

# Human Rights Situation in Sri Lanka

## May 2025



A photograph of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, taken by Lahiru Harshana, a photojournalist of Lankadeepa newspaper, was subjected to censorship.

# INFORM

Human Rights Documentation Centre

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*INFORM was established in 1990 to monitor and document the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the ethnic conflict and war, and to report on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national, and international levels. INFORM also focused on working with other communities whose rights were frequently and systematically violated. Currently, INFORM focuses on election monitoring, freedom of expression, and human rights defenders. INFORM is based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and works closely with local activists, groups, and networks as well as regional (Asian) and international human rights networks.*

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# 1. Executive Summary

**Legal Reforms and Amendments:** An individual went to the Embilipitiya Magistrate's court to post bail but was jailed for contempt after his phone rang. He died two days later.

Minister Ananda Wijepala announced that amendments to the Online Safety Act will be presented in Parliament within a month. The draft has been finalized by a committee and is now with the Ministry of Mass Media.

Sri Lanka's Parliament approved amendments for digital judicial reforms, enabling remote appearances for suspects and witnesses in legal proceedings to enhance safety and efficiency.

HRCSL asked the Ministry of Justice to repeal Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, which criminalize same-sex relations. They referenced laws supporting non-discrimination based on sexual orientation. HRCSL also condemned discrimination against the LGBTIQ community and urged Parliament to pass a bill to meet international human rights standards.

The HRCSL plans to amend its founding Act to fix implementation issues and reduce backlogs, with over 8,000 investigations open.

**Freedom of the Press:** A photo of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake at a May Day rally was removed from official sites after authorities requested it. The image sparked debate about political symbolism and raised concerns about censorship under the current administration.

The Government Information Department requires only government-accredited journalists to attend post-Cabinet media briefings, facing opposition from the PWJA and SLWJA for restricting media freedom.

**Workers' Rights:** May Day 2025 featured strong demonstrations supporting workers' rights and calling for justice in the North. In Mannar, local groups hosted community events and a mass protest addressed issues like environmental destruction and land grabs. Farmers, fisherfolk, and laborers united to oppose exploitative development projects. A May Day rally in Jaffna led by Joseph Stalin focused on teacher salaries and various social justice demands.

The NEXT apparel factory in Katunayake FTZ closed suddenly, affecting 1,416 workers. Reasons included financial losses and rising costs, but the closure violated labor laws regarding notice. Management offered severance pay, but unions rejected it, raising concerns about employee coercion. Negotiations are ongoing to address the issues.

**Prevention of Terrorism Act:** Sri Lanka pledged to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act during a meeting with the EU, intending to create new counter-terrorism laws that meet international standards.

Despite government promises, no changes have happened concerning the Anti-Terrorism Bill. A committee was formed in February 2025, and public feedback began on 16 May 2025. Skepticism remains, with many opposing new laws, preferring existing ones.

Germany planned to address the PTA, reconciliation, and accountability during President Dissanayake's visit. Justice Minister Nanayakkara acknowledges public opposition to the PTA.

**Land Encroachment:** The government claimed over 1,700 acres of land in Tamil-majority areas, requiring landowners to submit claims by June 28, 2025, after which the land would become state property. This move faced strong backlash from Tamil leaders and displaced communities, many lacking ownership documents. ITAK leaders threatened civil disobedience if the Gazette was not revoked by May 28.

Tamil landowners protested against illegal Buddhist temple constructions on seized lands, despite government reassurances about land release and improvements. Thousands of acres remain under military control, affecting resettlement. Tamil residents submitted petitions for immediate land release in areas like Myliddy and Palali, noting the loss of fishing and agricultural land.

Parliamentary debates reveal ongoing land seizures in Trincomalee district, affecting Tamil farmers' farmland and livelihoods. ITAK MP Shanmugam Kugathan claims overlapping claims have inflated land appropriation, causing rice production losses and food security risks. Bureaucratic inertia worsens displacement and economic hardship.

**Custodial Deaths:** A 28-year-old drug addict, died in police custody in Kosgoda on May 2, 2025. His family claims he was severely assaulted while in custody, leading to his death. The Kosgoda Police have been directed to hand the case over to the Criminal Investigation Department for further investigation.

The HRCSL issued General Guidelines and Recommendations No. 1 of 2025 to the Sri Lanka Police, defining custodial deaths as those resulting from police action or inaction during arrest, detention, or transit. HRCSL Chairperson Justice L.T.B. Dehideniya reiterated that the police are legally responsible for the safety and lives of those in their custody and emphasized the constitutional right to life.

The Commission calls for an independent mechanism to investigate custodial deaths due to conflicts of interest. HRCSL recommends an independent committee, as over 8,000 cases remain unresolved and officers are overwhelmed with case files.

**Right to Memorialize and Commemorate:** Tamils in Sri Lanka and the diaspora commemorated Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day, marking sixteen years since 2009 atrocities. Despite government assurances, suppression, surveillance, and intimidation occurred.

