



Covering events from January - December 2000

SRI LANKA

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Head of state and government: Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga

Capital: Colombo

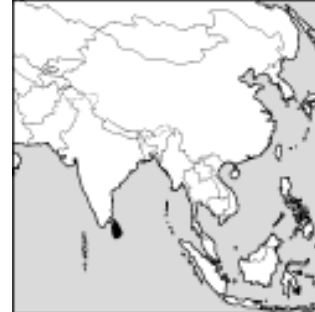
Population: 18.8 million

Official languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English

Death penalty: abolitionist in practice

2000 treaty ratifications/signatures:

Optional Protocol to the UN Children's Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict



The continuing armed conflict and a general rise in violence dominated Sri Lanka in 2000. April and May saw particularly ferocious fighting between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main armed opposition group fighting for an independent state, Eelam, in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Tens of thousands of people were internally displaced by the fighting. People taking no active part in the hostilities faced gross human rights abuses, including indiscriminate bombing and shelling, killings, "disappearances", torture and the recruitment of child soldiers. Widespread violence took place during parliamentary elections in October. There was also a rise in paramilitary and vigilante activities. The failure to bring to justice those responsible for human rights violations remained a major concern.

Background

A state of emergency remained in force throughout the country. After heavy fighting and the capture of the strategically important Elephant Pass army camp by the LTTE, measures were introduced in May to put the country on a "war footing". New Emergency Regulations (ERs) considerably extended the security forces' powers to detain and included provisions granting powers of arrest to "any other authorized persons". The ERs also provided wide powers of censorship.

In February, the Norwegian government agreed to facilitate a dialogue between the government and the LTTE, but by the end of the year few concrete results were visible. The government's efforts to introduce constitutional reforms aimed at resolving the ethnic conflict were shelved in August after it failed to muster the required two-thirds majority in parliament.

No party won an overall majority in parliamentary elections in October. The

People's Alliance formed a new government with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Eelam People's Democratic Party.

The security forces and LTTE stepped up the procurement of arms.

Killings of civilians

Amid the escalating conflict, the number of internally displaced civilians rose from around 400,000 in January to around 570,000 by the end of June. At least 150 civilians were killed in attacks by both sides. Both the army and the LTTE were responsible for not taking adequate measures to avoid civilian casualties.

- In October, at least 24 civilians were killed in two separate attacks on election rallies by LTTE suicide bombers. Scores of civilians were killed in other attacks, apparently carried out by the LTTE, in Colombo.
- The army shot dead 17 civilians, including nine children, in Batticaloa town in May, apparently in reprisal for the killing of three policemen by a bomb concealed in a ice cream vendor's freezer box.
- On 2 October, seven Tamil civilians were killed by Muslim Home Guards - villagers armed ostensibly for their own protection - at Poonagar, Muttur, Trincomalee district, in apparent reprisal for the killing of two Muslim Home Guards by members of the LTTE earlier that day.

'Disappearances'

At least 20 "disappearances" were reported during 2000. As in previous years, the highest number - 11- were reported from the Vavuniya area. An internal inquiry ordered by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga into seven cases reported between 10 and 26 August seemed to bring a temporary halt to "disappearances" in that area, but two more cases were reported in early October. Other "disappearances" were reported from Colombo, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar and Trincomalee. Naval personnel were held responsible for two "disappearances" in Trincomalee.

- Eight displaced civilians, including a five-year-old boy, "disappeared" after being arrested while visiting their homes on 19 December. Their bodies were recovered from an illegal grave six days later. Thirteen soldiers were arrested in connection with their abduction and murder.

Torture/ill-treatment

Torture/ill-treatment

Torture remained common, both in the context of the armed conflict and during routine policing operations. Reports of torture increased following the introduction of ERs in May. However, later in the year reports of torture appeared to decline, possibly partly as a result of a number of measures taken by the government after a visit to the country by the Committee against Torture. These included, among other things, the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Standing Committee to take action with regard to cases of torture. By the end of 2000 no one had been convicted of offences related to the crime of torture. There were frequent reports of torture involving the Security Coordinating Unit of the Vavuniya police and the army camps at Urelu and Atchelu in Jaffna. There were reports of rape by the army in Jaffna and Batticaloa and by police in Negombo.

- Five labourers arrested on suspicion of involvement with the LTTE were

tortured by police at Kantalai, Trincomalee, in June. One of them died apparently as a result of torture, although police and other officials claimed that he was shot while trying to escape.

Deaths in custody

Several incidents of violence in prison and other detention facilities were reported.

- A Tamil detainee died as a result of injuries sustained during a clash between prison guards and political prisoners in Ward F at Kalutara prison on 6 January. The following day, another detainee was killed in an apparently deliberate attack by prison guards on prisoners in Ward C.
- On 25 October, 27 young Tamil men and boys aged between 14 and 23 detained for "rehabilitation" were killed during an attack by a mob of Sinhalese villagers on a rehabilitation camp at Bindunuwewa, Badulla district. There was evidence of collusion by members of the local police and deliberate failure to protect the detainees.

Political prisoners

Thousands of Tamil people were arrested on suspicion of involvement with the LTTE. At least 1,500 were held without charge or trial at the end of the year; some had been detained for more than four years.

Impunity

Impunity for the perpetrators of human rights abuses remained a major concern. Victims who sought justice through the courts received death threats. The report of a Presidential commission of inquiry, set up in 1998 to investigate complaints of past "disappearances" not examined by three earlier commissions, was handed over to the President in late August. The implementation of the recommendations of previous commissions and of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which visited the country in 1999, proceeded slowly.

- Officers from Tangalle police station standing trial for torturing Mahanama Geeganage Chandrakumara in 1990, attempted to stop him and his parents from giving evidence against them by intimidation and death threats. The trial was continuing at the end of the year.
- Four army personnel and a police officer were arrested in March on suspicion of involvement in the "disappearance" in 1996 of 15 people whose bodies were recovered from shallow graves in the Chemmani area of Jaffna district in 1999. The five were released on bail in June. The criminal investigation was continuing at the end of the year.

Death penalty

Scores of people were sentenced to death for murder. No one was executed. In November, the government announced that it would put into practice a decision announced in 1999 to resume executions. AI expressed concern about this major step backwards for human rights.

Violations by vigilante and paramilitary groups

Tamil armed groups working alongside the security forces, and members of the security forces acting outside the normal command and control structures, were

allegedly responsible for human rights violations, including against journalists.

- Circumstantial evidence put the blame for the killing of Mylvaganam Nimalrajan, Jaffna correspondent for various newspapers and international agencies, on members of the Eelam People's Democratic Party working with the security forces. He was killed in his home in the High Security Zone of Jaffna town during curfew.
- Kumar Ponnambalam, President of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, was killed on 5 January by two gunmen in what appeared to be a carefully planned attack. The motive and the identity of those responsible for ordering the killing were unclear. There were concerns that police investigations into his murder may have been subject to political influence. A reserve police constable was among those arrested in connection with the murder.

Child soldiers

The LTTE stepped up the recruitment of children as combatants after the intense fighting in Jaffna in May. Those recruited included children as young as 12.

AI country report

- Sri Lanka: New Emergency Regulations - erosion of human rights protection (AI Index: [ASA 37/019/2000](#))
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