Delayed or Denied?

Sri Lanka’s Failing Transitional Justice Process
People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL) is a Tamil advocacy group, based in Washington DC and registered as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization in the United States. PEARL advocates for human rights, justice and a political solution for Tamils in the North-East of Sri Lanka.

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This report was only possible due to the remarkable strength and courage of the Tamil communities of the North-East who continue to demand justice and accountability for the atrocities they have endured. We hope that this report will focus attention on the shrinking prospects for transitional justice in Sri Lanka.

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All pictures in the report were taken by Tamil Guardian.
**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAT</td>
<td>UN Committee Against Torture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CID</td>
<td>Criminal Investigation Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTF</td>
<td>Consultation Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCO</td>
<td>Foreign and Commonwealth Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>LLRC</td>
<td>Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTTE</td>
<td>Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maaveerar Naal</td>
<td>Annual LTTE Remembrance Day on November 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFZ</td>
<td>No Fire Zones</td>
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<tr>
<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
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<td>OISL</td>
<td>OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka</td>
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<tr>
<td>OMP</td>
<td>Office of Missing Persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONUR</td>
<td>Office of National Unity and Reconciliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTA</td>
<td>Prevention of Terrorism Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHRC</td>
<td>United Nations Human Rights Council</td>
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</table>
Delayed or Denied? Sri Lanka’s Failing Transitional Justice Process by the Numbers

9 years since the end of the War.

0 atrocity crimes prosecutions (or even investigations).

0 fully functional transitional justice mechanisms.

0 states calling for a special court with foreign judges at 37th UNHRC (March 2018).


30 times Sri Lanka has repudiated its UNHRC commitments since Resolution 34/1 (March 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broken promises on…</th>
<th>President Sirisena</th>
<th>Other Sri Lankan Government Officials</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atrocity crimes prosecutions.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign judges.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devolution or federalism.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Protests relating to the disappeared and land grabs have been taking place in 7 regions across the North and East for over 365 days.

Protests relating to disappearances have taken place in:
- Kilinochchi (since Feb 20, 2017)
- Maruthankerny (since March 14, 2017)
- Mullaithivu (since March 7, 2017)
- Trincomalee (since March 3, 2017)
- Vavuniya (since Feb 23, 2017)

Protests relating to land grabs have taken place in:
- Iranaitivu (since May 1, 2017)
- Keppapilavu (since Jan 31, 2017)
- Mullikulam (March 23 - April 29, 2017)

PEARL's new report documents Sri Lanka’s failure to fulfill its transitional justice commitments and the complacency with which its intransigence has been received by members of the international community. Sri Lankan officials have publicly repudiated their promises on at least 30 occasions in the last year alone. Nevertheless, members of the international community continue to treat Sri Lanka as a good faith actor, ignoring glaring red flags that it is unwilling to pursue a meaningful accountability process. PEARL’s interviews with the victim-survivor community show that they are growing frustrated with the international community’s lenience towards Sri Lanka’s endless delays and broken promises and are increasingly willing to mobilize in defense of their rights.
“Government is responsible for all disappearances.”
Introduction

Nine years after the end of Sri Lanka’s civil war, victims and survivors of state-perpetrated atrocities are still waiting for justice. Despite clear and compelling evidence that the Sri Lankan security forces engaged in serious human rights violations both during and after the war, almost no one has been held accountable.¹ High-ranking military officials implicated in ordering atrocity crimes continue to serve in cabinet positions, diplomatic posts abroad, and UN peacekeeping missions. Although Sri Lanka has repeatedly flouted UN Human Rights Council resolutions calling for action on accountability and post-war human rights issues, international pressure urging Sri Lanka to comply has gradually dissipated. Members of the international community appear to have accepted Sri Lanka’s assurances that it is “making haste slowly,” turning a blind eye to clear statements and signals to the contrary. And Western governments have restored preferential trade benefits and increased ties with the yet-to-be vetted military and despite Sri Lanka’s failure to meet human rights benchmarks.

Meanwhile, Tamils victims and survivors of state-perpetrated crimes, who have long relied on the international community as a guarantor of their rights, are watching their last hope for justice disappear. For some, hopelessness has brought despair; for others, anger. Sri Lanka’s North-East today is seeing an unprecedented level of post-war political mobilization. Widespread protests on a variety of issues, including—most prominently—the still-uncertain fate of thousands of disappeared persons, demonstrate the victim-survivor community’s rejection of a status quo in which Sri Lanka perpetually evades consequences while continuing to violate the rights of war-affected individuals and communities.

This report chronicles Sri Lanka’s abject failure to fulfill its transitional justice commitments and the leniency shown by members of the international community, who continue to treat Sri Lanka as a good-faith actor despite the government’s obvious reluctance to pursue accountability. It highlights the toll this is taking on the war-affected population in the North-East and the high stakes of ignoring their demands for truth and justice. The report proceeds as follows: Part II details the report’s research methodology and Part III provides a brief overview of the engagement between Sri Lanka and the international community on transitional justice issues prior to the passage of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 in October 2015. Part IV chronicles the disconnect between Sri Lanka’s assurances of progress to the international community and its statements and actions at home during the 18 months following Resolution 30/1’s passage. Part V covers events in the aftermath of the two-year extension granted to Sri Lanka in March 2017, including Sri Lanka’s growing complacency as Western governments have strengthened bilateral ties. Lastly, Part VI documents members of the victim-survivor

¹ A very small number of individuals have been convicted for wartime and post-war abuses of Tamil civilians (e.g. the 2015 convictions of four soldiers for a 2010 gang rape and a single Army Staff Sergeant in the Mirusuvil massacre case). These cases have moved slowly through the court system and have been plagued by problems, including harassment of victims and witnesses.
community's increasing frustration with the international community’s tolerance for Sri Lanka’s inaction. The report concludes by discussing the potential impacts of transitional justice in Sri Lanka falling off the international agenda.

“Everyone seems to be supporting Sri Lanka on this. Who is listening to us?”

(Mullaitivu, October 2017)

Methodology

This report is based on a combination of desk and field research conducted in late 2017 and early 2018.

Using the online archives of Sri Lankan government bodies (Presidency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and branches of the military), and English-language Sri Lankan media, as well as of Tamil Guardian as a backstop, PEARL’s researchers compiled and analyzed over 170 English language statements made by Sri Lankan government officials on the subject of transitional justice between the adoption of Resolution 30/1 on October 1, 2015 and the beginning of April 2018. Additionally, PEARL staff conducted primary source research on Sri Lanka’s transitional justice progress, including an analysis of statements and actions from members of the international community engaged on the issue.

