

**Debate Pack**

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# Human rights in Sri Lanka

<b>1</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Press and media articles</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Press releases</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>PQs</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Further Parliamentary material</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Further reading</b>	<b>29</b>

# 1 Summary

A Westminster Hall debate on human rights in Sri Lanka is scheduled for Wednesday 20 March 2024, from 2:30-4:00pm. The debate will be led by Elliot Colburn MP.

# 2 Background

## Civil war

In 2009, [Sri Lanka's civil war came to an end](#) after more than two decades of conflict, with the decisive military defeat of the Tamil Tigers (also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE) by Sri Lanka's armed forces.

The Tamil Tigers were an armed separatist group fighting for an independent homeland for Tamils in North-eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the Tamil population live. They were [proscribed as a terrorist group by the UK Government in 2001](#).

Sri Lanka's relationship with the rest of the world has been strongly shaped since then by allegations that the army committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during the final phase of the civil war. A UN Panel of Experts reported in April 2011 that [there were "credible allegations" of those crimes](#) by both government and Tamil Tiger forces.<sup>1</sup>

The Sri Lankan Government in power in the final phase of the war [denied many of the accusations of crimes made against the military and civilian Government at the time](#), and argued Tamil forces had used civilians as "human shields".<sup>2</sup>

## Reconciliation after the Civil War

In February 2020 the Sri Lankan government, then led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, [withdrew its support for a UN-led reconciliation process](#), which had committed the Sri Lankan government to investigate and prosecute war-related crimes as part of a package of wide-ranging legal reforms and transitional justice measures.

Ranil Wickremesinghe [took over as permanent President in July 2022 after Rajapaksa fled the country following mass protests against his government](#). In May 2023, the new government announced that it [was establishing a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission](#), that would take "[Tak\[e\] into](#)

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<sup>1</sup> UN, [Panel of experts finds credible reports of war crimes during Sri Lanka conflict - UN](#), 25 April 2011

<sup>2</sup> [Sri Lanka rejects deaths report](#), BBC News, 29 May 2009.

[account the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa](#)".<sup>3</sup>

The Commission is set to comprise of 21 members that will "[represent the pluralistic nature of Sri Lanka, including gender](#)".<sup>4</sup>

Human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch [criticised the plans in a joint letter](#), writing they had "grave reservations" about the Commission that "echo many of those already raised by victims of conflict-related abuses and their families".<sup>5</sup> The letter states further that:

The latest initiative risks repeating the mistakes of the past, exposing victims to renewed security threats and re-traumatization without any realistic chance of a different outcome. There have not been any genuine confidence-building measures, or steps to ensure a safe and conducive environment for such a commission to function effectively. There has been no meaningful consultation, including with affected communities.<sup>6</sup>

[A 2023 analysis by the International Crisis Group echoes these concerns, arguing that the Commission](#) "in present circumstances, would have little to no chance of success".<sup>7</sup>

In October 2023, in an interview with German broadcaster DW, [President Wickremesinghe defended plans for the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission](#), saying discussions were ongoing and more details would be available soon:

At the moment discussions are on with the parties plus the government, and we are talking with the western governments [...] and the Truth and Reconciliation Bill will come to Parliament before the end of the year.<sup>8</sup>

[A report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, published in September 2023 for the 54<sup>th</sup> UN Human Rights Council](#), criticised the Sri Lankan government's reconciliation plans and called for "deeper institutional reforms and tangible progress on accountability, reconciliation and human rights".<sup>9</sup>

Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Himalee Arunatilaka, [delivered a statement in response to the report in which she said her government rejected the report and "its conclusions and recommendations"](#). She stated further that: "Sri Lanka remains firmly committed to pursuing tangible progress on human rights through our

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<sup>3</sup> News.LK, [Cabinet Decisions 29.05.2023](#), 30 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup> The Sunday Times, [Government gives priority to national unity and reconciliation](#), 9 April 2023.

