



PEOPLE FOR EQUALITY AND RELIEF IN LANKA

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International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances: PEARL Reinforces the Need for International Accountability for Tamil Victims

Washington D.C.; August 30, 2026 — Today marks the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. Thousands of Tamils remain unaccounted for since the 1980s, including many who were last seen in the custody of Sri Lankan security forces. For over a decade, their families across the Tamil North-East have held roadside vigils demanding answers, with some family members dying without ever learning their loved ones' fate. Instead of truth and justice, families have faced surveillance, intimidation, harassment, and disruption of their peaceful protests. PEARL stands in solidarity with these families and their decades-long struggle for truth and justice.

The discovery of nearly 600 sets of human remains, including children, at Chemmani in Jaffna, now the largest mass grave uncovered on the island, has further exposed Sri Lanka's unresolved legacy of enforced disappearances. Chemmani is one of many mass graves across the North-East. Successive governments have relied on failed domestic mechanisms, including numerous commissions of inquiry and the Office on Missing Persons, while political interference, witness intimidation, and a lack of political will to pursue genuine justice have obstructed meaningful accountability. Chemmani is particularly significant on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. For Tamil families who have spent decades searching for their loved ones, mass graves represent both the possibility of answers and the consequences of decades of impunity. Establishing the identities and circumstances of death of those buried at Chemmani is therefore inseparable from the wider struggle to account for the disappeared and pursue justice for the violations committed against them.

Any process addressing enforced disappearances must place Tamil families at its center and recognize the decades of advocacy through which they have kept the search for the disappeared alive. The families are not merely recipients of information or participants to be consulted after decisions are made. Their demands must be taken into account. After years of failed domestic mechanisms and broken promises, any credible process should be victim-centered, protect families and witnesses, provide meaningful access to information, and ensure families can participate without surveillance, intimidation, or reprisals.

As the international community prepares for the 63rd Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Sri Lanka will once again seek to reassure states that domestic processes are sufficient and meaningful progress is being made. Any process concerning the disappeared, including the investigation at Chemmani, must command the confidence of affected Tamil families and communities, with transparency, meaningful participation, protection of witnesses and evidence, and credible pathways to criminal accountability.

Today, PEARL renews its call for an independent international accountability mechanism for Sri Lanka, mandated to investigate international crimes, preserve evidence, identify perpetrators, and support future prosecutions. Until the disappeared are accounted for and perpetrators held responsible, enforced disappearance will remain emblematic of Sri Lanka's failure to confront its atrocities.