In July–August 2017 and February 2018, PEARL researchers interviewed approximately 50 war-affected individuals in the North-East about transitional justice. These conversations were conducted both one-on-one and in small groups in seven of the eight districts of Sri Lanka’s Northern and Eastern Provinces. The majority of the interviewees were family members of disappeared persons; however, PEARL’s researchers also spoke to former combatants, members of civil society, and politicians. Using a semi-structured approach and observing the interviewee’s preference of Tamil or English, the researchers asked a series of questions about engagement with past commissions of inquiry, knowledge of the commitments made in Resolution 30/1 and the government’s progress toward fulfilling them, expectations regarding the current transitional justice process, and attitudes toward participating in any new mechanisms.

PEARL’s researchers also conducted extensive field observations at the protest sites of the families of the disappeared. The researchers visited three of the five continuous protests, spending approximately 14 days in total with the families.

2 A handful of additional interviews were conducted by telephone in October and November 2017.
3 Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai.
4 Because the security situation in the North-East remains volatile and activists continue to face threats and harassment, respondents are identified only by location and month of interview.
Background

Massive violations of international law accompanied the end of the armed conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The government’s take-no-prisoners approach to defeating the LTTE killed at least 40,000 Tamil civilians through the deliberate shelling of government-established “No Fire Zones” (NFZs) and protected structures, like hospitals, as well as other unlawful conduct. In addition to shelling and extrajudicial executions, there is credible evidence that the government was responsible for arbitrary arrests and detentions; enforced disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; sexual violence; and the denial of humanitarian assistance—all of which targeted Tamils. These acts are serious violations of international law and almost certainly constitute war crimes and/or crimes against humanity—maybe even genocide.

Shortly after the end of the war, then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa and then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made a joint statement committing Sri Lanka to pursue accountability for wartime abuses. Instead of taking steps toward accountability, however, Rajapaksa’s Sri Lanka became increasingly authoritarian and repressive. Sinhalese nationalism and Buddhist extremism grew more virulent, targeting Muslims as well as Tamils. The North-East remained heavily militarized despite the elimination of the threat of the LTTE. In the South, the government closed civic spaces for journalism and the exchange of ideas while surveilling and harassing human rights defenders and civil society organizations. The Rajapaksa regime refused to acknowledge the occurrence of violations of international law, let alone provide justice for them.

As evidence mounted that the Sri Lankan security forces had perpetrated widespread and systematic human rights violations, the government came under increasing international pressure to pursue accountability. In May 2010, the Rajapaksa regime established the domestic Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in a bid to appease the international community. But a Panel of Experts appointed by the UN Secretary-General determined that the commission was neither independent nor impartial. The LLRC’s conclusion that the security forces “had not deliberately targeted civilians in the NFZs” met with widespread criticism from international audiences.

Nevertheless, members of the international community encouraged Sri Lanka to implement the LLRC’s recommendations on reconciliation and ethnic relations. UN Human Rights Council Resolutions passed in March 2012 and March 2013 foregrounded the LLRC instead of calling for an international investigation of wartime abuses. Ultimately, the Rajapaksa regime’s continuous failure to deliver on its own mechanism’s recommendations, coupled with its refusal to address human rights issues, led the international community to take a harsher stance. In March 2014, the Human Rights Council passed Resolution 25/1, which requested that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) “undertake a comprehensive investigation.”
and report back in March 2015.

The OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) began its work in June 2014. The Rajapaksa regime refused to cooperate and barred investigators from entering the country. But in January 2015, Sri Lanka’s political atmosphere changed dramatically with the unexpected victory of Maithripala Sirisena over the incumbent Rajapaksa in the presidential election. The international community enthusiastically welcomed this development, praising President Sirisena’s initial moves to roll back repression and surveillance in the South and shift to a more cooperative diplomatic posture.

In March 2015, capitalizing on the international community’s relief at Rajapaksa’s ouster and the new administration’s professed willingness to pursue transitional justice, Sri Lanka successfully requested that the Human Rights Council delay the release of the OISL report. After a six-month deferral granted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the report was publicly released in September 2015. Its conclusions tracked those of the UN Panel of Experts. It found “persistent and large scale violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.” Sri Lanka’s new government responded without any of the previous administration’s customary intransigence, taking note of the report and pledging to “facilitate the right to know, right to justice, reparations and guarantee[s of] non-recurrence.”

To this end, Sri Lanka cosponsored Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1. The resolution, which the Council unanimously adopted without a vote on October 1, 2015, pledged Sri Lanka to pursue transitional justice. Importantly, it envisioned a special judicial mechanism that would involve international experts, including foreign judges, lawyers, and investigators. It also formalized Sri Lanka’s commitments to demilitarize and return occupied land; address ongoing torture and sexual violence; vet and reform the security sector; review and repeal harmful legislation, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA); and take necessary constitutional measures to devolve political authority and reach a political settlement. It called for the High Commissioner for Human Rights to assess Sri Lanka’s implementation progress in March 2017.

Making Haste Slowly or Not at All?

Over the next 18 months, Sri Lanka repeatedly assured the international community that transitional justice progress was imminent. But while Sri Lankan officials’ statements to external audiences reiterated the commitments made in Resolution 30/1 and emphasized the need to “make haste slowly,” their message to domestic audiences was very different. The Sirisena government consistently reassured its military and Sinhalese voters that it would not pursue accountability for wartime violations. This section documents the disjuncture between the Sri Lankan government’s statements abroad and at home, its systematic failure to keep its word, and members of the international community’s puzzlingly optimistic responses to the lack of progress.

Sri Lanka Promises Progress Abroad While Guaranteeing Impunity At Home

In the immediate aftermath of Resolution 30/1’s passage, Sri Lankan officials signaled that the government was ready to move on transitional justice, with its Ambassador to Geneva promising to begin consultations with the public immediately. Later that month, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera announced that the government would create four new institutions, as agreed to in the resolution: a truth commission, a judicial mechanism, an Office of Missing Persons, and an Office for Reparations. In November 2015, the head of the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, guaranteed that a special court would be up and running by January 2016.

