was a fierce critic of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government and had led investigative reporting that exposed its corruption and human rights violations. He faced multiple threats and attacks for his work. His daughter, Ahimsa Wickrematunge, later told the CID that her father believed he was being targeted by Gotabaya, the president's brother and defense secretary (and future president), because of this work.[108]

Successive governments dragged their feet or actively impeded investigations into the murder, but in 2024 the Dissanayake government announced it would reopen this and several other high-profile cases.[109]

Under the Mahinda government, investigations into Wickrematunge's death faced multiple setbacks including interference and evidence tampering.[110] His notebook and phone, recovered from the crime scene, later went missing; two senior police officers later testified that then-Inspector General of Police Jayantha Wickramaratne had ordered them to be destroyed.[111]

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[107] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[108] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[109] "Govt clarifies decision to investigate 7 high-profile cases," *Newswire*, October 15, 2024, https://www.newswire.lk/2024/10/15/govt-clarifies-decision-to-investigate-7-high-profile-cases/ (accessed August 11, 2026).

[110] For an extensive account of the crime and the conduct of the investigation, see Ahimsa Wickrematunge's 2019 United States civil action against Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Case No. 2:19 https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Complaint-Wickrematunge-v-Rajapaksa.pdf.

[111] Nirmala Kannangara, "Evidence unfolding before courts on Lasantha's Murder," *Daily Mirror*, March 28, 2018, https://www.dailymirror.lk/expose/Evidence-unfolding-before-courts-on-Lasantha-s-Murder/333-147877 (accessed July 8, 2026).

In 2010, CID investigators sought to question a member of the Tripoli Platoon, an elite military squad in which Gotabaya Rajapaksa had served, whom they had identified through cell phone records. However, immediately after, the police chief ordered the CID to halt its investigation and hand the case to the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID).[112]

In February 2010, the TID arrested Pitchchai Jesudasan, a motor mechanic whose identity card was linked to the SIM cards used in the attack. It emerged that he had lost his identity card after a night of drinking with a military intelligence officer. Jesudasan died in prison on October 13, 2011. According to the police, he had suffered a heart attack, although his family rejected the explanation.[113] Eventually, the police detained 19 individuals linked to the case, including 17 army officers, but they were all released.[114]

After the Sirisena administration took office in 2015, the CID was reassigned to the case and began pursuing leads that implicated military intelligence personnel. In July 2016, Premananda Udalagama, a military intelligence officer, was arrested.[115] Over the following months, the CID presented evidence in court. On March 20, 2017, they announced that in a witness statement, former army commander Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka had alleged that an army intelligence team under the direct command of Maj. Gen. Kapila Hendawitharana was responsible for Wickrematunge's murder. The CID also reported that two of the motorcycles used in the killing were stolen a few days before the attack, and that their owners, Balraj Ram Prakash and Kumarasingham Vishnukumar, had been killed and their bodies burned.[116]

In April 2019, Ahimsa Wickrematunge launched civil proceedings in the United States against Gotabaya, who at that time was a US citizen, arguing that the Sri Lankan legal

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[112] "TID to handle Lasantha murder," *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 2010, https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/tid-to-handle-lasantha-murder/108-8173 (accessed July 8, 2026).

[113] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[114] Ahimsa Wickrematunge's 2019 United States civil action against Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Case No. 2:19 https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Complaint-Wickrematunge-v-Rajapaksa.pdf

[115] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[116] Nirmala Kannangara, "Evidence unfolding before courts on Lasantha's Murder," March 28, 2018, https://www.dailymirror.lk/expose/Evidence-unfolding-before-courts-on-Lasantha-s-Murder/333-147877 (accessed July 8, 2026).

system had been unable to provide justice for her father's killing.[117] Following Gotabaya's election as president, the US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the lawsuit without prejudice, clearing the way for it to be revived after he left office and no longer enjoyed sovereign immunity as head of state.[118] No case has been filed in court since then.

Meanwhile, the CID's lead investigator in the case, Nishantha Silva, fled the country fearing retaliation for identifying the role of senior military officers. In October 2020, Premananda Udalagama, who had been arrested, testified to the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization that the police investigation had been used to target Gotabaya.[119] In his testimony, he alleged that Nishantha Silva had suggested to him to admit that the intelligence units assaulted journalists on the instructions of Gotabaya.[120]

In 2021, Jayantha Wickramaratne, the former inspector general of police who allegedly ordered evidence to be destroyed, was appointed to the Office of Missing Persons, a body meant to investigate enforced disappearances, drawing criticism from victims' families, including Ahimsa, who called it proof of "President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's contempt for victims."[121]

In May 2022, Nishantha Silva gave a public statement for the first time at the unofficial People's Tribunal in The Hague, and alleged that Gotabaya had command authority over the unit involved in Wickrematunge's killing.[122]

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[117] Ahimsa Wickrematunge's 2019 United States civil action against Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Case No. 2:19 https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Complaint-Wickrematunge-v-Rajapaksa.pdf

[118] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[119] Centre for Policy Alternatives, A Commentary on the Presidential Commission of Inquiry and the Special Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization, July 2021.

