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World Report 2024



Sri Lanka

Events of 2023

A street food vendor waits for customers at the Galle Face promenade in Colombo, Sri Lanka, April 9, 2023.

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Regressive government policies and inadequate social protection left many Sri Lankans at risk from the worst effects of the country's economic crisis.

A US\$3 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) helped stem the immediate economic crisis in Sri Lanka after it had defaulted on its foreign debt in 2022. However, the government and IMF's response to the economic situation undermined [human rights](#), leaving more than 17 percent of the population moderately or acutely food insecure and in need of humanitarian assistance and 31 percent of children under 5 malnourished, [according to the World Food Programme](#).

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who came to power in 2022 after his predecessor's departure from office following months-long protests, sought to suppress dissent, ending a [moratorium](#) on the use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). A proposed new [counterterrorism law](#) would give sweeping powers to the police, the military, and the president, and create new speech-related offenses. Other [proposed legislation](#) would further constrain freedom of expression online.

In the north and east of Sri Lanka, which was most affected by the 1983-2009 civil war, victims of past human rights violations, their families, and activists [campaigning for truth and accountability](#) were subjected to [surveillance and intimidation](#) by the police and intelligence agencies.

Economic and Social Rights

Due to the economic crisis, from 2021 to 2022, the country's [poverty rate doubled](#) to 25 percent and was projected to rise further.

In March, an IMF [loan](#) paved the way for multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to offer [new financing](#). The IMF program focused on raising government revenues and emphasized tackling corruption and improving social protection; however, as structured, it shifted the burden of recovery principally onto people with low incomes, [undermining people's economic and social rights](#).

For instance, as part of the IMF agreement, the government raised electricity tariffs, doubled value-added taxes, and phased out fuel subsidies, contributing to a spike in prices. The reform [program](#) included a "social spending floor" requiring that 0.6 percent of GDP be spent on social protection programs, less than developing countries' average of 1.6 percent.

The government's plan of targeted social protection benefits [led to the exclusion](#) of many who do not have an adequate standard of living. Amid widespread protests, the government agreed to review almost one million applications for Aswesuma, the new social protection program. Social protection programs such as Aswesuma that [target people based on economic status](#) have been criticized for being prone to errors, arbitrary cut offs, corruption, and social mistrust.

In June, in an attempt to reduce its domestic debts, the government [announced](#) a policy that would [reduce the value](#) of state-run pension funds in which ordinary people [hold their savings](#).

Accountability and Justice

In June, President Ranil Wickremesinghe [announced](#) plans to establish a new truth and reconciliation commission, called the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), to examine rights violations 14 years since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 and over three decades after the suppression of a leftist uprising in the south in 1989.

Victims' groups and civil society organizations said they had not been properly consulted and that the new commission would put them at risk of re-traumatization and further threats from security forces.

The government's [ongoing abuses](#) against victims of past violations, their families, and communities undermined the purported goals of the proposed commission. Those campaigning for truth and accountability for crimes committed during the war with the LTTE, particularly the relatives of victims of enforced disappearance, were subjected to surveillance and intimidation by the police and intelligence agencies. Events to commemorate Tamil victims of the war were disrupted.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have appointed similar commissions that collected extensive testimony from victims and witnesses, but none led to accountability or revealed the fate of the disappeared. Instead, the authorities [blocked](#) the few criminal investigations into grave abuses that had made some progress in identifying those responsible and initiating prosecutions.

Numerous [mass graves](#), usually discovered accidentally, have not been properly examined to identify the victims or the perpetrators.

The government [Office on Missing Persons](#), set up in 2017 to trace the disappeared, made almost no progress. An April UN Human Rights Committee report [criticized](#) the agency's appointment of "individuals implicated in past human rights violations" and its "interference in the prosecution of such cases." Some government officials implicated in alleged crimes remained [politically powerful](#) or [hold senior official positions](#).

Government agencies unlawfully [occupied property](#) and religious sites of minority Tamil and Muslim communities. In September, a judge from Mullaitivu district [resigned](#) and fled the country after [receiving death threats](#) following a ruling he handed down against the Department of Archaeology, which had constructed a Buddhist monument on the site of a Hindu temple.

A [resolution](#) adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2021 to form the [Sri Lanka Accountability Project](#) to gather evidence of international crimes for use in future prosecutions is due for renewal in 2024. President Wickremesinghe's office said it [hopes](#) the proposed truth commission will convince governments that there is no need for further scrutiny by the council.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said when publishing a September [report](#) on Sri Lanka that for any transitional justice process to succeed, "[t]ruth-seeking alone will not suffice. It must also be accompanied by a clear commitment to accountability and the political will to implement far-reaching change."

Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

The authorities clamped down on free speech, including, for example, by holding a [comedian](#) in custody for five weeks over comments alleged to be hurtful to religious sentiments.

In September, the government published an [Online Safety Bill](#) to prevent the publication of false, threatening, alarming, or distressing statements on the internet, but activists said that it would further restrict speech. If passed into law, the bill would establish an Online Safety Commission, appointed by the president, that could decide whether statements are false or prohibited, order their removal, and participate in police investigations and prosecutions.

A [report](#) on Sri Lanka by the [UN Human Rights Committee](#) described "severe restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression," including the excessive use of force by police in dispersing peaceful assemblies, the application of counterterrorism legislation against protesters, and the blocking of public access to social media platforms during mass demonstrations against government policies. Restrictions on expression and assembly were [particularly severe](#) in the north and east.

The authorities continued to [target civil society groups](#) and activists, including human rights defenders. In his report, Türk called for "the immediate end of all forms of surveillance and harassment."

Counterterrorism Laws

The government had pledged to adopt a rights-respecting counterterrorism law following domestic and international criticism of abuses under the existing PTA. In particular, pressure from the European Union, which grants Sri Lanka tariff-free market access in exchange for meeting its human rights obligations under a program called GSP+, led to the government renewing pledges to act on a commitment to repeal the PTA that it first made to the EU in 2017.

However, the proposed replacement legislation, called the Anti-Terrorism Bill, threatens citizens' freedom of assembly and speech and also falls far short of Sri Lanka's international obligations.

The government had [first proposed](#) the new law in March but withdrew it for “consultations” following widespread objections that the bill preserved many of the most abused powers of the PTA while also creating abusive new powers. The bill, resubmitted in September, contained minimal changes. Although the Anti-Terrorism Bill has some improvements, it contains vague and overbroad language to include peaceful protest or acts that, while criminal, do not reach any reasonable definition of terrorism. The bill appeared to be designed to give the president, police, and military broad powers to detain people without evidence, make vaguely defined forms of speech a criminal offense, and arbitrarily ban gatherings and organizations without meaningful judicial oversight. In October, following criticism, the [bill was withdrawn from parliament](#), apparently to make further changes.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

The impact of the economic crisis was often [most severely felt by women](#), who were in low-paid or insecure employment and faced increasing burdens within the home.

The [Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act](#) (MMDA), which governs marriage in the Muslim community, contains numerous provisions that [violate the rights of women and girls](#), including by allowing child marriage without setting any minimum age. The act stipulates that only men can be judges of the Qazi (family) court, makes it easier for men than for women to obtain a divorce, and does not require a woman or girl’s consent to be recorded before the registration of her marriage. Furthermore, the [penal code](#) permits what would otherwise constitute statutory rape in cases of child marriage that are permitted under the MMDA.

Sri Lanka has among the most [restrictive abortion laws](#) in the world, imposing long prison sentences for all abortions with exceptions only for saving a woman’s life.

The UN Human Rights Committee [expressed continuing concern](#) at the prevalence of violence, including sexual violence, against women, and regretted the [low representation of women](#) in politics.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The [penal code](#) prohibits “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” and “any act of gross indecency.” These provisions are widely understood to criminalize [consensual same-sex activity](#). Another provision, which prohibits “cheating by personation,” is used by police to [target transgender people](#), and the 1841 [Vagrants Ordinance](#) contains overbroad and vague provisions that are used to target transgender women and women suspected to be sex workers.

A private member’s bill was presented in parliament to decriminalize same-sex relations but had not been brought to a vote by the time of writing.

Key International Actors

The rivalry between China and other powers to assert strategic influence in the region partly forms the context for Sri Lanka’s international relations. Key actors include India, the United States, and Japan, which along with Australia are members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as the Quad, aimed at countering China. Economic assistance provided to Sri Lanka has partly been viewed by states through the lens of this rivalry.

The EU has continued to push for human rights improvements in Sri Lanka, leveraging its GSP+ program, which grants the country tariff-free access to the EU market conditioned on Sri Lanka’s implementation of core human rights conventions.

The [Canadian](#) government took a major step by [imposing sanctions](#) against two former Sri Lankan presidents, the brothers Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and two former soldiers, all of whom it said are implicated in “gross and systematic violations of human rights.” While the US has [sanctioned some Sri Lankan military figures](#), other governments have not done so.

The government’s rhetoric on human rights—directed at international audiences—was not matched by actions to end violations. The government did not publish details of its proposed truth commission. However, officials sought the support of foreign governments, including South Africa, Switzerland, and Japan, as well as UN agencies.

The 2021 UN Human Rights Council [resolution on Sri Lanka](#), which will need to be renewed in September 2024, is led by a core group consisting of Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Malawi, Montenegro, the United Kingdom, and the US.