State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East
Executive Summary

This report outlines the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL)'s multi-pronged Sinhalization efforts in the North-East through the use of state-aided Sinhala settlements and irrigation schemes, economic marginalization and land appropriation by Sri Lankan state bodies, "Buddhisization," and repression of memorialization of important Tamil events. When considered against the broader context of decades of state-driven demographic shifts, this report’s findings support the conclusion that the GoSL is reengineering the demographics in the North-East of Sri Lanka with clear political implications. The systematic and strategic alteration of the North-East's demographics is designed to destroy the Tamil concept of a homeland in the North-East and permanently diminish Tamil democratic representation from the region.

Part I outlines the need for this report, and ominous warning signs that grave human rights violations remain imminent given Sri Lanka's current culture of impunity. It further defines Sinhalization as a supremacist, settler-colonial enterprise that seeks to supplant the distinct Tamil character of the North-East with that of a unitary Sinhala-Buddhist state. Finally, it summarizes the key historical context, from the roots of Sinhalization after the British colonial era, through the armed conflict and into the post-conflict years.

Part II analyzes the legal framework underpinning the GoSL's irrigation-settlement schemes in the North-East, which are currently chiefly carried out under the umbrella of the Mahaweli Development Project at the direction of the Mahaweli Authority. The Mahaweli Authority in turn exercises a sweepingly broad legal mandate to acquire and develop both privately-owned and public lands through irrigation schemes. The Government then subsidizes the settlement of Sinhalese people into these historically Tamil lands in order to farm the newly irrigated land, all while blocking Tamil efforts to have their land ownership claims recognized. As a result, thousands of Tamils remain displaced, unable to re-enter their lands or carry out their traditional livelihoods.

Part III highlights the role that the ongoing military occupation plays in the dispossession, displacement, and economic marginalization of Tamils in the North-East. Through the continuing proliferation of military-run High Security Zones (HSZs), the state has effectively blocked Tamils from rebuilding their homes and livelihoods after the armed conflict. Meanwhile, the military-dominated tourism sector promotes Buddhist-nationalist narratives while displacing and marginalizing the economic activities that Tamils traditionally carried out on their lands. Finally, the chapter briefly examines the militarization of "community projects" and the appointment of various military-run Presidential Task Forces with sweeping powers. Together, these activities aim to normalize a pervasive military presence and surveillance of civilian life in the North-East.

Part IV turns to the direct construction and reinforcement of the State's ethnocentric, Buddhist-nationalist narrative in its Buddhisization of Tamil lands and religious sites. In 2020, the GoSL appointed and invested in a new Task Force for Archaeological Heritage in the Eastern Province with wide-ranging powers and no accountability or Tamil representation. The Task Force, which has been staffed exclusively with Sinhala military brass and Buddhist religious leaders, perhaps unsurprisingly focuses on the "discovery," building, and preservation of Buddhist monuments and religious sites in the historically Muslim and Hindu Eastern Province. As a result, Tamils have lost access to a number of their religious and cultural sites. At the same time, such sites draw Buddhist pilgrims and create new spaces for Buddhist cultural activities and narrative-building.

Each of the strategies examined act as a means to not only occupy and dominate the physical space of the Tamil homeland, but also displace the historical and cultural touchstones of Tamil community life in the North-East. This serves the Sri Lankan nation-building vision of a unitary Sinhala- Buddhist state. In each case, the GoSL has created one or more governing bodies—from the Mahaweli Authority to a range of
executive Task Forces—that are designed to centralize power and remove local governance structures in Tamil-dominated regions. In addition, these processes occur at the expense of the rule of law, since the Sri Lankan courts have repeatedly shown themselves to be unable or unwilling to enforce any meaningful legal checks against government Sinhalization activities. The collective effect is an erosion of human rights and democratic accountability throughout the country.

**Part V** examines the ways in which the GoSL attempts to override and repress Tamil narratives and memories of the armed conflict. The GoSL has sought to Sinhalize the historical identity of the North-East by promoting Sinhalese perspectives on memory and history, while simultaneously suppressing the perspectives of Tamil-speaking communities. Tamils have resisted through acts of memorialization that highlight the existence of the Tamil nation and honor the power and potential of the Tamil right to their land, their culture, and their self-determination.

In its final chapter, **Part VI**, the report highlights Tamil resistance in the face of the State’s efforts to dismantle the communities and demographics of Tamil-speaking regions in the North-East, and offers policy recommendations that protect and advance Tamils’ human rights. In particular, the broad acknowledgement of the traditional Tamil homeland, addressing the root causes of the armed conflict, empowering local governance over lands and resources in the North-East, and meaningful accountability and justice are vital for countering the oppressive effects of Sinhalization.

Reversing these trends and ensuring that Tamils can realize their rights will require both international and GoSL actors to engage in constructive collaborations to listen to and respect Tamil demands for justice.