[120] Zulfick Farzan, "CID misled court over Lasantha Wickrematunge killing; Ex intelligence offer," *Newsfirst*, October 28, 2020, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/10/28/cid-misled-court-over-lasantha-wickrematunge-killing-ex-intelligence-officer (accessed August 11, 2026)

[121] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[122] Steven Butler, "New details raise questions about whether Sri Lankan president was complicit in the killing of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, June 27, 2022, https://cpj.org/2022/06/new-details-raise-questions-about-whether-sri-lankan-president-was-complicit-in-the-killing-of-journalist-lasantha-wickrematunge/ (accessed July 8, 2026).

In February 2025, Attorney General Parinda Ranasinghe informed the Mount Lavinia Magistrate's Court that he had suspended his decision to discharge three key suspects until he had reviewed the evidence provided by police investigators.[123] These were a former army intelligence officer, Premananda Udalagama; a former police officer, Tissasiri Sugathapala; and a former area police chief, Prasanna Nanayakkara, all of whom had been returned to custody because of evidence linking them to the murder and interfering with the investigation. Journalists and activists had protested when the attorney general had earlier announced that he was dropping the case against the suspects.[124]

After the protests, President Dissanayake summoned a meeting with the Justice Ministry and the attorney general to discuss the case.[125] Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya assured parliament that the government was committed to securing justice.[126] In August 2025, the public security minister informed parliament that the investigations had concluded and the file forwarded to the attorney general's department.[127] However, since then there have been no arrests or prosecution.

Abduction of Keith Noyahr, 2008

Keith Noyahr was the deputy editor of the *Nation* newspaper when unidentified men in a white van abducted him on May 22, 2008. Noyahr was found early the following morning, badly beaten and suffering from multiple injuries.[128] He left the country following the attack.

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[123] Lakmal Sooriyagoda, "Lasantha Wickrematunge murder case: AG suspends discharge of three suspects," *Daily Mirror*, February 13, 2025, https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Lasantha-Wickrematunge-murder-case-AG-suspends-discharge-of-three-suspects/108-302305 (accessed July 9, 2026).

[124] "Ahimsa Wickrematunge demands AG's impeachment over father Lasantha Wickrematunge's murder case decision," *The Morning*, February 6, 2025, https://www.themorning.lk/articles/pJeI4ZZQOEWJ1WcpjQaj (accessed July 9, 2026).

[125] "President Summons AG Over Controversial Release of Lasantha Wickrematunge Murder Suspects," *Asian Mirror*, February 6, 2025, https://asianmirror.lk/news/president-summons-ag-over-controversial-release-of-lasantha-wickrematunge-murder-suspects/ (accessed July 9, 2026).

[126] "PM assures justice for Lasantha Wickrematunge's family," *NewsWire*, February 7, 2025, https://www.newswire.lk/2025/02/07/pm-assures-justice-for-lasantha-wickrematunges-family/ (accessed July 8, 2026).

[127] "Investigations into assassination of Lasantha concluded: File sent to AG for prosecution," *The Island*, August 24, 2025, https://island.lk/investigations-into-assassination-of-lasantha-concluded-file-sent-to-ag-for-prosecution/ (accessed August 11, 2026)

[128] "Keith Noyahr recounts the harrowing ordeal of being abducted by a white van," *Newsfirst*, August 20, 2018, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2018/08/20/keith-noyahr-recounts-the-harrowing-ordeal-of-being-abducted-by-a-white-van (accessed July 8, 2026).

Noyahr's case, which had stalled during the Rajapakasa years, was reopened in 2015 at the request of detectives investigating the 2009 murder of the journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge, since the perpetrators appeared to be connected.[129]

Investigations showed that on the night Noyahr went missing, his editor, Lalith Alahakoon, and the publishing company chairman, Krishantha Cooray, telephoned President Mahinda Rajapaksa and then-Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa seeking assistance, setting off a sequence of telephone calls. The call logs were later produced in court as evidence that military intelligence was involved and that Noyahr was eventually released because of orders through the chain of command.

After Alahakoon and Cooray raised the alarm, Gotabaya made two calls, one to the inspector general of police, Jayantha Wickramaratne, and then to the intelligence chief, retired Maj. Gen. Hendawitharana. Hendawitharana subsequently called Brig. Amal Karunasekara, the director of military intelligence. Karunasekara then called the commanding officer of the military intelligence unit based at the Tripoli Camp in Colombo, Maj. Prabath Bulathwatta.[130]

The CID took a statement from Noyahr, who was by then in Australia, which was produced as evidence in court. Noyahr told the police that his assailants took him to a house where he was blindfolded, stripped, and beaten. He said that during the assault, one of his captors received a telephone call and replied, "Okay sir, okay sir." After that, his abductors stopped the beatings and later dumped him in the Dehiwala area of Colombo.[131]

Detectives investigating the abduction identified the military intelligence "safe house" at Dompe, outside Colombo, where Noyahr was allegedly taken. In 2017, they arrested nine suspects in the case including Maj. Bulathwatta.[132] The following month, they located the

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[129] "Keith Noyahr recounts the harrowing ordeal of being abducted by a white van," *Newsfirst*, August 20, 2018, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2018/08/20/keith-noyahr-recounts-the-harrowing-ordeal-of-being-abducted-by-a-white-van (accessed July 8, 2026).