The HRCSL has criticized the Acting Inspector General of Police for misuse of legal provisions to hinder peaceful commemorations, citing the misapplication of ICCPR Act and temporary court orders to block events, despite the government's public announcement in November 2024 not to interfere with peaceful commemoration.

In Colombo, civil society activists held a peaceful vigil for the third consecutive Mullivaikkal commemoration. However, the event was disrupted by Sinhala Ravaya, an ultranationalist group accused of supporting the LTTE and aligning with Palestine. Despite the police de-escalating the confrontation, the atmosphere remained tense. The disconnect between governmental promises and actions highlights the ongoing challenges faced by Tamils in exercising their rights.

Sri Lanka's government has strongly opposed the Tamil Genocide Monument in Canada, calling the allegations 'unfounded' and 'misleading'. Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath protested the monument's approval, arguing that credible claims of genocide during Sri Lanka's civil conflict are not supported. The unveiling occurred after Canadian MP Gary Anandasangaree was appointed Minister of Public Safety.

**Police Brutality and Intimidation:** Tensions are high in Kurunthumalai, Mullaitivu, where Tamil farmers were arrested for cultivating land occupied by an allegedly illegal Buddhist temple.

Police misconduct issues have emerged nationwide. A Gokarella constable was suspended for assaulting a civilian. In Ampara, an officer was arrested for drunk driving, and another officer was suspended for sharing a video of the incident.

The Bar Association of Sri Lanka condemned law enforcement's attempts to access lawyers' confidential information without court orders, stating it threatens justice and independence.

**Families of the Disappeared:** The President of the Association of Families of the Forcibly Disappeared criticized the government for neglecting Tamil families' justice demands and pushing the issue into bureaucracy. Families reject the OMP and seek international judicial mechanisms.

The Association for Relatives of the Enforced Disappearances (ARED) marked 3,000 days of protest in Vavuniya, demanding truth and justice for Tamil civilians forcibly disappeared during the 2009 war, especially those last seen in military custody.

Tamil families in Ampara District protest for transparency on disappeared relatives' fate, demanding comprehensive lists, international inquiries, and justice despite intimidation and political neglect.

## 2. Legal Reforms and Amendments

Jayasekara Arachchige Asanka Indunil, who appeared at the Embilipitiya Magistrate's Court to submit bail for another individual, was sentenced to prison for contempt of court after his phone rang inside the courtroom. Forty-eight hours following his imprisonment, Indunil was pronounced dead, with investigations still ongoing. He died in prison, and his family has accused officials of assault, citing a post-mortem report indicating internal bleeding due to trauma caused by blunt force—specifically, a blow to the head with a blunt weapon resulting in brain injury, and damage to the ribs from a blow to the left side of the chest.(The Island, 2025).

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara acknowledged this incident and confirmed ongoing discussions with the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) to review [the Contempt of Court, Tribunal, or Institution Act No.8 of 2024](#). A committee reportedly led by former BASL President Saliya Pieris, PC, was appointed for this review, although direct confirmation was unavailable. The BASL expressed concerns over excessive use of contempt powers and called for systemic reforms to ensure consistency with constitutional rights, fairness, and proportionality. Pieris criticized the strict enforcement, noting that previous accidental phone rings were not treated as contempt and cautioning that overreaction risks damaging the Judiciary's respect. Attorney-at-Law Jayantha Dehiaththage highlighted the need for uniform courtroom practices, stressing that inadvertent phone ringing should not be harshly punished. Attorney-at-Law Sanjaya Wilson Jayasekera also criticized it as undemocratic and susceptible to arbitrary judicial discretion, potentially suppressing dissent (Dewasiri, 2025).

In related developments, Minister of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs Ananda Wijepala announced that amendments to the Online Safety Act (OSA) would be tabled in Parliament within a month. A committee from the Ministries of Public Security, Mass Media, and Justice finalized the draft amendments, which the Ministry of Justice submitted to the Ministry of Mass Media. Minister Nanayakkara noted the matter was now with the Ministry of Mass Media, with Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa as the contact point (Shaheid, 2025).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Public Security issued instructions to police to establish 14,022 Public Safety Committees across all Grama Niladhari divisions by 20 June. These committees, comprising police officers, retired public servants, former security personnel, and youth representatives, aim to strengthen community-police relations and enhance public safety against crime and drug threats (The Morning, 2025).

Sri Lanka's Parliament also advanced digital judicial reforms by approving amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure, allowing suspects and witnesses to appear remotely via real-time audiovisual links for remand extensions, bail hearings, and inquiries. This modernization, supported by the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) and the Ministry of Justice, aims to protect witnesses and reduce risks associated with transporting suspects, such as those highlighted by the murder of Ganemulla Sanjeewa during a court appearance (The Morning, 2025).