Samaraweera, the public face of the Sri Lankan government to the international community, struck a consistent refrain, stressing the government’s detailed transitional justice agenda and willingness to involve international experts. As the months went by without any action, he began to ask for more time, highlighting the size of the task and the need to proceed carefully. Despite the pattern of inaction, he continued to promise results, affirming in July

2016 that the structure of the judicial mechanisms would be tabled for discussion in early 2017.\textsuperscript{13} These transitional justice pledges were accompanied by assurances that Sri Lanka was moving forward with demilitarization,\textsuperscript{14} land return,\textsuperscript{15} and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{16}

But even as Sri Lanka convinced members of the international community of its intention to meet its obligations prescribed by Resolution 30/1, officials were busy telling their domestic audiences that the country’s “war heroes” would never stand trial. After the adoption of Resolution 30/1, high-ranking cabinet members, including Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, met with members of the security forces to reassure them that they were not under threat of investigation or prosecution. Acting Defense Minister Ruwan Wijewardene emphasized to the Army that it had conducted a “legitimate” counter-terrorist operation, and it was the government’s duty to protect the military’s “good reputation.”\textsuperscript{17} President Sirisena consistently reiterated his commitment to protect “war heroes,”\textsuperscript{18} criticizing the Rajapaksa government for exposing the military to international censure.\textsuperscript{19} He also met with senior military officers to allay their concerns.\textsuperscript{20}

Official statements rejecting the possibility of atrocity crimes trials were particularly common around UN Human Rights Council sessions. During the September 2016 session, Justice Minister Wijewayadasa Rajapakshe threatened legal action against anyone alleging that members of the security forces had perpetrated atrocity crimes.\textsuperscript{21} In the run-up to the March 2017 session,
Kumaratunga, who had earlier promised a special court by January 2016, contended that atrocity crimes trials were unnecessary. Sirisena went even further, telling members of the security forces in Jaffna that they would never face charges.

When officials did admit to the possibility of prosecutions, they insisted that no foreigners would be permitted to sit in judgment over Sri Lankan military personnel. Immediately after saying the opposite to the international community, both Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe ruled out the possibility of international participation. Sirisena repeatedly undermined Samaraweera's statements to the international community, telling domestic audiences that Sri Lanka would not allow any foreign judges. Other ministers echoed his edict, including Samaraweera, who contradicted his own statements on at least three occasions, promising domestic audiences that any prosecutions would be purely domestic.


Since the adoption of Resolution 34/1, the number of government statements on the foremost place of Buddhism in the constitution has increased. In total, the government has made 6 statements on this issue, half of which were made by Sirisena.

3 statements by President of Sri Lanka
Maithripala Sirisena

2 statements by Prime Minister
Ranil Wickremesinghe

1 statement by Foreign Minister
Ravi Karunanayake
Sri Lanka’s Statements Against Atrocity Crimes Prosecutions

The government continued the trend of rejecting atrocity crimes prosecutions since the extension was granted in March 2017. In total, government officials have made 16 statements on this issue, the majority of which were made by Sirisena.

The dichotomy between Sri Lanka’s outward- and inward-facing rhetoric during this period was reflected in its actions as well. Following the passage of Resolution 30/1, Sri Lanka substantially increased its cooperation with the international community, allowing visits from four UN Special Rapporteurs, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Secretary General. It also launched a consultation process, the Consultation Task Force (CTF), on the design of the four transitional justice mechanisms. Although the consultations resulted in broad and meaningful participation, the government chose to preempt its results and exclude victim-survivor perspectives from consideration by announcing the creation of an Office of Missing Persons in May 2016 just as the CTF was starting its work.

When the CTF released its final report, both the President and Prime Minister were absent from its launch. The Justice Minister immediately dismissed its findings, which included a recommendation to empanel a hybrid court with both domestic and foreign judges. Meanwhile, the government pushed ahead with the OMP, emphasizing to its domestic audiences that the body would be toothless. In the words of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe: “The responsibility of this office is to search for missing persons and issue a certificate. There is no other power.”

The August 2016 passage of the OMP bill, which was not signed into law until July 2017, was the only observable progress Sri Lanka made on its transitional justice commitments before the March 2017 Human Rights Council session. Although officials promised throughout late 2015 and 2016 that the establishment of the truth commission and Office for Reparations were imminent and that the plans for the prosecutorial mechanism were underway, there were no visible steps taken to establish any of these institutions.

This extremely limited progress on transitional justice was matched by similar stalling on the other commitments included in Resolution 30/1. On the legal reform front, the constitutional process did not move forward during this period. Additionally, the government failed to

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29 The Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence (from March 30 to April 3, 2015 and from January 26 to February 1, 2016); the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers (from April 29 to May 7, 2016); the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (from April 29 to May 7, 2016); and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues (from October 10 to 20, 2016).


33 Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 16.
criminalize atrocity crimes\(^{34}\) or enforced disappearances.\(^{35}\) The draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act remained on the books,\(^{36}\) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers found that the judicial system remained severely compromised,\(^{37}\) especially in its treatment of Tamils.\(^{38}\) While Sri Lanka did pass a victim and witness protection act in 2015 (the Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act),\(^{39}\) civil society criticized it on numerous grounds, including the fact that it does not protect victims and survivors of international crimes that have not been incorporated into domestic law.\(^{40}\)

Human Rights Watch,\(^{41}\) the International Truth and Justice Project,\(^{42}\) and the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment\(^{43}\) documented the routine commission of torture throughout this period. Sri Lankan officials steadily denied evidence that security forces continued to use torture and insisted at the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT)\(^{44}\) that they had instructed the military and police to abide by international law as they had agreed to do in Resolution 30/1.\(^{45}\) The government’s decision to send Chief of National Intelligence Sisira Mendis to represent Sri Lanka at the November 2016 CAT review of Sri Lanka exemplified its failure to address allegations of torture. Mendis himself has faced allegations of torture during his tenure as Deputy Inspector General of the Criminal Investigation Department. At the CAT review, he refused to answer questions from the Committee, which subsequently issued a report expressing concern over “consistent reports of torture,” including the sexual violence and rape of Tamil detainees with suspected LTTE ties.\(^{46}\)

Linked to the ongoing use of torture is a security sector that Sri Lanka has taken no steps to

\(^{34}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 7.

\(^{35}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 13.

\(^{36}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 12.


\(^{38}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 6.

\(^{39}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 9.


\(^{45}\) Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 17.

\(^{46}\) Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Sri Lanka, CAT/C/LKA/CO/5, Jan. 27, 2017.
reform and that still commits abuses with impunity.\textsuperscript{47} The military remained heavily deployed in the North-East throughout this period.\textsuperscript{48} And although the government made a handful of high-profile land releases in 2015 and 2016,\textsuperscript{49} land grabs continued.\textsuperscript{50} Statements made by the military confirmed that the security presence would not change in the North-East, and that despite the government’s commitments, it “would not return even an inch” of land to its rightful owners.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{International Pressure Dissipates}

In spite of a near total absence of meaningful action, members of the international community—especially the US—made frequent statements applauding Sri Lanka for its transitional justice progress throughout this period.

The passage of Resolution 30/1 was met with understandable praise from the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, the US Ambassador to the UN, US Ambassador to the UN Human Rights Council, and the US Secretary of State, commending Sri Lanka’s “promising future”\textsuperscript{52} and reform agenda.\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 8.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Commitment made in Resolution 30/1, Operative ¶ 10.
\end{itemize}
But this praise persisted even as it became clear over the following 18 months that Sri Lanka had established neither transitional justice institutions nor a clear timeline for doing so.