[130] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[131] Ibid.

[132] Sheain Fernandopulle, "Keith Noyahr abduction case army intelligence officer arrested," *Daily Mirror*, August 24, 2019, https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front_page/Keith-Noyahr-abduction-case-Army-Intelligence-officer-arrested/238-173379 (accessed July 19, 2026); "Sri Lanka arrests soldiers over journalist's abduction during war," *Reuters*, February 18, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-arrests-soldiers-over-journalists-abduction-during-war-idUSKBN15XoLV/ (accessed July 8, 2026).

van they believe was used in the abduction.[133] Retired Maj. Gen. Amal Karunasekara, who had been director of military intelligence at the time of the abduction, and was later chief of staff of the Sri Lankan army, was arrested on April 5, 2018, on charges of aiding and abetting the abduction.[134]

The investigations stalled soon after Gotabaya became president in 2019. In February 2020, he promoted Maj. Bulathwatta to lieutenant colonel.[135]

In May 2025, under the Dissanayake government, the attorney general began the process to indict 12 former soldiers in the case on charges including attempted murder, abduction, assault, and causing injuries.[136] In August 2025, the public security minister informed parliament that investigations into the case had been concluded and the file forwarded to the attorney general's department.[137] However, there have been no arrests or prosecution in the case.

[133] "Van suspect to have been used to abduct Keith Noyahr found", *Daily News*, March 29, 2017, https://archives1.dailynews.lk/2017/03/29/law-order/111883/van-suspect-have-been-used-abduct-keith-noyahr-found?page=2 (accessed July 10, 2026).

[134] Darshana Sanjeeva Balasuriya, "Keith Noyahr abduction: Rtd. Major General Karunasekara arrested," *Daily Mirror*, April 5, 2018, https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Keith-Noyahr-abduction-Rtd-Major-General-Karunasekara-arrested/108-148325 (accessed July 10, 2026).

[135] "Ahimsa files UN Complaint on 12th Anniversary of Lasantha Wickrematunge's Murder," *Colombo Telegraph*, January 8, 2021, https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ahimsa-files-un-complaint-on-12th-anniversary-of-lasantha-wickrematunges-murder/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

[136] Ranjith Padmasiri, "Keith Noyahr abduction and torture: 12 former armed forces personnel to be indicted," *Sunday Times*, May 18, 2025, https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news-online/Keith-Noyahr-abduction-and-torture-12-former-armed-forces-personnel-to-be-indicted/2-1149249 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[137] "Investigations into assassination of Lasantha concluded: File sent to the AG for prosecution," *The Island*, August 24, 2025, https://island.lk/investigations-into-assassination-of-lasantha-concluded-file-sent-to-ag-for-prosecution (accessed July 19, 2026).

IV. Enforced Disappearances

Sri Lanka has suffered from waves of enforced disappearances over several decades, with estimates ranging from 60,000 to 100,000 cases since the 1980s. Tens of thousands of Tamils, as well as suspected left-wing Sinhalese militants, were forcibly disappeared by state security forces and paramilitary groups during the civil war and earlier Marxist uprisings.[138]

Sri Lankan governments have promised to investigate the disappearances, yet most cases remain unresolved. A law establishing the first permanent institution to investigate disappearances and missing persons, the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), was enacted in 2016 and operationalized in 2018.[139]

Victims' families who have long campaigned for justice, repeatedly appearing before various commissions that proved futile, have expressed distrust in the OMP and other domestic mechanisms. "Domestic mechanisms are there to protect perpetrators," one family member of a disappeared person said. "So why should we trust the OMP or any other domestic mechanism?"[140]

The enforced disappearance in 2006 of the former vice-chancellor of Eastern University, Professor Sivasubramanium Raveendranath, is emblematic of the delays in obtaining justice. Raveendranath was forced to resign his post following threats from the paramilitary Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), headed by the former LTTE commander and pro-government paramilitary leader Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, also known as Karuna.[141] While Karuna's former deputy, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan, was arrested by the CID in 2025 in relation to the disappearance,

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[138] Human Rights Watch, *Recurring Nightmare*.

[139] The Office on Missing Persons (Establishment, Administration and Discharge of Functions) Act, No.14 of 2016 was passed in Parliament on August 11, 2016, and operationalized by President Sirisena on February 28, 2018, by appointing seven commissioners based on the recommendations of the Constitutional Council.

[140] Human Rights Watch interview, Jaffna, July 5, 2026.