The Sectoral Oversight Committee on Governance, Justice and Civil Protection further approved the Code of Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Bill, praising audiovisual technology's potential to lower security risks and costs. The committee also reviewed reports

from various institutions, including the *Sri Lanka Judges' Institute* and the *National Dangerous Drugs Control Board*, noting efforts to compensate victims while raising questions about parliamentary eligibility for damages. A detailed report on compensated individuals was requested for further analysis (Daily News, 2025).

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) urged the Ministry of Justice to repeal Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, which criminalize sexual activity between consenting adults of the same sex. The HRCSL referred to prior communications with Minister Nanayakkara and pointed to the Women Empowerment Act No.37 of 2024, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act No.10 of 2023 also recognizes sexual orientation as a vulnerability factor. The Supreme Court ruled that decriminalization aligns with constitutional dignity and rights but clarified it does not legalize same-sex marriage. The HRCSL condemned ongoing discrimination and misinformation against the LGBTIQ community and urged Parliament to adopt the relevant Private Member's Bill to align Sri Lanka with international human rights commitments under treaties such as the ICCPR (HRCSL Official Communications, 2023–2025; The Morning, 2025).

Additionally, the HRCSL plans to amend its founding Act No.21 of 1996 to address implementation failures and reduce case backlogs. Commissioner Nimal Punchihewa highlighted erosion of public trust due to ignored recommendations and noted the commission's adoption of a Standard Operating Procedure to improve efficiency. As of March 2024, over 8,000 investigations remained open while more than 8,000 cases had been completed in the previous year (Waravita, 2024).

### 3. Freedom of the Press



A photograph of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, taken by Lahiru Harshana, a photojournalist of Lankadeepa newspaper during the government's May Day rally in Colombo, was abruptly removed from Harshana's social media profiles and official platforms following requests by authorities, without an official explanation. The image, showing Dissanayake mid-speech with a sickle and hammer backdrop, sparked debate over its political symbolism, especially given Dissanayake's leadership of the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Harshana noted on social media that photographic interpretation is subjective, but was soon ordered to take down the image from all channels. Despite this, it circulated widely online, illustrating ongoing concerns over censorship under the current National People's Power (NPP) administration, which had previously campaigned on transparency and press freedom (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

A photograph of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, taken by a photojournalist of Lankadeepa newspaper, was subjected to censorship.

Sri Lanka ranks 139th out of 180 countries in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, signaling 'difficult' conditions of journalism, though it has improved from 150th the previous year. The Index highlights that economic pressure, alongside physical attacks on journalists, remains a critical challenge globally (Newswire, 2025).

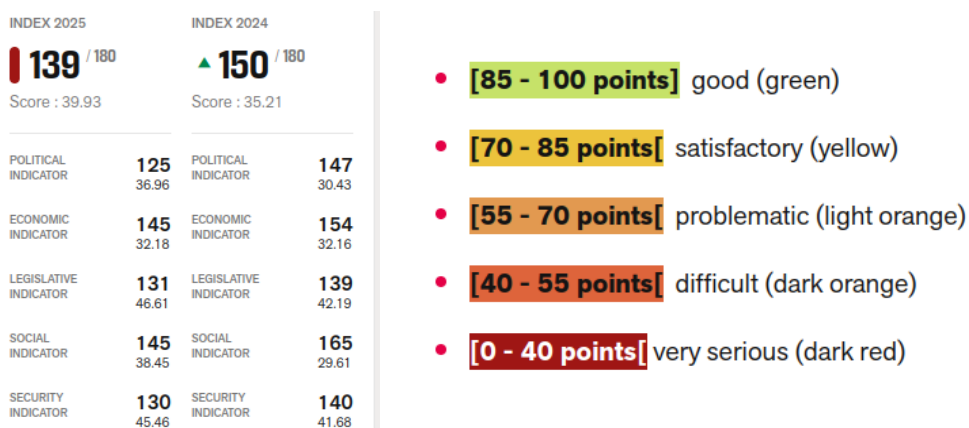


Image: 2025 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index

Despite some progress in 2025, compared to 2024, the overall press freedom score remained “very serious” for Sri Lanka.

Adding to these challenges, the Government Information Department recently mandated that only journalists with government-issued media accreditation can attend post-Cabinet media briefings. This directive has been strongly opposed by the *Professional Web Journalists Association* (PWJA) and the *Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association* (SLWJA), which view it as an infringement on media freedom and the public’s right to information (Chamara, 2025; Daily News, 2025). In one incident, Lanka Sky News Editor Shantha Wijesooriya was denied access to a Cabinet briefing due to lacking the government-issued card, despite holding credentials from recognized journalist bodies (Chamara, 2025).

The Media Ministry defended the policy as necessary to expedite Defence Ministry clearance for web-based media, requiring journalists to provide extensive personal and family details, including information about relatives suspected of anti-State activities—an approach criticized by journalist associations for being intrusive and undermining professional dignity (Waravita, 2025). PWJA convenor Freddy Gamage argued that such measures represent unnecessary state control and erode journalistic independence.