In April 2016, for instance, after Sri Lanka had already reneged on its promises to present plans for a judicial mechanism in January, the US Ambassador to the UN commended Sirisena’s Sri Lanka as a “global champion of human rights and democratic accountability.” In September 2016, she conveyed the US’s optimism for “enhanced military relations” with Sri Lanka and supported their efforts to deploy more peacekeepers to UN missions. Around the same time, the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka and Maldives also commended the government for its “positive steps.” At a reception celebrating the 69th anniversary of Sri Lankan independence in 2017, the US Acting Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs welcomed Sri Lanka’s contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, despite widely-reported allegations that Sri Lanka’s forces in Haiti had sexually exploited and abused minors. At the 34th Human Rights Council session, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of the US noted that the Council “catalyzed progress for reform” in Sri Lanka with no mention of how minimal that progress has been.

The UK took a similarly supportive stance, although its public statements became more reserved over time. At the beginning of 2016, the UK set aside £6.6 million to support Sri Lanka’s accountability and reconciliation agenda. During the 31st Human Rights Council session, in March 2016, the UK stressed its commitment to the implementation of Resolution 30/1 without expressing concerns about Sri Lanka’s progress, as it did regarding other named countries. As time passed with no action on transitional justice, however, representatives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) began to underscore the need for further

progress, emphasizing that “much remains to be done.”\textsuperscript{61}

Six months after the adoption of Resolution 30/1, the EU urged Sri Lanka to maintain and increase its cooperation with OHCHR.\textsuperscript{62} Against the backdrop of the 34\textsuperscript{th} Human Rights Council session and discussions around the restoration of Sri Lanka’s GSP+ status, discussions between the EU and Sri Lanka highlighted progress despite stressing the need for further efforts on reconciliation and ongoing human rights violations.\textsuperscript{63}

Sri Lanka took the absence of sustained international criticism as a sign that the pressure was off. In June 2016, Sirisena told The Sunday Times that Sri Lanka no longer faced pressure from members of the international community to prosecute allegations of atrocity crimes.\textsuperscript{64} He struck a similar note by telling Army personnel that Resolution 30/1’s provisions were proposals, not obligations, and that Sri Lanka was under “no compulsion” to implement them\textsuperscript{65} and by assuring a crowd in Kurunegala that he would keep foreigners out of domestic affairs.\textsuperscript{66}

Both he and the Prime Minister repeatedly told domestic audiences that they had prevented


an international probe.\textsuperscript{67} In October 2016, following the 33\textsuperscript{rd} Human Rights Council session, Minister of Highways and Higher Education Lakshman Kiriella reported to an audience in Kandy that the government had successfully implemented most of Resolution 30/1 and that the UN Human Rights Council was no longer pressuring Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{68}


Timeline: Sri Lanka’s Backsliding

Two important timelines are examined side-by-side below from March 2017 to April 2018. On the left are evaluations of Sri Lanka’s human rights situation by UN bodies, NGOs and civil society organizations, which are consistently critical. On the right are statements made by members of the Sri Lankan government, who dismiss and repudiate its transitional justice commitments.

Human Rights Reports

23 March 2017
Human Rights Council, 34th Session
Adoption of Resolution 34/1
UN Human Rights Council unanimously adopted a resolution that granted Sri Lanka a two-year extension, until March 2019, to implement the commitments made in Resolution 30/1. 31

1 May 2017
Reporters Without Borders, 2017 World Press Freedom Index
No improvements in press freedom
Reporters Without Borders ranked Sri Lanka 141 out of 180 countries, indicating little positive improvements in press freedom over the past year.32

16 May 2017
International Crisis Group, Report
ICG found that “the military resists returning additional occupied land to its owners in these areas and continues to run shops and hotels and build Buddha statues in Tamil and Muslim communities.”33

18 May 2017
Tamil Genocide Day: Domestic and international civil society groups
Repression of memorialization
PEARL (U.S.), Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research (Jaffna), and International Truth and Justice Project (South Africa) condemned the government’s intimidation of Tamil activists.34

6 June 2017
Human Rights Council, 35th Session
35th Human Rights Council session begins.35

Sri Lanka Rejects its International Commitments

23 March 2017
Minister of Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, Speech in Parliament
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“Reconciliation and probing crimes which took place during the war is like railway tracks which never get together. Probing war time crimes will actually create tension among ethnic groups.”1

25 March 2017
Chairperson of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) Chandrika Kumaratunga, Speech at a gathering in Jaffna
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“We have no intention to drag the soldiers before courts and send them to gallows … We will not give into such demands from the diaspora who have formed NGOs.”2

29 March 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech at Kurunegala Defense Services College
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“No War Hero who genuinely fought against the LTTE terrorism to ensure democracy, peace and territorial integrity of this country would be allowed to stand before any international court, nor would any War Hero be deemed an “accused … I will not leave room for true War Heroes to face any accusations and will do everything possible to safeguard the dignity and respect of the armed forces.”3
12 June 2017
Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Statement at the 35th Human Rights Council session
No due process or fair trials for Tamils
Special Rapporteur Diego Garcia-Sayán said that “problems related to language … have a very serious effect on justice and on the likelihood of obtaining a fair process if you belong to the Tamil community.”

23 June 2017
Human Rights Council, 35th Session
35th Human Rights Council session ends.

14 July 2017
International Truth and Justice Project, Report
Impunity for ongoing torture and sexual violence against Tamils
ITJP Executive Director Yasmin Sooka said the organization found that “torturing Tamils has become a highly lucrative business.”

18 July 2017
Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, Preliminary Findings
Torture is routine, endemic, and uninvestigated
Special Rapporteur Ben Emmerson found that “since the authorities use [the PTA] disproportionately against members of the Tamil community, it is this community that has borne the brunt of the State’s well-oiled torture apparatus.”

6 July 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech at Temple Trees
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“The current government performs to protect not only the freedom earned for the country by war heroes but also the war heroes themselves.”

10 July 2017
Minister of Foreign Affairs Ravi Karunanayake, Speaking to the media in Colombo
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“We are not ready at any time to betray tri-forces [the armed forces] and police.”
No constitutional reform re: Buddhism
He said Sri Lanka needs a constitution that continues to protect, promote, and give due honor to Buddhism.

15 July 2017
Secretary to the Ministry of Defense Kapila Waidyaratne, Speaking to the media
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
He said he would take measures to maintain the dignity of the armed forces and civil security forces.
No meaningful legal reform re: disappearances
He said the proposed International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance Bill would not affect “war heroes.”

