



### **PEARL condemns Sri Lanka's latest assault on Tamils' right to remember**

Washington D.C.; September 24, 2020 — PEARL is deeply concerned by reports that a Sri Lankan court has banned commemorations of Lt. Col. Thillepan, who died while conducting a hunger strike for Tamil rights in 1987. PEARL condemns the arrest, pursuant to the ban, of those involved in organizing remembrance activities and stands in solidarity with the protests planned in response.

This is an alarming escalation in the state's continuing efforts to block Tamils from commemorating significant days in the Tamil struggle. Although security forces have consistently surveilled and harassed Tamils attempting to commemorate the struggle in the post-war period, this abuse of legal process is a troubling development.

PEARL condemns the arrest last week of former MP MK Shivajilingam and stands in support of the unity shown by Tamil nationalist parties, including the Tamil National Alliance, the Tamil National People's Front and the Tamil Makkal Kootani, in condemning the state's actions.

Security forces have surveilled and harassed those organizing and attending commemorations linked to the Tamil struggle in the past, as PEARL reported in our 2016 report on this topic, [Erasing the Past: Repression of Memorialization in North-East Sri Lanka](#). However the current constellation of a hyper-nationalist and Sinhala Buddhist supremacist state, and a president and parliament unconcerned with Tamil rights, is an even more dangerous mix. These abuses of legal processes will lay the ground for further bans, arrests and intimidation, including around Maaveerar Naal on November 27, and Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day on May 18, both commemorated annually by tens of thousands across the Tamil homeland and the diaspora. This not only further shrinks the political space, fought for by Tamils over the years, it also dashes any faint hopes some may have held of meaningful accountability and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Unimpeded memorialization is inextricably linked to free speech and expression, and has been one of the fundamental demands of the Tamil people. Ending state repression of remembrance activities will aid all survivors of violence and facilitate the healing process. "For the ethnic conflict to be sustainably resolved, its participants and victim-survivors must be allowed to remember freely," Executive Director Tasha Manoranjan said. "Restriction of memorialization by the state and the continued forcible imposition of one-sided narratives will only divide the country further."

A ban on Tamil memorialization is a slippery slope and will accelerate Sri Lanka's descent into further conflict. PEARL urges the international community to send an unequivocal message that interfering with the Tamil community's right to remember is an unacceptable breach of domestic and international law protecting free speech and expression. Sri Lanka's continued repression, discrimination and impunity for mass atrocities must have consequences.