<sup>5</sup> HRW, [Joint Statement: Sri Lanka's Flawed Plans for a 'Truth Commission'](#), 4 September 2023.

<sup>6</sup> As above.

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group, [Sri Lanka Needs Truth, but Not \(Yet\) a Truth Commission](#), 7 September 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Sri Lankan President's Office, [President Ranil Wickremesinghe Discusses Key Issues in Interview with Deutsche Welle](#), October 2023.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, [Accountability central to Sri Lanka's future - UN Human Rights report](#), 6 September 2023.

domestic institutions”. The statement added that “The proposed truth-seeking mechanism has been identified as a meaningful way to secure the peace achieved after three decades of brutal conflict. Consultations are ongoing with stakeholders including the civil society on the proposed mechanism”.<sup>10</sup>

## Human Rights reports

A December 2023 Commons Library Debate Pack looked at [Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights](#), and a November 2022 Debate Pack focused on the [UK response to the human rights and economic situation in Sri Lanka](#), after a year of political and economic upheaval, during which mass protests led to the resignation of the country’s President.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), the human rights NGO, in a [January 2024 report looking at human rights in Sri Lanka in 2023](#), raised issues with growing hunger, the lack of social protections, and existing and new laws being used by the government to stifle dissent:

Regressive government policies and inadequate social protection left many Sri Lankans at risk from the worst effects of the country’s economic crisis.

A US\$3 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) helped stem the immediate economic crisis in Sri Lanka after it had defaulted on its foreign debt in 2022. However, the government and IMF’s response to the economic situation undermined human rights, leaving more than 17 percent of the population moderately or acutely food insecure and in need of humanitarian assistance and 31 percent of children under 5 malnourished, according to the World Food Programme.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who came to power in 2022 after his predecessor’s departure from office following months-long protests, sought to suppress dissent, ending a moratorium on the use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). A proposed new counterterrorism law would give sweeping powers to the police, the military, and the president, and create new speech-related offenses. Other proposed legislation would further constrain freedom of expression online.

In the north and east of Sri Lanka, which was most affected by the 1983-2009 civil war, victims of past human rights violations, their families, and activists campaigning for truth and accountability were subjected to surveillance and intimidation by the police and intelligence agencies.<sup>11</sup>

A March 2024 report by HRW reported comments by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, on enacted and proposed laws that HRW say will “will severely curtail civil liberties”, including the Online Safety Act, the Anti-Terrorism Bill, the Electronic Media Broadcasting Authority Bill, and the Non-Governmental Organization Supervision and

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<sup>10</sup> Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [GoSL Statement made by H.E. Himalee Arunatilaka, the Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations in Geneva](#), 11 September 2023.

<sup>11</sup> HRW, [Sri Lanka: Events of 2023](#), January 2024.

Registration Bill. Türk warned that these policies “grant broad powers to the security forces, and severely restrict rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression, impacting not only on civic space but the business environment”.<sup>12</sup>

Sri Lanka is one of the UK’s 32 ‘human rights priority countries’ as identified by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The [FCDO’s annual human rights and democracy report published in July 2023](#), looking back at 2022, raised issues with the “marginalisation” of minority communities by state authorities, the treatment of the Tamil minority, and the security responses to the 2022 protests which it said “often featured intimidation and violence against peaceful protesters”.<sup>13</sup>

The FCDO report also stated that the Sri Lankan government had “signalled its readiness to decriminalise same-sex relations”, describing it as a “welcome move”. In May 2023 the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled that [draft legislation to implement decriminalisation was constitutional](#). The legislation has yet to be passed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> HRW, [Sri Lankan Laws Threaten Democracy, Warns UN Rights Chief](#), 6 March 2024.

<sup>13</sup> FCDO, [Human Rights and Democracy: the 2022 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office report](#), 13 July 2023.

<sup>14</sup> As above.