Public protests have followed, with Shantha Wijesooriya and other media figures condemning the government for focusing on identity cards instead of addressing violence against journalists or media repression. Political leaders and former editors also voiced concerns that such censorship efforts threaten democratic freedoms and repeat historical patterns of media control (Gamage, 2025).

In response, Health and Mass Media Minister Nalinda Jayatissa has called for broad participation in drafting a national media policy intended to professionalize the sector and ensure transparency. While affirming that restrictions on press briefings are for quality control rather than censorship, he acknowledged difficulties in defining who qualifies as a genuine journalist and promised welfare schemes and streamlined media accreditation (Algewatta, 2025). However, media associations warn that government-controlled accreditation risks curtailing freedom of expression and advocate for independent bodies to oversee journalist certification (Waravita, 2025).

## 4. Workers' Rights



More than 1,400 employees of the NEXT garment factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone were abruptly left jobless after the company announced its immediate closure through WhatsApp. Photo Courtesy: [Sri Lanka Mirror](#)

May Day 2025 was marked by powerful demonstrations honouring workers' struggles and demanding justice, equality, and an end to systemic repression in the North. In Mannar, the day began with a vibrant community celebration organised by the *Vankalai Fishermen's Association*, *Fishermen's Cooperative*, and the *Vankalai Sports Club*. Nearby Pesalai held a sea blessing at St. Joseph's Chapel. In the afternoon, the *People's Planning Union* led a mass protest in Mannar under the banner "Let Us Build the Power of Agriculture," drawing demonstrators to march from the local sports ground to Mannar Bazaar. Protestors voiced outrage against environmental destruction, land grabs, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), disappearances, Indian trawler incursions, and exploitative wind power projects. Farmers, fisherfolk, and labourers united to oppose development projects that exploit local resources. The rally culminated with speeches from leaders, including Nadaraja Devakrishnan (Northern Province *People's Planning Union*), Sudesh Kamake (*Valvai Farmers' Rights Protection Organisation*), N.M. Aalam (Mannar District *Fishermen's Associations*), K. Rusikk (Eastern Province *People's Planning Union*), Vimukthi Silva (*La Via Campesina*), and Sudhara Vanni Lathuge (*Indigenous People's Forum*), calling for solidarity across oppressed communities from Vanni farmers to Hill Country labourers (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

In Jaffna, a May Day rally was led by Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Ceylon Teachers' Union, featuring trade unions, student groups, and civil society organisations. The rally demanded solutions to teacher salary anomalies, justice for the forcibly disappeared, demilitarisation of Tamil lands, release of political prisoners, Tamil self-determination, and repeal of the PTA. Organisations such as the *University of Jaffna Employees' Union*,

*Association for the Welfare of Former Fighters, Valikamam Land Rights Organisation, Association for the Disappeared, and Vadamarachchi Media Centre* participated (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, the sudden closure of the NEXT apparel manufacturing factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) drew strong criticism. The factory, a long-standing UK-owned export garment producer operating since 1978, abruptly shut down operations in May, leaving around 1,416 workers redundant out of approximately 2,800 employees (Bandara, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025; Kapila, 2025; Siriwardana and Perera, 2025). Management cited sustained financial losses nearing USD 10 million since the COVID-19 pandemic and unsustainable rising operational costs as key reasons (Daily News, 2025; Doloswala, 2025; The Morning, 2025). However, the closure was carried out without prior notice to the Labour Ministry, Board of Investment (BOI), trade unions, and employees, violating labour laws requiring advance notification (Bandara, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025; Siriwardana and Perera, 2025). The Deputy Minister and union representatives condemned the lack of transparency and called for the factory's reopening. NEXT management expressed willingness to offer severance packages exceeding statutory requirements, including gratuity, holiday pay, production bonuses, and assistance finding alternative employment at affiliated factories (Daily Mirror, 2025; Daily News, 2025; Fernando, 2025; The Morning, 2025). Trade unions, however, rejected the closure, citing breaches of collective agreements and alleged coercion to force employees into resignations for reduced compensation (Cgamara, 2025; Tennekoon, 2025). Ongoing negotiations between the Ministry of Labour, factory management, trade unions, and BOI aim to resolve the issue, with government officials pledging inquiries and parliamentary briefings (Daily Mirror, 2025; Daily News, 2025; The Morning, 2025).

