



Sri Lanka should not obstruct Tamil commemorations of Maaveerar Naal

(Washington, DC; November 22, 2016) PEARL is deeply concerned about a statement attributed to Sri Lanka's State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene, who threatened legal actions against those commemorating Maaveerar Naal on November 27. Annually, Tamils around the world observe Maaveerar Naal, or "Great Heroes Day," to remember people who died fighting for the liberation of Tamils from the oppressive Sri Lankan state. Activists have linked the recent spate of arrests in Jaffna to the upcoming remembrance day, ostensibly timed to instil fear and further repress commemoration activities.

Under both former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and current president Maithripala Sirisena, commemorations in the North-East have led to arrests, as well as intimidation of LTTE cadres' family members, activists, and others attempting to observe Maaveerar Naal. However, Maaveerar Naal remains an important day for Tamils in the North-East. The annual remembrance is regarded as a show of respect for those who died and an opportunity for the community to collectively mourn the loss of life. PEARL's November report, [*Erasing the Past*](#), examines the significance of the day in more detail and makes clear that the government's obstruction of Tamil memorialization is an ongoing obstacle to transitional justice and lasting reconciliation.

Despite the ban on Maaveerar Naal commemorations since the end of the armed conflict in 2009, Tamils continue to try marking the day, either clandestinely or openly. Arrests and the military presence at public events, however, contribute to the ongoing climate of fear around these commemorations and prevent many from participating.

Tamils should be allowed to commemorate their dead in the manner they find necessary to heal. Opening up spaces for communal forms of remembrance would also facilitate necessary intra-community conversations about Tamil militant movements and diverse Tamil political ideologies. Honoring the right to remember and permitting memorialization of combatant and non-combatant deaths is also a key step in any transitional justice process.

PEARL calls on the Sri Lankan government to allow commemorations of Maaveerar Naal and to issue orders to the security forces not to conduct surveillance of any of these events. PEARL further calls on our partners and allies in civil society in the South to support the Tamil people's right to remember and to urge the government to allow commemorations. PEARL also asks the United States, European Union and United Nations to closely monitor events and possible repression taking place over the next week, and to urge Sri Lanka to allow these commemorations to take place publicly, communally, and without military presence or intimidation.