[141] UTHR(J), "Can the East be won through Human Culling? Special Report No.26," August 3, 2007, https://www.uthr.lk/special-reports/special-report-26 (accessed on July 9, 2026); "Pillyan arrested over 'abduction and disappearance' says Sri Lankan Police," *Tamil Guardian*, April 9, 2025, https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/pillayan-arrested-abduction-and-disappearance-says-sri-lankan-police (accessed on July 10, 2026).

Karuna has never been prosecuted.[142] Karuna is among four men that the UK government sanctioned in March 2025 for involvement in "serious human rights violations and abuses during the civil war."[143]

Enforced Disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda, 2010

On the evening of January 24, 2010, alleged security forces detained and forcibly disappeared political cartoonist and journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda. His wife, Sandya, has spent years seeking justice through long-delayed court proceedings.[144] More than 16 years later, there is no verdict, and his fate remains unknown.

Ekneligoda was first abducted in August 2009 and released the following day. While in captivity, his abductors—suspected members of military intelligence—tied him to a pole during his interrogation and denied him his diabetes and heart medications.

After he was released, he received numerous anonymous calls and faced physical surveillance. A few months later, he disappeared again.[145] At the time, he was working on a book entitled *Pawul Gaha* (The Family Tree), in which he intended to detail allegations of corruption against the Rajapaksa family.

When his wife went to the Homagama police, they initially refused to file a report. Sandya said she faced constant setbacks and that at one point the police even advised her "to seek astrological services" when she inquired about her husband.[146]

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[142] "Pillayan associate arrested over disappearance of Eastern University Vice Chancellor," *Tamil Guardian*, April 23, 2026, https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/associate-pillayan-arrested-over-disappearance-eastern-university-vice-chancellor (accessed July 9, 2026).

[143] UK sanctions for human rights violations and abuses during the Sri Lankan civil war, March 24, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-for-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-during-the-sri-lankan-civil-war (accessed July 10, 2026).

[144] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[145] Committee to Protect Journalists, Prageeth Ekneligoda, January 24, 2020, https://cpj.org/data/people/prageeth-ekneligoda/ (accessed July 16, 2026).

[146] Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, "6000 days after disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda: Fees of private lawyers of accused who attacked journalists allegedly paid from a 'secret fund' under military?- Lanka eNews Editor," *Daily Mirror*, June 30, 2026, https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/6000-days-after-disappearance-of-Prageeth-Ekneligoda-Fees-of-private-lawyers-of-accused-who-attacked-journalists-allegedly-paid-from-a-secret-fund-under-military-Lanka-e-News-Editor/131-344204 (accessed July 19, 2026).

In February 2010, Sandya filed a habeas corpus petition at the Court of Appeal.[147] The authorities repeatedly called for postponements. On November 9, 2011, then-Attorney General Mohan Peiris told the UN Committee against Torture that Ekneligoda had taken refuge in a foreign country.[148] After public uproar, Peiris was summoned to the Homagama Magistrate's Court where he said that only "God knows where Prageeth is," and that he could not remember who gave him the false information regarding Ekneligoda's whereabouts.[149]

Police investigations have found evidence that army personnel were responsible for Ekneligoda's enforced disappearance. In 2015, Army Sgt. Maj. Jayasundara Mudiyanselage Ranbanda confessed that he had interrogated Ekneligoda at Giritale Army Camp following his abduction about the book he was writing.[150] He told police that after three days, a senior army officer took Ekneligoda away and that he never saw Ekneligoda again.

In August 2015, the police arrested four military personnel, including two lieutenant colonels, in connection to the case.[151] In October, 11 more suspects, most of them soldiers or former soldiers, were arrested.[152]

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[147] Human Rights Watch interview, Colombo, July 11, 2026.

[148] Ruki Fernando, "How Chief Justice Mohan Peiris told the UN that 'Disappeared' Prageeth Ekneligoda was living abroad and retracted claim in a Sri Lankan court," January 22, 2013, https://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/?p=15165 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[149] Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, "6000 days after disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda: Fees of private lawyers of accused who attacked journalists allegedly paid from a 'secret fund' under military?- Lanka eNews Editor," *Daily Mirror*, June 30, 2026, https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/6000-days-after-disappearance-of-Prageeth-Ekneligoda-Fees-of-private-lawyers-of-accused-who-attacked-journalists-allegedly-paid-from-a-secret-fund-under-military-Lanka-e-News-Editor/131-344204 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[150] "Ekneligoda case: Nine army officials indicted," *Daily Mirror*, November 27, 2019, https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Prageeth-Ekneligoda-case-Nine-army-officials-indicted/108-178597 (accessed July 19, 2026); Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[151] "Ekneligoda disappearance: 4 army personnel held under detention orders," *Ada Derana*, August 27, 2015, https://adaderana.lk/news/32140 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[152] Shihar Aneez & Ranga Srilal, "Sri Lanka detains soldiers in case of missing cartoonist," *Reuters*, October 23, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/sri-lanka-detains-soldiers-in-case-of-missing-cartoonist-idUSKCNoSHoW1/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

In January 2016, Sandya was threatened in court by a Buddhist monk from Bodu Bala Sena called Gnanasara Thero, who was later convicted for intimidation.[153] She has faced numerous threats and intimidation for activism in pursuit of justice in the case.

