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The State of the World's Human Rights; Sri Lanka 2025

A new government took office in late 2024, promising transformational change. However, the new administration continued to use the draconian anti-terror law and failed to reform other laws, negatively affecting freedom of expression and rights for Muslims, women and girls, and LGBTI people. Minorities, especially the war-affected Tamil community, continued to be harassed for demanding justice for wartime atrocities, which were yet to be addressed through credible domestic mechanisms. Cyclone Ditwah claimed lives and destroyed homes.

Background

After the newly elected National People's Power (NPP) government took office in late 2024, overdue local government elections were held in May. In June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights undertook an official visit. In October, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reached an agreement on the extended fund facility arrangement, enabling Sri Lanka to access USD 347 million in financing. In October, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution extending the mandate of OHCHR, the UN human rights office's Sri Lanka Accountability Project to collect and preserve evidence for future prosecutions, and calling for ongoing monitoring and reporting.

Economic, social and cultural rights

Despite increased social welfare payments under the "Aswesuma" programme, the IMF reported that poverty levels remained higher than before the economic crisis.

The Malaiyaha Tamil community working in the tea plantations remained one of the most marginalized groups, continuing to suffer from over two centuries of racial discrimination. The community faced limited access to land ownership, inadequate housing and exploitative working conditions. In the garment sector, workers continued to experience rights abuses, including union repression, low wages, gender-based violence and unsafe working conditions.¹

Right to a healthy environment

In late November and early December, cyclone Ditwah hit the country, causing significant damage and loss of life, raising questions about the government's climate-related disaster

preparedness and communications. An estimated 646 people died in the resulting floodings and landslides, and 114,343 homes were destroyed.

Freedom of expression

In the wake of cyclone Ditwah, the president declared a state of emergency in late November and passed broad emergency regulations granting extensive powers to authorities including the armed forces and police. The Deputy Minister of Public Security instructed the police to take action against those spreading false and defamatory statements during the disaster and slandering the president on social media. Police reported that investigations had been launched in relation to 57 social media posts.

The NPP pledged to amend the Online Safety Act of 2024, which was enacted by the previous government, to remove excessive restrictions on freedom of expression. The law granted broad powers to an Online Safety Commission to determine what constitutes “prohibited statements”. In August, the government called for public submissions on proposed amendments.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Despite the NPP’s commitment to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the draconian law remained in use, including for offences not remotely connected to terror-related acts, such as to detain “underworld” figures linked to drug-related crimes. The government disclosed that the PTA had been used to make 49 arrests in the first five months of the year.

In February, the government appointed a committee to draft a replacement bill and in May invited public submissions. In December, the government released a draft bill entitled the Protection of the State from Terrorism Act.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

A group of 116 Rohingya refugees, including 57 children, who arrived in December 2024, remained in detention at a Mullaitivu Air Force Camp run by the Department of Immigration and Emigration. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, was not permitted access to register the refugees.

Freedom of association and peaceful assembly

There were oppressive restrictions on the right to unionize and state interference in union activities.

The requirement for NGOs to register with the governmental NGO secretariat after obtaining security clearance from the Ministry of Defence continued, despite registration already being

mandated under other laws.

In August, the former inspector general of police was arrested on charges related to the failure to prevent attacks against peaceful protesters in May 2022.

In September, police used excessive force against protesters in the town of Mannar who were demonstrating against a wind energy project they feared would negatively affect the environment.

Torture and other ill-treatment

There were at least 13 known cases of custodial deaths during the year. Two officers were suspended over the death of Muthuwadige Sathsara Nimesh in police custody in April. His family alleged he had been subjected to torture while detained at Welikada Police Station, in the capital, Colombo. The Special Investigation Division investigated six cases of torture by police officers and two cases of illegal arrest during the year.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

In February, a new mass grave was discovered near Chemmani in the Jaffna district. By September, 239 skeletons had been exhumed. Concerns were raised about transparency and the need for resources to complete the excavation process. In August, the Kaluwanchikudy Magistrate ruled against the Attorney General's no-action directive and ordered the excavation of the Kurukkalmadam mass grave, located in the Batticaloa district, where people were allegedly massacred and buried by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. The government failed to respond to calls for enhanced forensic capacity and criminal inquiries into mass graves.

In August, ministers approved the development of a national action plan on reconciliation, with support from the UN country office. In September, the government announced it had initiated a process to establish a truth and reconciliation commission.

Several arrests were made in emblematic wartime cases. Former MP Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (known as Pillaiyan) was arrested over the 2006 disappearance of Eastern University vice-chancellor Sivasubramaniam Raveendranath. Two ex-army intelligence officers were arrested for the 2008 abduction of journalist Keith Noyahr. The Navy 11 case, involving the alleged enforced disappearance of 11 youths between 2008–2009, remained stalled in court. In July, ex-navy commander Nishantha Ulugetenne, implicated in the Navy 11 case, was arrested over a separate disappearance during his tenure in the intelligence services.

In April, the president submitted the final report of the commission of inquiry into the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. A police committee was established to investigate but no updates were available by year's end.

War-affected communities struggled with ongoing land disputes with numerous state departments. Via a notification issued in March, authorities sought to acquire 5,941 acres (approximately 2,400 hectares) of land from several districts in the Northern Province. The government withdrew the notice following a Supreme Court interim order preventing the acquisition.

Reports of surveillance and harassment of war victims' families, journalists and Tamil activists continued. Journalist Kumanan Kanapathipillai was summoned by the Counterterrorism Investigation Division, following a complaint by military intelligence about his coverage of protests and commemorations by the war-affected community. In response to UN concerns, the government cited unsubstantiated allegations of terrorism and financial crimes.

Enforced disappearances

In August, the government announced that the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) would open inquiries into 10,531 missing persons cases from before 2000. Recent cases remained unaddressed. In September, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances noted that the OMP had traced only 23 disappeared persons out of the 16,966 cases received. It stated concern about the high level of impunity reflected by the lack of progress in investigating and prosecuting enforced disappearances.

Women's and girls' rights

In February, the CEDAW Committee raised concerns about the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, which permitted child marriage. The Committee welcomed the Women, Peace and Security action plan.

In September, the government appointed members to the first Women's Commission; however, the Commission was not yet operational at year's end.

LGBTI people's rights

No progress was made on decriminalizing consensual same-sex sexual activity, despite the National Human Rights Commission urging action on a Private Members' bill to reform the Penal Code and the government's pledge to revise discriminatory laws.