## 5. Prevention of Terrorism Act



The Bar Association of Jaffna

### RESOLUTION

adopted by the membership at a Special General Meeting held on 20 May 2025

*Recognising* that the Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 48 of 1979 has ripped apart the lives of many individuals and families all over the island, in particular disproportionately affecting the Tamil community and other numerically smaller communities in Sri Lanka over the last four decades

*Recognising* that the Prevention of Terrorism Act has been used by successive Governments to suppress dissent emanating from individuals and organisations including from the majority Sinhala-speaking community

*Mindful* of the fact that the Prevention of Terrorism Act is in violation of fundamental principles that govern the right to free trial

*Recognising* that the Prevention of Terrorism Act in its entirety is in violation of International Human Rights Law including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

*Recognising* that the Prevention of Terrorism Act in its entirety is in violation of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed in the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

*Being convinced* that the Criminal procedure Code and other penal provisions contained in various legislations provide adequately for the maintenance of law and order and for any unusual and abnormal situations of law and order

#### Resolves:

1. that the Government present a bill to the Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, forthwith repealing the Prevention of Terrorism Act No.
2. that the Government of Sri Lanka present no legislation to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act

On this day the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2025

Jaffna Bar Association adopted a resolution calling for unconditional repeal of PTA with no replacement, May 27, 2025. [Tamil Guardian](#).

Sri Lanka reaffirmed its commitment to repeal the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) during the 8th meeting of the EU–Sri Lanka Working Group on Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights held in Colombo on 5 May 2025. The Sri Lankan delegation confirmed plans to replace the PTA with new counter-terrorism legislation aligned with international human rights standards (Tamil Guardian, 2025; The Island, 2025). The PTA has long faced condemnation from civil society, human rights organizations, and international bodies such as the EU and United Nations for facilitating arbitrary detention, torture, and disproportionately targeting Tamil and Muslim minorities. The European Union has emphasized that substantive legal reforms are necessary for Sri Lanka to maintain benefits under the GSP+ trade preferences, which contribute over \$500 million annually to the country's economy (Tamil Guardian, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Despite repeated government promises, including from the current National People's Power-led administration, no concrete legislative changes have yet occurred. A committee led by Rienzie Arsecularatne, PC, was appointed in February 2025 to draft a new Anti-Terrorism Bill. The Ministry of Justice and National Integration initiated a 14-day public consultation beginning 16 May 2025 to gather feedback on the proposed legislation (Daily News, 2025; Dewasiri, 2025). However, these reform efforts have been met with skepticism. The Bar Association of Jaffna has rejected the notion of any new counter-terror law, arguing that existing criminal laws suffice and cautioning against rebranding the PTA's repressive framework under a new name (Tamil Guardian, 2025). Additionally, over 240 civil society groups—including victims, academics, religious leaders, and lawyers—have jointly appealed for the immediate repeal of the PTA and opposed any replacement legislation, criticizing the short consultation period and lack of transparency (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, former Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Pillayan) filed a Fundamental Rights petition before the Supreme Court, alleging unlawful detention under the PTA related to a 2006 enforced disappearance case, with a hearing scheduled for 17 June 2025 (Farzan, 2025; The Morning, 2025).

As international pressure mounted, Germany was expected to raise concerns regarding the PTA, reconciliation, and accountability during President Anura Kumara Disanayake's visit on 11 June 2025 (Bandara, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025). Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara has acknowledged public opposition to the PTA and assured that the new legislation will comply with Sri Lanka's human rights obligations, while the PTA remains in force until the replacement law is enacted (Daily News, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025).

## 6. Land Encroachment

The Sri Lankan government's March 28, 2025, Gazette notification (No. 2430), issued under Section 4 of the Land Settlement Ordinance, announced the mass appropriation of over 1,700 acres of land across Tamil-majority areas in the Northern Province—including Mullivaikkal, Pudumatalan, Ambalavan Pokkanai, Valayanmadam, and Irattaivaikkal—sites deeply scarred by the atrocities that took place in the context of the final phase of the war in 2009 (Tamil Guardian, 2025). This notification required landowners to submit claims by June 28, 2025, after which the lands would be declared state property under Section 5(1). The lands included paddy fields, coconut plantations, water bodies, sand dunes, and forests. The move triggered widespread condemnation from Tamil political leaders, civil society, and displaced communities, many of whom lack ownership documents after fleeing the conflict (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025). Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) leaders warned of civil disobedience campaigns if the government did not revoke the Gazette by May 28, citing the impossibility for many refugees living abroad to meet the deadline (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Tamil landowners also protested illegal Buddhist temple constructions, like the Tissa Rajamaha Vihara in Jaffna, built on seized Tamil lands as part of the continued Sinhalisation efforts (Tamil Guardian, 2025). Despite government officials' assurances—including from MPs. Sri Bavanandarajah and Northern Province Governor N. Vethanayahan—that military-occupied lands in Jaffna were gradually being released and infrastructure improved, but thousands of acres remain under military or state control, hindering resettlement and livelihoods (Daily News, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025). Tamil residents from Valikamam North submitted formal petitions demanding the immediate release of lands still held by the military in areas such as Myliddy, Palali, and Thaiyiddy, highlighting the loss of critical fishing and agricultural land (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya emphasized that the government had no intention of acquiring Tamil lands and pledged legal, verified processes to restore land rights, addressing public mistrust born from past government mismanagement and fraud (Daily News, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025). At the same time, concerns grew over the government's plans to declare 10,000 acres in Vavuniya North as forest land under environmental pretexts ahead of World Environment Day, amplifying further dispossession of Tamil residents and raising demands for transparent land identification and release before gazette notifications (Tamilwin, 2025). Following intense Tamil political opposition and civil society backlash—including parliamentary condemnations that questioned demands for ownership documents from war survivors—the government officially revoked the controversial Gazette on May 27, 2025 (Siriwardana, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, parliamentary debates highlighted ongoing land seizures by Forest and Wildlife Departments in the Trincomalee district, where farmland traditionally cultivated by Tamil farmers have been appropriated under conservation claims, devastating agricultural production and cattle grazing, and undermining rural livelihoods (Tamil Guardian, 2025). ITAK MP Shanmugam Kugathanan alleged that overlapping claims by state agencies have inflated land appropriation, with over 236,000 acres locked away, causing massive rice production losses and food security risks (Tamil Guardian, 2025). Despite past presidential directives to return lands, bureaucratic inertia persists, exacerbating displacement and economic hardship for Tamil communities (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