4 August 2017
Commander of the Army Mahesh Senanayake, Speaking to the media in Kandy
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“Not a single soldier who fought bravely has been punished, nor will they be allowed to be penalised because we have not committed any offences.”

11 August 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speaking in Matara
No constitutional reform re: Buddhism
He said that everyone must unite to build a society in this Buddhist country.

24 August 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Media Interview
No foreign judges
He said it was premature to discuss a domestic inquiry except to stress that no foreign judges or lawyers would be allowed to participate.

Freedom from Torture, Summary report
Sri Lanka is top country of origin for torture victims in the U.K.
Freedom from Torture reported that Sri Lanka was the top country of origin for torture victims referred to the organization from 2011 through 2016.
31 August 2017
Minister of Justice Thalatha Athukorala, Press Conference in Colombo
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“I will not give any room to anybody to prosecute our war heroes who have protected this country in a foreign court or punish them.”

9 September 2017
Minister of Housing and Construction Sajith Premadasa, Speech in Polonnaruwa
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“Some claim our war heroes committed war crimes. None of them committed any such crimes. … The yahapalana government would not permit anyone to lay their hands on our war heroes. … The yahapalana government is dedicated to safeguarding the interests of war heroes.”

10 September 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech in Horowpathana
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
He said the government would protect “war heroes” at all ranks from foreign forces.

15 September 2017
Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Press Conference
No atrocity crimes prosecutions
“We don’t need to take legal action against those who were engaged in the war or go to international courts. We can resolve any issue in Sri Lanka with the country’s law. That promise, given by the President, will not be breached by any of us.”

16 September 2017
Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Press Conference
No meaningful legal reform re: disappearances
“No one can take any step against enforced disappearances prior to October or November of 2017. If an incident of enforced disappearance takes place in the future, they can request the government to take action against it.”

29 September 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speaking in Amparai
No devolution or federalism
“I must clearly say that we will never allow to make a constitution that will lead to destroy the unitary state of the country or separate the country.”

No constitutional reform re: Buddhism
He said he would not allow anyone to change the foremost place of Buddhism in the existing constitution.
30 September 2017  
Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Speaking at a UNP meeting in Anuradhapura  
No devolution or federalism  
He said the unitary status of the state would not be diluted.\(^{19}\)  
No constitutional reform re: Buddhism  
He said no changes were made during the constitutional reform process that would change the foremost place of Buddhism and that all agree that Buddhism should retain this prominent status.\(^{20}\)  

4 October 2017  
Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Speaking at a conference of South Asian parliamentarians in Colombo  
No constitutional reform re: Buddhism  
He said all religious would be treated equally, but Buddhism would be given the foremost place.\(^{21}\)  

10 October 2017  
President Maithripala Sirisena & Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Statement to senior Buddhist monk  
No devolution or federalism  
They said the new constitution would protect the unitary status of the country.\(^ {22}\)  
No constitutional reform re: Buddhism  
They said the new constitution would continue to grant the foremost place of Buddhism.\(^ {23}\)  

9 November 2017  
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech at a gathering of military troops in Colombo  
No atrocity crimes prosecutions / No foreign judges  
“As long as I remain the head of the country, I assure you that none of you would be allowed to testify before any war tribunals. … I, as the President of this country would not allow anyone to be subjected to interrogation by foreign judges as such.”\(^ {24}\)  

25 January 2018  
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech at a gathering of Sri Lankans in Seoul, South Korea  
No atrocity crimes prosecution  
“There won’t be electric chairs, international war crimes tribunals or foreign judges. That book is closed.”\(^ {25}\)  
No devolution or federalism  
“I am not ready to give in to the federal demand or devolve power in any way that might result in a fracture of the country.”\(^ {26}\)
25 January 2018
Human Freedom Index 2017
Sri Lanka ranks in the bottom ten for personal freedom

According to the Human Freedom Index 2017, Sri Lanka ranked 150 out of 159 countries for personal freedom, which was determined from an assessment of the enjoyment of a range of civil and political rights.49

22 February 2018
Sri Lanka Campaign, Report
Security forces intimidate Tamils in the North-East

SLC found the persistence of a climate of fear and intimidation that targeted Tamils, namely ex-LTTE, civilian victims of the war, human rights activists, and everyday citizen-dissenters.50

26 February 2018
Human Rights Council, 37th Session
37th Human Rights Council session begins.51

5 March 2018
Society for Threatened Peoples, Report
Military occupies the Vanni and intrudes into Tamil livelihoods

STP reported on the ongoing militarization of civilian life, including the military’s intrusion into commercial activities, which competes with Tamils’ ability to make livelihoods in sectors such as agriculture, catering, and tourism.52

21-22 March 2018
General Debate on OHCHR Annual Report, 37th Human Rights Council session

Only OHCHR continues to call for special court

PUN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Kate Gilmore noted that “the Authorities have yet to demonstrate with the willingness or the capacity to address impunity … [which] strengthens the argument for the establishment of a specialized court to deal with serious crimes, supported by international practitioners.” 53

Meanwhile, the Resolution 30/1’s main co-sponsors expressed their faith that “this Government [of Sri Lanka] can deliver the reform and justice agenda, and take the actions needed to support long-term reconciliation.”54

23 March 2018
Human Rights Council, 37th Session
37th Human Rights Council session ends.55

19 December 2017
President Maithripala Sirisena, Speech at a conference of domestic judicial officers in Colombo

No foreign judges

He said foreign judges should not be involved in Sri Lanka’s affairs and that the judiciary is able to independent and impartially mete out justice. He further claimed that neither the UN Human Rights Council nor other states have given opinions about the participation of foreign judges.27

6 February 2018
Anonymous Sri Lankan Diplomat, Speaking to the media

No atrocity crimes prosecutions / No foreign judges

“I told them [heads of state and the UN Secretary-General] not to send foreign judges to my country. There will be no international war tribunals or electric chairs. … At no point has the Human Rights Council said that we have committed international war crimes. There is clearly no such thing.”28

23 March 2018
Human Rights Council, 37th Session
37th Human Rights Council session ends.55

6 April 2018
President Maithripala Sirisena, Press Conference at the President’s House

No foreign judges

In response to a question about the 37th UN Human Rights Council session, he said the government will not agree to appoint any foreign judges.30
Timeline References

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Unsurprisingly, the UN High Commissioner’s progress report in early 2017 was discouraging. He concluded that Sri Lanka’s progress in implementing Resolution 30/1 had been “elementary” and “worryingly slow.” Nevertheless, at its 34th session, the Human Rights Council granted Sri Lanka a two-year extension, until March 2019, to perform. But one year later, there is little indication that it will do so. Rather than prompting Sri Lanka to rededicate itself to fulfilling its transitional justice commitments, the extension appears to have only emboldened further intransigence. In early 2018, the High Commissioner again decried the government’s pace, this time noting that “the authorities have not yet demonstrated the capacity or willingness to address impunity.”