## 3

# Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

### [Sri Lankan laws threaten democracy, warns UN rights chief](#)

Human Rights Watch

Lucy McKernan

6 March 2024

### [Sri Lanka is focussed on 'suppressing dissent and limiting international attention on human rights'](#)

Tamil Guardian

15 February 2024

### [Sri Lanka's controversial internet safety law comes into force](#)

BBC News Online

Kelly Ng

1 February 2024

### [Sri Lanka: New transitional justice process lacks credibility](#)

Human Rights Watch

29 January 2024

### [Sri Lanka has arrested tens of thousands in drug raids criticized by UN human rights body](#)

AP News

Jayampathi Palipane

19 January 2024

### [Sri Lanka: Events of 2023](#) (Human Rights Watch World Report)

Human Rights Watch

11 January 2024

### [Still rebuilding, still resisting](#) (Editorial)

Tamil Guardian

27 November 2023

### [Ranil questions 'double standards' of U.S. in Gaza and Sri Lanka](#)

The Hindu

Meera Srinivasan

4 November 2023

[Reprisals against peaceful protesters protesting against ongoing pastureland encroachment in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa](#)

Front Line Defenders  
13 October 2023

[Tamil refugees on Diego Garcia win fight against forcible return to Sri Lanka](#)

The Guardian  
Diane Taylor  
25 September 2023

[Congress wants to hold Sri Lanka's feet to the fire on human rights](#)

Foreign Policy  
Anusha Rathi and Jack Detsch  
21 September 2023

["If We Raise Our Voice They Arrest Us" Sri Lanka's Proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (PDF)

Human Rights Watch  
September 2023

[Sri Lanka's reconciliation efforts get stuck in the 13th Amendment, again](#)

The Diplomat  
Rathindra Kuruwita  
27 July 2023

[British Parliamentarians urge for formal recognition of Tamil genocide](#)

Tamil Guardian  
15 June 2023

[Spotlight sought on urgent human rights challenges in Sri Lanka](#)

Colombo Gazette  
2 April 2023

[Human rights abuses are plaguing Sri Lanka – the UK must step up and introduce sanctions](#)

Politics Home (The House)  
Elliot Coburn MP  
11 November 2022

[The overlooked human rights problem: Sri Lankan Tamils](#)

International Relations Review  
12 October 2021

## 4

## Press releases

### UN Human Rights Council 55: Core Group Statement on Item 2 General Debate – Sri Lanka

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

4 March 2024

HRC55 Item 2 General Debate: Sri Lanka. Core Group Statement delivered by the UK's Human Rights Ambassador, Rita French.

Thank you, Mr President.

This statement is on behalf of the Sri Lanka Core Group comprising Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

High Commissioner,

There have been several important legislative developments regarding human rights, reconciliation and civic space. Unfortunately, some of these developments give cause for concern.

The Online Safety Act has the potential to severely restrict online communication and could potentially criminalise nearly all forms of expression, creating an environment that has a chilling effect on freedom of expression. We urge the government to enact amendments to align the Act with Sri Lanka's human rights obligations and commitments.

We continue to call for the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to be replaced with legislation that is consistent with Sri Lanka's international obligations. We acknowledge the recent release of nine Tamil leaders detained last November. We encourage the release of unjustly held long-term PTA detainees and for Sri Lanka to maintain a moratorium on its use.

While we note the government's efforts to establish a Commission on Truth, Unity and Reconciliation, we stress the importance of an inclusive participatory process to build trust in advance of any legislation. Any future commission must be independent, inclusive, meaningful, and transparent, meet the expectations of affected communities, build upon previous transitional justice processes, and provide pathways for accountability.

As the government brings forward other legislation with potentially serious implications for fundamental freedoms and civic space, we encourage comprehensive consultations with stakeholders, including civil society, and due legislative process.

We welcome the government's stated commitments on land releases but note with concern reports of increased tensions around land seizures in the north and, particularly, the east of the country.

High Commissioner,



We urge the government to engage with you and your office to address these and other challenges, and we remain ready to support Sri Lanka in addressing HRC resolution 51/1.

Thank you.