## 7. Custodial Deaths

In the last five years (from 2020 to 2025), the HRCSL recorded 49 custodial deaths and 30 encounter deaths. This number does not include the lives lost in prison. For the first quarter of 2025, the HRCSL received 28 complaints regarding torture. Last year, the independent body recorded 737 complaints about torture – an increase from the 546 complaints about torture in 2023.

The Morning, 25th May 2025

Recent custodial deaths have sparked widespread concern and renewed calls for police reform and accountability. 28-year-old Tharindu Siriwardene De Soysa died on May 2, 2025 while in police custody in Kosgoda. De Soysa, who was reportedly addicted to drugs, was arrested on May 1 on suspicion of possessing 6.21 grams of crystal methamphetamine (which is popularly known as 'Ice') (Ada Derana, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025; Newsfirst, 2025). While the police claim that he suddenly fell ill and died upon admission to the Balapitiya Base Hospital, his family alleges that he was severely assaulted while in custody, leading to his death. His father, Nimal Siriwardene De Soysa, has publicly accused the Kosgoda Police of fatally beating his son (Daily Mirror, 2025). Acting IGP Priyantha Weerasooriya has since directed that the case be handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for further investigation (Ada Derana, 2025; Hiru News, 2025; Newsfirst, 2025).

Amid these developments, the HRCSL issued *General Guidelines and Recommendations No. 1 of 2025 to the Sri Lanka Police on Preventing Custodial and Encounter Deaths*. These were formally sent to the Acting IGP on May 14 and disseminated across police divisions by May 17 (HRCSL, 2025). The guidelines define custodial deaths as those resulting directly or indirectly from police action or inaction during arrest, detention, or transit. Encounter deaths are described as extrajudicial killings outside legal frameworks (HRCSL, 2025; Waravita, 2025).

The HRCSL reports that from 2020 to 2025, 79 people have died while in police custody—49 from custodial deaths and 30 from encounter deaths. Furthermore, the Commission received 737 complaints of torture and 1,225 complaints of arbitrary arrest in 2024, with 28 and 280 such complaints already filed in the first quarter of 2025, respectively (Waravita, 2025). Commissioner Nimal Punchihewa stressed that these deaths erode public trust in law enforcement and impede effective criminal investigations. HRCSL Chairperson Justice L.T.B. Dehideniya reiterated that the police are legally responsible for the safety and lives of those in their custody and emphasized the constitutional right to life (HRCSL, 2025).

The Commission advocates for the establishment of an independent mechanism to investigate custodial deaths, citing the conflict of interest when perpetrators investigate their own colleagues. As a first step, HRCSL's new guidelines recommend an independent committee of investigators for such cases (Waravita, 2025). Commissioner of HRCSL Dr.

Gehan Gunatilleke highlighted the systemic issue, pointing out that over 8,000 cases remain open and that individual officers are burdened with over 300 files each—making timely justice elusive (Waravita, 2025).

In a landmark Supreme Court ruling, six police officers from the Thambuttegama Police Station were ordered to personally compensate a torture victim Rs. 1.2 million. The victim, falsely accused in 2012, was brutally assaulted in custody, leading to permanent hearing loss. The court found that multiple constitutional rights—including freedom from torture and arbitrary arrest—had been violated. The judgment also directed the Attorney General to consider criminal charges under the Convention Against Torture Act No. 22 of 1994 (Sooriyagoda, 2025).

These cases collectively underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms within Sri Lanka's policing and justice systems. While HRCSL's initiatives mark an important step forward, the broader challenge remains: to restore public trust, ensure accountability, and protect the fundamental rights of every citizen under the law.