In February 2016, Abeysekera, head of the CID, told the Homagama magistrate that the police had received evidence that after being detained at Giritale Army Camp, Ekneligoda was taken to Akkaraipattu, where he was killed.[154] In November 2019, the attorney general indicted nine army officers on charges of abduction and conspiracy to murder.[155]

However, soon after, with Gotabaya as president, the case was taken up by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization.

In June 2022, nine officers were remanded for interfering with witnesses during the ongoing trial. On June 13, 2025, retired Brig. Shammi Kumararatne, the main suspect, was detained over allegations of threatening witnesses on 19 separate occasions.[156]

The trials have seen numerous delays and obstacles including changes in judges, repeated delays in hearings, and changes in witness statements.[157] Investigators from the CID have also faced threats.[158]

Two trials are currently underway. One is a trial relating to Ekneligoda's prior abduction and release in 2009, which is proceeding at the Homagama High Court. In the second

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[153] "Homagama High Court suspends six month sentence of Gnanasara Thero to five years in Sandhya Ekneligoda case," *Sunday Times*, February 8, 2019, https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news-online/homagama-high-court-suspends-six-month-sentence-of-gnanasara-thero-to-five-years-in-sandya-ekneligod/2-1069163 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[154] "Roshan Thushara, CID tells Homagama Magistrate: Evidence shows that Ekneligoda killed in Akkaraipattu," *Daily News*, February 10, 2106, https://archives1.dailynews.lk/2016/02/10/security/cid-tells-homagama-magistrate-evidence-shows-ekneligoda-killed-akkaraipattu (accessed July 19, 2026).

[155] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[156] Zulfick Farzan, "Prageeth Ekneligoda: Nine Military Intelligence personnel who were out on bail, remanded," *Newsfirst*, June 3, 2022, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2022/06/03/prageeth-ekneligoda-nine-military-intelligence-personnel-who-were-out-on-bail-remanded (accessed July 19, 2026).

[157] Ruki Fernando, "Sandya Ekneligoda: 5,000 Days of Struggle for Truth and Justice," *Groundviews*, October 4, 2023, https://groundviews.org/2023/10/04/sandya-ekneligoda-5000-days-of-struggle-for-truth-and-justice/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

[158] "Top detective who investigated high-profile cases flees Sri Lanka," *Al Jazeera*, November 26, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/26/top-detective-who-investigated-high-profile-cases-flees-sri-lanka (accessed July 19, 2026).

case, regular hearings are proceeding in the trial of nine army intelligence officers for his disappearance in 2010.

The CID director overseeing the probe, Shani Abeysekara, was demoted, arrested, and retired by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government.[159] In 2025, the ruling Dissanayake administration reinstated him as CID director.[160] The case has progressed, although slowly, since then. On July 16, 2025, Abeysekara was named as a witness in the case.[161] Sandya told journalists that she continues to face challenges in pursuing justice for her husband's disappearance:

> Last week I went to the Permanent Trial-at-Bar that has been appointed to hear the case regarding Prageeth's disappearance and they were discussing the fourth witness, named Sumathipala Suresh Kumar, alias Murali. When Gotabaya Rajapaksa assumed power as president, two main sources of evidence were destroyed by those linked to the crime. Witnesses changed their statements. This fourth witness once again told courts that he was pressured to change his statement.[162]

In January 2026, the Dissanayake government was forced to halt the promotion of Erantha Peiris, a suspect in the Ekneligoda case, to the rank of colonel, after protests by Sandya and human rights organizations.[163]

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[159] "Top CID investigator Nishantha Silva leaves country," *The Morning*, November 24, 2019, https://www.themorning.lk/articles/59653 (accessed July 12, 2026).

[160] "Sharni Returns: Top sleuth reinstated as CID chief after years in the wilderness," *Asian Mirror*, June 28, 2025, https://asianmirror.lk/news/shani-returns-top-sleuth-reinstated-as-cid-chief-after-years-in-the-wilderness/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

[161] Zulfick Farzan, "Ekneligoda Trial: AG confirms Shani Abeysekara as 109th Witness," *Newsfirst*, July 17, 2025, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2025/07/17/eknaligoda-trial-ag-confirms-shani-abeysekara-as-109th-witness (accessed July 19, 2026).

[162] Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, "6000 days after disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda: Fees of private lawyers of accused who attacked journalists allegedly paid from a 'secret fund' under military?- Lanka eNews Editor," *Daily Mirror*, June 30, 2026, https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/6000-days-after-disappearance-of-Prageeth-Ekneligoda-Fees-of-private-lawyers-of-accused-who-attacked-journalists-allegedly-paid-from-a-secret-fund-under-military-Lanka-e-News-Editor/131-344204 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[163] "President urged to reverse promotion of officer charged in Ekneligoda disappearance," *NewsWire*, January 15, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/01/15/president-urged-to-reverse-promotion-of-officer-charged-in-ekneligoda-disappearance/ (accessed June 19, 2026).