**High Commissioner H.E. Rohitha Bogollagama met with the Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, Minister of State (Indo-Pacific)**

**High Commission of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in the United Kingdom**

**10 February 2024**

High Commissioner H.E. Rohitha Bogollagama met with the Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, Minister of State (Indo-Pacific) on 6 January 2024 at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, United Kingdom.

The High Commissioner discussed with Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, Minister of State, matters related to Sri Lanka-United Kingdom bilateral relations with a special emphasis on economic engagement. High Commissioner Bogollagama thanked Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan for furthering Sri Lanka-UK relations and briefed her on his priorities during his tenure to enhance bilateral relations.

High Commissioner briefed Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka and highlighted that Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan's expertise in this area would significantly contribute to Sri Lanka's journey in reconciliation, recovery, and progressive development. High Commissioner also briefed Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan on the current developments in Sri Lanka with regard to the debt restructuring with IMF assistance.

**Human Rights Day Message**

**Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

**10 December 2023**

Today we commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Sri Lanka considers this milestone as an opportune occasion to reaffirm the intrinsic value of human rights for all, as enshrined in the UDHR.

The UDHR recognizes the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings. The UDHR has inspired more than 70 international human rights treaties and declarations, which together has empowered women, children, migrants, disabled people, minorities and others identified as requiring protection and addresses everyday rights such as the right to life, equality before the law, freedom of expression, the right to work, social

security and education. All 193 member states of the UN have accepted the Declaration.

Subsequently, in 1993 the adoption of the VDPa advanced efforts to uphold the principles of the UN Charter and the UDHR. It emphasizes that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and reaffirms the right to development as an integral part of fundamental human rights. It elevates the role of economic, social and cultural rights.

The Government of Sri Lanka continues its constructive engagement with the UN through regular interactions with its established human rights mechanisms. Human rights are enshrined in our constitution and these rights are being progressively protected and enhanced in dialogue with Treaty Bodies. Sri Lanka is a State Party to the 09 key Human Rights Conventions. As part of this engagement Sri Lanka has voluntarily engaged with the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

The work of the Human Rights Council (HRC) should be guided by the principles of universality, impartiality, objectivity and non-selectivity and constructive dialogue and cooperation with Member States. Intrusive and polarizing initiatives that goes beyond the mandate conferred on the Council by UNGA resolution 60/251 are unproductive.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) represents a beacon of hope and aspiration for all. It is therefore of concern, that as we commemorate this important occasion of the 75th anniversary, we continue to be reminded of the need to avoid politicization of human rights and double standards. There is an urgent need for global solidarity and meaningful, genuine dialogue, particularly in the context of the current global crisis, in the Gaza.

On this Human Rights Day, I reaffirm Sri Lanka's commitment to continue to promote and protect human rights and reconciliation in a spirit of cooperation and constructive dialogue as well as in line with the human rights obligations voluntarily undertaken.

Ali Sabry, PC  
Minister of Foreign Affairs

**[UK enhances security and climate cooperation with Sri Lanka](#)**  
**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**  
**10 October 2023**

To deepen UK-Sri Lanka cooperation on environmental protection, regional security and human rights, UK Minister for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan will arrive in Sri Lanka today (10 October). The 3-day visit to

Colombo and Jaffna marks the celebration of 75 years of diplomatic relations between the UK and Sri Lanka and is the minister's first visit to Sri Lanka in her role.

Minister Trevelyan will emphasise the UK's long-term commitment to the region at the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Ministerial meeting hosted by Sri Lanka. With around 60% of global shipping passing through the Indo-Pacific, ensuring maritime security is of critical importance to the Prime Minister's priority of growing the UK's economy. The UK is increasing its long-term presence in the Indo-Pacific by permanently deploying 2 offshore patrol vessels to tackle maritime security challenges in the region alongside partners and allies.

Minister Trevelyan will also seek to strengthen IORA work on climate mitigation. Through collaborative programmes that underpin biodiversity objectives and the Glasgow Pact (agreed at COP26), the minister will highlight UK support for Sri Lanka's environmental work. This builds on the UK's strong track record as the first major economy to legislate for Net Zero, cutting carbon emissions faster than any other G7 country. Sri Lanka are also prioritising green growth, with their own commitment to net zero by 2050.