## 8. Right to Memorialize and Commemorate

On May 18, Tamils across Sri Lanka and the diaspora commemorated Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day, marking sixteen years since the mass atrocities at Mullivaikkal during the final stages of the civil war in 2009. Despite public assurances from the government that peaceful commemorations would not be obstructed, multiple incidents across the country revealed ongoing suppression, state surveillance, and intimidation of those marking the day.

In a formal letter to the Acting Inspector General of Police, the HRCSL expressed deep concerns over the Police's continued misuse of legal provisions to hinder peaceful commemorations. The HRCSL cited the misapplication of Section 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, No. 56 of 2007 to arrest individuals engaging in remembrance activities and criticized the practice of seeking temporary court orders under Section 106(1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure to block such events, particularly in the North and East. It noted that this continued despite the government's public announcement in November 2024 that it would not interfere with peaceful commemorations (HRCSL, 2025).

In Muthur, Trincomalee, police disrupted a remembrance event involving the distribution of *Mullivaikkal kanji*—a simple porridge of rice and water symbolizing the food scarcity endured by Tamil civilians in the government-designated No Fire Zones during the war's final days. Officers seized a banner said to depict the *Karthigai* flower, a symbol associated with Tamil Eelam, and summoned organizers for questioning (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

Meanwhile, in Colombo, civil society activists gathered at Wellawatte beach for a peaceful vigil organized by the *May 18 Committee*, marking the third consecutive Mullivaikkal commemoration held in the capital. The event, led by Aragalaya participants and joined by various civil society members, included the lighting of memorial lamps and releasing of flowers into the sea (Kariyakarawana, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025). However, the vigil was disrupted by Sinhala Ravaya, an ultranationalist Sinhala-Buddhist group known for its anti-Tamil rhetoric and affiliations with extremist organizations like Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balaya. The group accused the attendees of supporting the LTTE, receiving foreign funding, and being aligned with Palestine to oppose Israel. Police responded by increasing their presence and eventually de-escalating the confrontation, but the atmosphere remained tense until the event concluded (Tamil Guardian, 2025). While the Colombo event notably avoided the use of the term 'genocide,' communities across the Tamil homeland and the diaspora explicitly observed May 18 as *Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day* (Tamil Guardian, 2025). The disconnect between governmental promises and actions on the ground illustrates the continuing challenges faced by Tamils in exercising their rights to memory, expression, and assembly in post-war Sri Lanka.

The Government of Sri Lanka has expressed strong and repeated objections to the recently inaugurated Tamil Genocide Monument<sup>1</sup> in Brampton, Ontario, Canada, calling the allegations it represents 'unfounded' and 'misleading.' Subsequently, Foreign Minister Vijitha

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<sup>1</sup> The monument's construction, originally proposed in 2021 and supported under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's administration, and coincided with Canada's recognition of May 18 as Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day. The Trudeau Government also sanctioned four former Sri Lankan officials in 2023 for alleged human rights violations.

Herath summoned Canadian High Commissioner Eric Walsh to formally protest the monument's approval, arguing that the claims of genocide during the final phase of Sri Lanka's civil conflict are not supported by any credible authority, nationally or internationally. Herath emphasized that such narratives—propagated largely for electoral gains in Canada—threaten Sri Lanka's ongoing efforts toward reconciliation, national unity, and lasting peace among its diverse communities (Ada Derana, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025; Daily News, 2025; Farzan, 2025). The unveiling of the monument occurred shortly after Gary Anandasangaree, a Canadian MP of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage, was appointed as Canada's Minister of Public Safety under Prime Minister Mark Carney (Ceylon Today, 2025).



Screenshot of the statement made by the Minister, denying the allegations of genocide during Sri Lanka's civil war.

Former Foreign Minister Ali Sabry rejected the genocide narrative as 'deeply irresponsible,' claiming that if genocide occurred, it was the LTTE's ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Sinhalese in the Northern Province. He cited the 1990 expulsion of over 75,000 Muslims from their homes in the North as documented evidence of such cleansing. He also pointed to the *Tamil National Alliance's* electoral victories in the same region as proof that a genocide by the state could not have taken place (Ceylon Today, 2025).

Further reinforcing Sri Lanka's stance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recalled that in April 2021, Canada's own Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development confirmed it had made no official finding of genocide in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Canada has designated the LTTE as a terrorist organization since 2006, reaffirming that status as recently as June 2024. The Sri Lankan Government has continuously urged the Canadian Federal Government to intervene and halt the monument's construction, describing it as harmful to both Sri Lankan and Canadian communities and a threat to reconciliation efforts (Ada Derana, 2025; Daily Mirror, 2025).

MP Namal Rajapaksa echoed these concerns, accusing Canada of yielding to pressure from segments of the Tamil diaspora and using the monument as a political tool. He warned that such actions could destabilize the fragile reconciliation process in Sri Lanka and said international law has not substantiated genocide charges against the Sri Lankan military (Ceylon Today, 2025).