Sandya, who has continued to face threats, hopes that the Dissanayake government will finally ensure justice for what happened to her husband. "I think the trial can proceed and be completed if there are no further delays, and the case is heard on a weekly basis," she said. "My firm belief is that the case must be heard and completed soon because I don't know what will happen if the political context changes."[164]

Abduction and Killing for Ransom: The Navy 11

Between August 2008 and February 2009, 11 men, most of them young men, disappeared in Colombo.[165] Their families received ransom demands, and some made payments up to a million Sri Lankan rupees (then about US$8,700).[166]

Some of those kidnapped had initially managed to contact their family by making calls from mobile phones belonging to sympathetic naval personnel.[167] They said that they were first held at "Pittu Bambuwa" on the Parakrama Navy Base in Colombo, and later at the "Gun Site," underground prison cells at the Trincomalee Naval Command in the northeast. The mother of Rajiv Naganathan, one of those missing, wrote down the names of some of the men her son said were holding him. Naganathan made his last call in May 2009, and all communication between the victims and their families ceased around that time.[168]

The investigation into the case began accidentally in 2009 when the commander of the navy, Adm. Wasantha Karannagoda, ordered that his subordinate, Lt. Cmdr. Sampath Munasinghe, be investigated in an unrelated matter. During a search of Munasinghe's quarters, investigators found national identity cards belonging to four of the victims, as well as SIM cards, live ammunition, and over a million Sri Lankan rupees in cash. This evidence was brought to the police, triggering a CID investigation.[169] However, the police failed to follow up.

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[164] Human Rights Watch interview, Colombo, July 11, 2026.

[165] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[166] Ibid.

[167] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[168] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[169] Bhavani Fonseka, "Elusive Justice & Emblematic Cases in Sri Lanka," Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2023, https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Elusive-Justice-and-Emblematic-Cases-in-Sri-Lanka-Book-Online-Version-1.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

Investigations remained stalled until the Sirisena government replaced the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration. In November 2015, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances visited Gun Site. The Working Group noted that if a proper investigation had been launched in 2009, lives could have been saved. They discovered two underground complexes containing 11 cells, with evidence suggesting the facility operated from at least 2006 to 2012.[170]

After the case was transferred to the CID, a former chief investigating officer told the court that the conditions of detention themselves constituted torture. Survivors said that the detainees were forced to live in their underwear, sleeping on bare cement floors, with only two toilet breaks a day. According to CID evidence submitted in court, the vehicle belonging to John Reid, one of the missing men, in which he had been traveling at the time of his abduction, was used by the navy with a forged license plate, and the mobile phone of another of the victims was used by a navy intelligence officer, Lt. Cmdr. Sedililage Don Sumedha Sampath Dayananda, for several months after its owner went missing.[171]

In 2017, former navy spokesman Cmde. D.K.P. Dassanayake was arrested on charges of aiding and abetting the abductions of the 11 men.[172] The former navy commander, Wasantha Karannagoda, who had sparked the original investigation, was also believed to be implicated and the CID alleged that he had been aware that the victims were tortured and killed at the Trincomalee naval base.[173]

The key suspect, an intelligence officer, Lt. Cmdr. Chandana Prasad Hettiarachchi, known as "Navy Sampath," was missing during this time. The police alleged that the then-navy commander and later chief of defense staff, Adm. Ravindra Wijegunaratne, had helped him escape from Sri Lanka in a naval vessel. On August 13, 2018, the police arrested Hettiarachchi when he returned to Sri Lanka on suspicion of abduction, torture, extortion, and murder. On November 28, 2018, Wijegunaratne surrendered to the Colombo Fort

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[170] Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on its mission to Sri Lanka, 2016, A/HRC/33/51/Add.2, July 1, 2016, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/847934?v=pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[171] Nirmala Kannangara, "Abduction of 11 Tamil youths Twists and turns in the investigations," *Daily Mirror*, August 21, 2018, https://www.dailymirror.lk/recomended-news/Abduction-of-11-Tamil-youths-Twists-and-turns-in-the-investigations/277-154315 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[172] "Former Navy officer arrested over disappearance of youth," *Sunday Times*, July 13, 2017, https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news/former-navy-officer-arrested-over-disappearance-of-youth/18-1027525 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[173] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

Magistrate's Court and was arrested for his alleged role in helping Hettiarachchi evade justice. [174]

Despite police investigations that showed the involvement of several navy officers, the justice process has been slow. In 2019, the attorney general filed indictments against 14 suspects including Admiral Karannagoda.[175] This prompted Karannagoda to file a case in the Supreme Court to prevent his arrest. He was later promoted to admiral of the fleet, the navy's highest rank.[176]

In January 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa promoted Cmde. Dassanayake, the alleged ringleader in the case, to the rank of rear admiral. The same month, the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization ordered the attorney general to halt the forthcoming trial.[177] In 2021, the attorney general withdrew indictments against Karannagoda.[178]

This decision was challenged by the families of the "Navy 11," but it was only in 2025 that the Supreme Court agreed to the appeal.[179] The case is pending before the courts.