This section documents the Sri Lankan government’s continued footdragging on Resolution 30/1 obligations following the extension, amidst ongoing reports of serious human rights violations.

**More of the Same**

Just one day after the extension was granted, Justice Minister Rajapakshe claimed that atrocity crimes investigations and prosecutions were “not realistic at all” for a country hoping to achieve reconciliation. Head of the ONUR Kumaratunga told an audience in Jaffna that there would be no trials and that only Tamil diaspora organizations—not locals—wanted prosecutions.

In the following months, government officials including Sirisena; the new Foreign Minister, Ravi Karunanayake; and the Commander of the Army all pledged that Sri Lanka’s “war heroes” would never stand trial. As the 36th Human Rights Council session got underway in September 2017,
the government was particularly keen to foreclose the possibility of foreign involvement in any transitional justice process. The new Justice Minister, Thalatha Athukorala, reaffirmed that no members of the military would be tried by foreign judges, a promise echoed by the Prime Minister and Minister of Housing, Sajith Premadasa.

These official statements undermining Sri Lanka’s commitments to transitional justice were accompanied by similar repudiations regarding federalism, repeal of the PTA, and answers on enforced disappearances. The government has insisted that accusations of ongoing torture are “baseless and unfounded,” but there are reports of torture, including sexual violence, as recent as March 2018. Instead of investigating and prosecuting alleged torturers, the government promoted and commended individuals implicated in abuses.

At the same time, the military’s presence and infiltration into civilian life throughout the
North-East remains pervasive into 2018, including in religious, cultural, school, and tourism-related activities. PEARL’s joint research with Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research (ACPR) in July 2017 found that one-fourth of Sri Lanka’s Army was stationed in Mullaitivu District, resulting in an extraordinary ratio of nearly 1 soldier for every 2 civilians there. And despite the government’s promise to demilitarize, President Sirisena once again reassured military officers in November 2017 that the government would not release lands needed for “national security.”

Three years after his election, the government has resettled only 3,996 people, leaving 40,938 members of 12,674 families internally displaced (as of October 2017). In July 2017, the government released land to 50 families in Myliddy harbor, but returned it in uninhabitable condition and has given the families inadequate support to resume their fishing livelihood. The majority of homes, part of the harbor, and the hospital remained occupied as of February 2018. There is also evidence of ongoing land grabs, with the Navy giving notice in October 2017 that it acquired 672 acres in Mullivaikkaal and is taking private lands in...
Kayts. Military facilities continued expanding in the Vanni, Kilinochchi, and Mullaitivu, with new appropriations occurring as recently as March 2018.

The ongoing presence of the military in Tamil-inhabited areas has had a profound impact on civilians’ daily lives. Members of the security forces continue to harass and intimidate Tamils in the North-East, including targeting journalists by confiscating cameras and hauling them in for questioning. They have threatened protesters demanding information about the disappeared and the return of stolen land and continued to repress the commemoration of Tamils who died during the war. In 2017, organizers of events for both Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day and Maaveerar Naal were surveilled and intimidated, and in at least one case, subjected to
unfounded legal action.¹⁰⁴

Government agents have also targeted Tamil activists for their UN advocacy, harassing their families and attempting to intimidate them by taking photographs of them.¹⁰⁵ And in the UK, Brigadier Priyanka Fernando, defense attaché at Sri Lanka’s High Commission and alleged war criminal,¹⁰⁶ made a throat-slitting gesture toward British Tamils protesting on the 70th anniversary of Sri Lanka’s independence in February 2018. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs suspended him but Sirisena reinstated him less than a day later. The Army chief summoned him to return to Colombo about two weeks after the incident, reportedly to address the “embarrassment to the country”—not to discipline him or investigate his actions.¹⁰⁷

In predictable fashion, the limited concrete progress made by Sri Lanka was all undertaken last-minute to coincide with the 37th Human Rights Council session in February–March 2018. The government tried (and failed) to rush the passage of the Counter Terrorism Act to replace the PTA before the session.¹⁰⁸ During the first week, Sirisena appointed OMP commissioners,¹⁰⁹ ignoring victims and survivors’ calls for the exclusion of military personnel and the inclusion of women and victim-survivors’ representatives. The OMP then began its operations during the third week of the session.¹¹⁰ Parliament also passed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance Bill during the second week of the session.¹¹¹

International Community Begins Tempering its Praise of Sri Lanka While Simultaneously Strengthening Bilateral Relations

In the aftermath of the 34th Human Rights Council session in 2017, members of the international community, namely the US, UK, and EU, have toned down their praise of Sri Lanka’s human rights progress. However, despite recognizing that Sri Lanka is failing to perform on its transitional justice commitments, they have continued to increase military cooperation and aid.

While US State Department officials and human rights reports have raised red flags regarding Sri Lanka’s slow transitional justice progress and ongoing “Buddhist Sinhalese religious and cultural imperialism,” US defense officials have honored Sri Lanka’s “war heroes” and praised its return to peace. The Millennium Challenge Corporation, a US foreign aid agency, reselected Sri Lanka for eligibility to develop a compact for a 5 year grant, a decision that had originally been made in late 2015 based on its “remarkable effort … to reinvigorate its democratic institutions, improve governance, and restore protection of human rights.” The Peace Corps program, which the US closed in 1998, was recently reestablished.

The US has also strengthened its military ties with Sri Lanka, conducting training exercises with both the Air Force and the Navy in late 2017 and early 2018 as well as expanding


cooperation through the #USASL70 campaign, launched on the 70th anniversary of Sri Lanka’s independence. In addition, the US Embassy hosted a workshop on psychological operations in Kilinochchi in September 2017, providing psyops training to Army units that have been credibly accused of torture and remain deployed throughout the North-East. Notably, about one week earlier, US entities had urged Sri Lanka to establish “meaningful and credible transitional justice processes” and prosecute perpetrators of atrocity crimes.

In November 2017, on the same day as the publication of an Associated Press report on ongoing torture and sexual violence against Tamil detainees, the US Under-Secretary of Political Affairs praised Sri Lanka’s progress on accountability and reconciliation. In the same Colombo speech, he announced that the US would provide Sri Lanka’s Navy with a coastguard ship as a symbol of the countries’ partnership. His statements to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Sri Lanka’s independence emphasized the “upward trajectory” of the countries’ cooperation, making no mention of persistent human rights violations and impunity.