Meanwhile, a banner thanking Brampton's Mayor Patrick Brown appeared in Mullivaikkal, Mullaitivu, shortly after the monument's unveiling, prompting a local police investigation and removal of the banner. Officials cited this as evidence of how foreign political gestures could incite domestic tensions in Sri Lanka (Daily Mirror, 2025).

## 9. Police Brutality and Intimidation

On 28 April, during a media briefing at the Mullaitivu Press Club, Chandramohan Sandhiya, a Tamil woman residing in Thiyogunagar, Mullaitivu District, alleged that she and her children have been subjected to ongoing harassment and intimidation by intelligence officers. Sandhiya recounted an abduction and assault incident in March, allegedly instigated by a person abroad. Despite being the victim, she has been repeatedly questioned by officers claiming to be from a special police branch, who have asked irrelevant and distressing questions related to her alleged former combatant status, leaving her and her children emotionally distressed. On 24 May, when Sandhiya was not home, intelligence officers allegedly arrived and used abusive language to intimidate her 12- and 14-year-old children—a moment she claimed to have captured on CCTV (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Simultaneously, tensions remain high in Kurunthumalai, Mullaitivu, where Tamil farmers have been arrested for cultivating private land now occupied by a Buddhist temple allegedly built illegally with the backing of the military. Buddhist monk Galgamuwa Shantha Bodhi, known for spearheading the construction of the temple, has reportedly seized hundreds of acres historically belonging to Tamil villagers. Despite court orders against further construction, officials from the Department of Archaeology continue to inspect and facilitate the site. Two Tamil farmers were remanded while a 16-year-old student was released on bail following their arrest on 10 May, after Bodhi lodged a complaint (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, broader issues of police misconduct have come to light across the country. In Gokarella, a police constable was suspended after a video surfaced showing him assaulting a civilian with an iron rod on 24 May. The incident, widely circulated on social media, has prompted an internal investigation. The officer was seen threatening and possibly attacking a motorcyclist while the latter was filming the encounter and claiming his wife had already been assaulted (Samaraweera, 2025; Sankalana, 2025). In another case, a police officer in Ampara was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. A second officer was suspended after videoing the incident and sharing it on social media, further highlighting a lack of accountability within the police force (The Morning, 2025).

In a rare instance of judicial redress, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of four female members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, finding that their arrest in 2014 by Walasmulla Police violated their constitutional rights to equality and protection from arbitrary arrest. The women were accused of attempting to 'spread' their religion for financial gain while conducting lawful community service. The Court ordered compensation from both the State and the arresting officer, stressing the peaceful nature of religious propagation in Buddhism's history (Daily Mirror, 2025).<sup>2</sup>

The independence of the legal profession has also come under threat. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) issued a strong statement condemning attempts by law enforcement agencies to access confidential information from attorneys-at-law without court orders. This came after the Colombo Crimes Division verbally requested an attorney to surrender his mobile phone. The BASL warned that such intrusions threaten the constitutional protections

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[https://supremecourt.lk/?melsta\\_doc\\_download=1&doc\\_id=26e569ed-ab61-49ec-9fa7-7886b4bd8a24&filename=sc\\_fr\\_119\\_122\\_2015.pdf](https://supremecourt.lk/?melsta_doc_download=1&doc_id=26e569ed-ab61-49ec-9fa7-7886b4bd8a24&filename=sc_fr_119_122_2015.pdf)

under Article 14(1)(g) and risk violating ethical standards that underpin the justice system. The BASL underscored that lawyers must be free to discharge their duties without fear or interference, as any obstruction to their professional independence ultimately infringes upon citizens' access to justice (Daily Mirror, 2025; Daily News, 2025; The Morning).

## 10. Families of the Disappeared

Amalanayagi Amalraj, President of the *Association of Families of the Forcibly Disappeared* in Batticaloa, has condemned the government for sidelining Tamil families' demands for justice by shifting the issue of enforced disappearances into bureaucratic obscurity through the Office of Missing Persons (OMP). She described that despite a change in government under Anura Kumara Dissanayake, promises remain unfulfilled, and the struggle is being diluted and co-opted. Tamil families reject the OMP, demanding international judicial mechanisms instead (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, the *Association for Relatives of the Enforced Disappearances* (ARED) marked 3,000 continuous days of protest in Vavuniya, maintaining calls for truth and justice regarding thousands of Tamil civilians forcibly disappeared during the final stage of the war in 2009, particularly those last seen in military custody (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Similarly, Tamil families in Ampara District protested in Thirukkivil, calling for transparency on the fate of their disappeared relatives. This demonstration echoed ongoing demands for comprehensive lists of the surrendered, international inquiries, and justice through credible mechanisms. These protests continue despite intimidation and political neglect, underscoring the unresolved trauma of enforced disappearances (Tamil Guardian, 2025).