Meanwhile, in 2023, the US government ordered sanctions against Karannagoda, citing his involvement in serious human rights violations.[180] In 2025, the UK government also introduced sanctions against Karannagoda.[181]

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[174] Ibid.

[175] "Sri Lankan Supreme Court Justices recuse themselves from Karannagoda 'Navy 11' disappearance case," *Tamil Guardian*, March 31, 2025, https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/twist-navy-11-case-judges-recuse-themselves-ahead-hearing (accessed July 19, 2026).

[176] "History is made: Admiral of the Fleet Wasantha Karannagoda becomes the first five-star Admiral of Sri Lanka," Sri Lanka Navy, September 19, 2019, https://oldnews.navy.lk/eventnews/2019/09/19/201909191535/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

[177] Human Rights Watch, *Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers.*

[178] Lakmal Sooriyagoda, "Indictments against Karannagoda to be Withdrawn- AG," *Daily Mirror*, October 14, 2021, https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front-page/Indictments-against-Karannagoda-to-be-withdrawn-AG/238-222490 (accessed July 10, 2026).

[179] "SC to hear petition against former Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda in Jan.," *Ada Derana*, September 15, 2025, https://adaderana.lk/news/112523 (accessed July 19, 2026).

[180] US Department of State, "Designation of Sri Lankan Governor due to involvement in a gross violation of human rights," April 26, 2023, https://2021-2025.state.gov/designation-of-sri-lankan-governor-due-to-involvement-in-a-gross-violation-of-human-rights/ (accessed July 10, 2026).

[181] "UK sanctions for human rights violations and abuses during the Sri Lankan civil war," March 24, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-for-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-during-the-sri-lankan-civil-war (accessed July 10, 2026).

On June 10, 2026, the Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court ordered that the former navy commander, Adm. Ravindra Wijegunaratne, be named as one of the suspects in the case.[182] A week later, the Trincomalee magistrate visited the Gun Site detention center for an official inspection.[183]

The next hearing of the case is scheduled for December 9, 2026.[184]

Mass Graves

According to official government data, 17 mass grave sites exist in different parts of Sri Lanka.[185] Recent excavations at several sites highlight the extent of enforced disappearances in the country.

In September 2025, President Dissanayake said that his government was committed to investigating these crimes: "I know that when digging the ground, old skeletons surface. A thorough and open inquiry into the Chemmani mass grave is now underway, which has caused a major stir. Our aspiration is to build a state where such mass graves will never be created again."[186]

Chemmani

The Chemmani site is located on the outskirts of Jaffna town in the country's Northern Province. In 1998, a soldier convicted in the rape and murder of a Tamil schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, told a court that hundreds of bodies had been buried at the site

[182] "Ex-Navy Commander named suspect in Colombo abductions probe," *Newswire*, June 10, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/06/10/ex%E2%80%91navy-commander-named-suspect-in-colombo-abductions-probe/ (accessed July 19, 2026).

[183] Zulfick Farzan, "Secret 'Gun Site' Prison at Trinco Navy Camp Sealed," *Newsfirst*, June 17, 2026, https://www.newsfirst.lk/2026/06/17/secret-'gun-site'-prison-at-trinco-navy-camp-sealed (accessed July 19, 2026).

[184] "Ex-Navy Commander granted bail in 2008 abduction case," *Newswire*, July 22, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/07/22/ex%E2%80%91navy-commander-granted-bail-in-2008-abduction-case/ (accessed August 11, 2026)

[185] Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, "Report on the ongoing investigation into the mass grave site in Chemmani, Jaffna," September 2025, https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Fact-Finding-Report-of-HRCSL-on-Chemmani-Mass-Grave-Site.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[186] "President wows transparent probe into Chemmani mass grave," *Newswire*, September 1, 2025, https://www.newswire.lk/2025/09/01/president-vows-transparent-probe-into-chemmani-mass-grave/ (accessed July 10, 2026).

during the military's occupation of the peninsula in the mid-1990s. However, no action followed.

In 2025, construction workers came across skeletal remains. Excavations are currently being conducted under the supervision of the Jaffna magistrate. Despite delays in procuring funding and inclement weather, over 530 skeletal remains had been identified as of August 2026.[187] In addition to the skeletal remains, excavations have unearthed some personal belongings—children's footwear, school bags, a child's doll, a baby milk bottle, and coins—providing some clues to investigators that may assist in identifying victims and the circumstances of how such belongings ended at the site.[188]

However, so far, the authorities have made little effort to determine the identities of the victims and their cause of death. Since thousands of Tamil civilians disappeared during war in the Jaffna area, many families are anxious for answers. A committee appointed by the National Human Rights Commission investigated enforced disappearances in the 1990s and in a report in 2003 named military personnel present in the area during the disappearances.[189] The government has not taken any steps to investigate these findings.