The UK has been harsher in its criticism, raising concerns about torture with Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner in London, identifying Sri Lanka as one of the 30 priority countries in the FCO’s annual human rights report, stressing the need for international involvement in accountability processes, and urging prompt implementation of Resolution 30/1. However,
it too has strengthened ties with the Sri Lankan military, even holding a program to teach English to troops stationed in the North-East. UK policy documents reflect continued faith that Sri Lanka possesses the political will to implement transitional justice measures and have downplayed human rights violations, such as those caused by militarization, that specifically affect the North-East.

In October 2017, the FCO Minister for Asia and the Pacific commended Sri Lanka’s “commitment to reconciliation and strengthening democracy.” Regarding Brigadier Priyanka Fernando’s throat-slitting threat to Tamil protestors in London, the FCO Minister apparently accepted Foreign Minister Tilak Marapana’s promise that the government would thoroughly investigate the incident.

Similarly, although Members of the European Parliament repeatedly raised concerns about the slow pace of legal reforms, the EU nevertheless restored Sri Lanka’s GSP+ status in May 2017. And despite the government’s failure to vet and reform the security sector, coupled with the military’s enduring human rights violations, UN peacekeepers were set to welcome Sri Lankan forces into their Lebanon mission in February 2018 until Tamil diaspora organizations and implementation-unhrc-resolution-301; @scullyp."""#Tamil families across #Sutton, Sri Lanka & the world are starting to celebrate their harvest festival. I wish you all a very happy #Thaipongal.""" Twitter. 14 January 2018, 7:49 AM. https://twitter.com/scullyp/status/952568263434817536.


human rights groups urged the UN not to deploy alleged war criminal Lt. Col. Rathnappuli Wasantha Kumara Hewage.\textsuperscript{137}

These mixed messages have enabled Sri Lankan officials to maintain the fiction domestically that the international community has stopped pressuring the government. In late March 2017, Sirisena informed an audience at Kurunegala Defense Services College that world leaders vowed that they would “stand by” Sri Lanka and its armed forces.\textsuperscript{138} A few months later, in one of his first speeches as Foreign Minister, Marapana assured his audience: “We have been given ample time and we can ask for further time also… we are not being pushed to implement it in five or ten years … we are not being pushed in that way at all.”\textsuperscript{139} Less than two weeks before the 36\textsuperscript{th} Human Rights Council session in September 2017, Sirisena echoed this claim, saying that the government had “defused” international pressure and that it was “premature to talk about a domestic inquiry.”\textsuperscript{140}


The Effect on the Victims

The leniency shown by members of the international community does not just communicate to the Sri Lankan government that it can get away with flouting its obligations. It also tells the victim-survivor community that their suffering and struggle for accountability is increasingly unimportant. Throughout the post-war period, international human rights pressure on Sri Lanka has served as a lifeline for Tamils living in war-affected areas. One prominent example was the release of Tamil activist Jeyakumari Balendran on March 10, 2015. The government had arrested and detained her in March 2014 for campaigning against enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions, holding her without charge until international pressure at the Human Rights Council contributed to her release.\(^{141}\) With war-affected individuals’ faith in the Sri Lankan government non-existent, their best hope for accountability has always rested with members of the international community. But increased military cooperation accompanied by commendations of Sri Lanka’s “progress”—despite ongoing repression and overt repudiation of transitional justice commitments—has put a significant dent in victims and survivors’ trust in the international community.

Victims’ Low Expectations

“Hope is gone now”

(Batticaloa, July 2017)

The majority of our interviews were conducted shortly after the OMP bill was finally signed into law in July 2017. However, while the international community interpreted the bill’s passage as an encouraging sign of progress, our interviewees were universally pessimistic about the OMP and the prospects for transitional justice more broadly. As one member of the victim-survivor community put it, underscoring the government’s refusal to provide any information about the fate of the disappeared: “If they can’t even answer simple questions, what is the OMP going to do? They just want to hoodwink the international community” (Mullaitivu, July 2017).

Another explained that she lost faith in the process after the results of the consultative process were ignored. “During the consultations, nothing from us was taken on board. We expected good things from the consultations—we were able to share our view, but nothing has happened” (Batticaloa, July 2017). A longtime community activist pointed out that victim-survivors were also not included in the establishment of the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), dismissing it as “just another office” (Vavuniya, July 2017).

“They use the OMP as a handy excuse to show progress—but where is this OMP? Why haven’t we been contacted yet about how it will work?”

(Batticaloa, October 2017)

Many highlighted the absence not only of victim-survivor participation in decision-making, but also outreach to inform them about transitional justice institutions. Some said the only information they had received about the OMP came from the newspaper (Amparai, July 2017) or mentioned hearing the name “ONUR” but nothing further (Mullativu, July 2017). Others noted the spread of misinformation. One victim-survivor said a local government official told her that the OMP was already operational and had an office open in Kilinochchi (Batticaloa, July 2017), which was untrue.

Nearly everyone we spoke to emphasized Sri Lanka’s long history of window-dressing accountability institutions. Several family members of the disappeared estimated that they had submitted information about their missing loved ones on as many as 50 occasions to past commissions, police stations, and government officials. “We started in 2009 from the IDP camps and haven’t stopped” (Mullaitivu, July 2017).

These experiences left many exhausted and wondering about the point of participating in another institution. Nevertheless, several said they planned to go to the OMP anyway, despite having “no hope and no expectation” (Trincomalee, July 2017). Some expressed the concern that if they did not participate, the government would use that fact strategically “as an excuse for more time at the Human Rights Council” (Batticaloa, July 2017).

Members of the victim-survivor community clearly saw the disconnect between Sri Lanka’s rhetoric abroad and actions at home. “There is no will on the part of the government” said one activist, referring to the government’s promises in Geneva (Kilinochchi, July 2017). Again and again, they highlighted the fact that in the absence of international participation, any transitional justice process would be a farce.

“How can those responsible prosecute themselves?”

(Mullaitivu, July 2017)

While they were particularly pessimistic about the prospect of criminal accountability without international involvement, many also stressed the need for a role for foreigners in the OMP. “Without international participation in the OMP, the government won’t let information about perpetrators come out” (Batticaloa, July 2017). Others pointed out that it was “only because of the international community” that progress had occurred on related issues such as land return (Jaffna, July 2017).
Losing Faith in the International Community

“We have no faith in the government but [have faith] in the international community”

(Amparai, July 2017)

None of the protesters we spoke to expressed surprise that the government had failed to act on their demands. In fact, many downplayed any expectation that the Sirisena administration would respond to them, identifying their target audience as the international community rather than the Sri Lankan government (Mullaitivu, July 2017). “Our only hope is that the international community puts pressure on the government” (Kilinochchi, October 2017). Several mentioned their wish for more members of the international community to come meet with them. “It has to have an effect—at least let the international community know what’s happening” (Vavuniya, July 2017).