Sections 369-373 of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act No. 15 of 1979 provide the magistrate with powers to investigate deaths, but there are no specific provisions on mass graves. The investigators also lack expertise and capacity in forensics testing.[190] Harshana Nanayakkara, the justice minister, has said that the government is seeking foreign assistance. "When it comes to DNA analysis, depending on the type and nature we will definitely have to go for internationally recognized places," he said.[191]

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[187] "Chemmani mass grave toll rises to 539, two skeletons found without skulls," *Newswire*, August 11, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/08/11/chemmani-mass-grave-toll-rises-to-539-two-skeletons-found-without-skulls/ (accessed August 11, 2026).

[188] "Six bodies discovered in single burial at Chemmani mass grave in Jaffna," *Sri Lanka Brief*, June 9th, 2026, https://srilankabrief.org/six-bodies-discovered-in-single-burial-at-chemmani-mass-grave-in-jaffna/ (accessed August 3, 2026).

[189] Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, "Report of the Committee on Disappearances in the Jaffna Region," October 2023, https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/1.-Report-of-the-Committee-on-Disappearances-in-the-Jaffna-Region-1_compressed-2.pdf (accessed July 10, 2026).

[190] Human Rights Watch interview, Colombo, July 2, 2026.

[191] "Sri Lanka's justice minister, opposition clash over foreign help with Chemmani mass grave," *Economy Next*, June 25, 2026, https://economynext.com/sri-lankas-justice-minister-opposition-clash-over-foreign-help-with-chemmani-mass-grave-276450/ (accessed July 10, 2026).

In March 2024, the College of Forensic Pathologists of Sri Lanka prepared a draft standard operating procedure for mass grave investigations, recommending that criminal investigations should proceed under the jurisdiction of the local magistrate using a multisectoral approach that includes officials from the Ministry of Justice, the police, medical officers, and archaeologists.[192]

Families have continued to agitate to keep attention on the high number of enforced disappearances and the need for truth and justice. One family member said: "Excavations alone will not provide justice."[193] In June and July 2026, families protested outside the Chemmani site demanding an international investigation.[194]

In July, a delegation of ambassadors representing European Union member states based in Sri Lanka visited the site.[195] During this visit, families and civil society protested outside the site, raising concerns with delays and disappointment with the domestic process.

UN Human Rights High Commissioner Volker Türk, who visited Sri Lanka in June 2025, presented his report to the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2025, emphasizing that many Sri Lankans are still in search of their loved ones and that proper investigations are essential.[196]

The Dissanayake government has the opportunity and capacity to provide answers and remedies to the families that have waited so long for justice.

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[192] Human Rights Watch interview, Jaffna, July 5, 2026.

[193] Human Rights Watch interview, Jaffna, July 5, 2026.

[194] Human Rights Watch interview, Jaffna, July 5, 2026.

[195] "EU Delegation faces protest at Chemmani Mass Grave," *Newswire*, July 22, 2026, https://www.newswire.lk/2026/07/22/eu-delegation-faces-protest-at-chemmani-mass-grave/ (accessed on August 3, 2026).

[196] "UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk delivered his report on Sri Lanka to the 60th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva," *UNTV*, September 8, 2025, https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d344/d3445003 (accessed on July 9, 2026).

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“Not Genuine with Justice”

Sri Lanka’s Lack of Will to Prosecute Past Abuses

Efforts towards justice and accountability for grave human rights abuses in Sri Lanka have faltered for decades due to a lack of political will and outright obstruction. The administration of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, which took office in 2024, offers a fresh opportunity for progress but will need to show greater determination. The administration has acted on investigating the mass graves in Chemmani and other emblematic cases including the conspiracy around the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. While the administration’s actions are meaningful first steps, significant barriers to genuine accountability remain.

“Not Genuine with Justice” is based on 32 interviews with victims of abuses, family members of the disappeared, and lawyers and other human rights defenders. The report provides an overview of seven prominent cases of human rights abuse during the civil war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in which the Dissanayake government has made a measure of progress.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Dissanayake government to show greater leadership in prosecuting these and other cases. The report also recommends next steps including structural and legal reforms, and the creation of an independent prosecutor’s office. There needs to be mobilization both within Sri Lanka and by international actors including relevant United Nations institutions and governments concerned with Sri Lanka’s future.

(above) Members of the Sri Lankan media hold placards of journalists at the “Black January” vigil to commemorate journalists who have disappeared, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, January 28, 2020. © 2020 REUTERS/Indunil Usgoda Arachchi

(cover) A police officer stands guard in front of the Chemmani mass grave site in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, July 26, 2025. © 2025 CHAMILA KARUNARATHNE/EPA/ Shutterstock