Our interviewees were surprised and confused by the two-year extension granted to Sri Lanka by the Human Rights Council in March 2017. “The government can’t even do the OMP. How are they going to do the bigger things they promised?” (Batticaloa, July 2017). One activist who had been to Geneva described the costs of delay: “I told them, you give them two years, you are giving time to the Army” (Vavuniya, July 2017). Another argued that Sri Lanka had already shown that the extension was worthless: “What have they done in four months?” (Amparai, July 2017).

For many, this confusion shaded into frustration. “I don’t understand what the international community is waiting for” (Batticaloa, July 2017). Several victims and survivors criticized the international community for what they saw as willful blindness to Sri Lanka’s intransigence on transitional justice. One called out specific members of the international community, saying: “The US, UK, and Swiss used to be very active, now they don’t open their mouths” (Kilinochchi, July 2017). Another remarked incredulously: “The international community is sending us to the government and the military for justice even now” (Jaffna, July 2017). Advocates working with the families of the disappeared explained that victims and survivors “had expectations of the international community” (Kilinochchi, July 2017) and that when the extension was announced “they were shocked” (Vavuniya, July 2017).
**Collective Action**

As this frustration over the lack of progress has grown, members of the victim-survivor community have taken to the streets in numbers unprecedented in the post-war period. For the last year, families of the disappeared, largely led by women, have sat in continuous protest in five out of the eight districts of the North-East. The protesters’ demands are simple: information about the fate of their missing loved ones.

**Days of protest by site (as of May 14th 2018)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Days of Protest</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iranaitivu</td>
<td>378 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilinochchi</td>
<td>448 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maruthankerny</td>
<td>426 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullaithivu</td>
<td>433 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullikulam</td>
<td>37 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keppapilavu</td>
<td>468 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trincomalee</td>
<td>437 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vavuniya</td>
<td>445 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In June 2017, Sirisena met with representatives of the families and agreed to provide a list of those held by the government. Yet no list has been released despite two additional meetings between Sirisena and the families. Individuals interviewed by PEARL who had attended those meetings were cynical about their purpose, noting that Sirisena only spent a brief amount of time with them and did not seem to listen to their concerns. “The meetings happen because the government wants to break the protests” (Mullaitivu, July 2017).

Meanwhile, the protests have been extremely taxing on the families. One activist pointed to the emotional toll of spending all day, every day, focused on their disappeared loved ones as well as the strain it puts on relationships between remaining family members. “Before they were stronger, now they are more traumatized” (Kilinochchi, July 2017). The protesters’ physical condition is also precarious. Many of them were already in poor health before facing the difficulty of sitting in the road in harsh conditions for over a year. Eight have died, still unsure of what happened to their children.142

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Other collective actions within the North-East have accompanied the protests by the families of the disappeared. More than 10,000 people poured into the streets of Jaffna for the Ezhuka Tamil rally in September 2016, with thousands more participating in a follow-up in Batticaloa. Since early 2017, war-affected Tamils all over the North-East organized to demand the return of military-occupied lands, the release of political prisoners, and the repeal of the PTA. Protesters demanding the return of military-stolen and occupied lands set up camp across from the Air Force Base in Pilaakkudiyiruppu on January 31, 2017, when the military told villagers they would receive their lands later that day and this did not happen. Shortly after the release of some Pilaakkudiyiruppu lands, 138 families of Keppapilavu village also began a continuous protest to demand the return of their lands around March 1, 2017. Similarly, in Iranaitivu, an islet in the Palk Bay off Kilinochchi, 366 families commenced protesting on May 1, 2017 to demand the return of their navy-occupied lands in order to end their displacement since the 1990s. Like the families’ protests, these demonstrations have been met with hollow promises from the government, which has meanwhile surveilled and harassed participants.

**Conclusion**

The need for a transitional justice process to address war-time abuses in Sri Lanka is clear. However, in spite of years of back-and-forth between Sri Lanka and international audiences about the potential shape of such a process, accountability is little closer today than it was in 2009. Sri Lankan government officials continue to make promises to the international community and then retract them in front of domestic audiences. The minimal progress made by the government has only occurred due to heightened pressure from looming UN Human Rights Council sessions and, more often than not, has been undermined by shoddy execution and immediate backtracking. Nevertheless, members of the international community have shown remarkable lenience, choosing to accept Sri Lanka’s claims that it is moving forward on its transitional justice commitments—not skillfully evading them.

But while the international community’s patience is seemingly inexhaustible, the victim-survivor community’s is not. Faced with the government’s refusal to meet their demands

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for accountability and the failure of members of the international community to press for meaningful change, war-affected communities in the North-East have engaged in collective action in unprecedented numbers. Most notably, mothers of disappeared persons have stood in the road for months on end—over a year now—risking not only exhaustion and illness, but also harassment and intimidation by the yet-to-be vetted security forces stationed among them. For many victims and survivors, their target audience remains members of the international community who they hope to persuade to intervene on their behalf.


Unsurprisingly, the government of Sri Lanka considered the 37th session a “success,” boasting that it “emerg[ed] proud” at the HRC.\footnote{News.lk. “Sri Lanka Emerges Proud at UNHRC.” 25 March 2018. https://news.lk/news/sri-lanka/item/19909-sri-lanka-emerges-proud-atunhrc.} In the words of one diplomat, Sri Lanka “has been successful in restoring its reputation on the world stage” without ever “allow[ing] a single person to be investigated for their conduct of the war.”\footnote{Id.}

The decision of UN Human Rights Council members to drop their calls for a prosecutorial mechanism with international involvement suggests that Sri Lanka has managed to stall for long enough that the international community is moving on. For the victims and survivors of Sri Lanka’s crimes, this outcome is intolerable. Our interviews in late 2017 revealed a growing sense among Tamils in the North-East that the international community has again abandoned them to whatever fate the Sri Lankan government sees fit to mete out, just as it did in the final phase of the war. The disappearance of transitional justice from the international agenda at this moment of increasing political mobilization among the victim-survivor community represents a potential inflection point in the pursuit of reconciliation and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.
The growing protest movement across the North-East reflects the fact that despite Sri Lanka’s grand promises in Geneva, many Tamils feel that nothing has changed for them. “Are we even in a transition?” (Vavuniya, July 2017) queried one activist, echoing comments made by numerous interviewees. Others spoke of the possibility that the increasing anger within the Tamil community may spark violence. “Our children are talking about taking up arms” (Mullaitivu, July 2017). Many suggested that the ongoing failure to grapple with victims and survivors’ grievances is endangering the prospects for long-term peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

“If the government doesn’t listen, there needs to be other action. If that doesn’t happen, Tamils will take up arms. This is how it all started.”

(Kilinochchi, July 2017)