Indo-Pacific Minister Anne-Marie Trevelyan said:

As the UK celebrates 75 years of diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka, we're working together on climate action, peacebuilding and human rights.

Through key regional forums like IORA, we can accelerate progress towards enhanced security for the Indian Ocean region, collaborate on shared climate goals and on boosting maritime security.

While in Colombo, Minister Trevelyan will meet members of the Sri Lankan government including President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Foreign Minister Ali Sabry. Discussions will focus on climate finance and green growth, justice reform and opportunities to enhance UK-Sri Lanka diplomatic ties.

Travelling to Jaffna, in the Northern Province, Trevelyan will meet with Governor P S M Charles, and regional parliamentarians. She will then visit a land mine clearance site in Muhamalai to see UK-funded demining and sustainable resettlement work. Supported by the UK's Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), charity The HALO Trust has been working to clear unexploded ordnances in Muhamalai since 2012, with the Sri Lankan government anticipating that the country will be landmine-free by 2027. UK funding to the United Nations Development Programme has also supported the resettlement of displaced communities on land cleared of mines, helping provide community infrastructure and build sustainable livelihoods.

To engage UK businesses in Sri Lanka on bilateral trade discussions, Minister Trevelyan will meet civil society and business leaders from across Sri Lanka at a breakfast meeting.

Following her engagements in Sri Lanka, the minister will travel to India as part of a wider trip to reaffirm the UK's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

### [UN HRC54: UK Statement on Sri Lanka](#)

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**11 September 2023**

Statement on report of OHCHR on promoting reconciliation, accountability & human rights in Sri Lanka. Delivered by UK Ambassador to the WTO & UN Simon Manley:

Thank you Madam Vice President,

Deputy-High Commissioner, let me thank you for your report and update.

The UK welcomes Sri Lanka's initial commitments to implement devolution in line with the constitution, to address land issues, and to advance governance legislation. It is important that these commitments are matched by tangible progress on the ground.

We also note longstanding commitments to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and urge the Government to ensure terrorism legislation is consistent with Sri Lanka's international obligations. We encourage too the further release of long-term detainees.

We call on Sri Lanka to safeguard the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and to freedom of expression. The right to freedom of religion or belief must be respected, and communities must be allowed to remember their loved ones.

The discovery of another mass grave [in Mullaitivu] highlights the urgent need for an adequately resourced, independent, and transparent approach to dealing with the past.

Justice, accountability, and reconciliation are at the heart of our approach and we hope in Sri Lankans. We acknowledge commitments to make progress in transitional justice and urge Sri Lanka to ensure any process carries the support of victim communities, builds upon past recommendations, and meets international standards.

Thank you.

**UN HRC54: Joint Statement on Sri Lanka**

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**11 September 2023**

Statement by Sri Lanka Core Group comprising Canada, N Macedonia, Malawi, Montenegro, United Kingdom and United States. Delivered by UK Ambassador, Rita French:

High Commissioner,

We welcome your report on Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has made important recent commitments on land issues and devolution of political authority. We encourage Sri Lanka to turn these commitments into meaningful action and deliver long-awaited results. Sri Lanka still has a long way to go to fulfil commitments to justice, accountability, and reconciliation.

We note preparations for a truth and reconciliation commission, and emphasise the importance of an inclusive participatory process in the establishment of any mechanisms to advance transitional justice, to gain the confidence of all affected communities, in line with international best practices.

We are concerned by continued incidents of intimidation and harassment of civil society and journalists, and by the arbitrary use of laws to suppress dissent.

As Sri Lanka takes forward its economic recovery, we stress the importance of effective governance reforms and note the recent anti-corruption legislation. This must be accompanied by safeguarding established independent institutions, and democratic processes.

We call on Sri Lanka to work with the High Commissioner and his office [and remain ready to support Sri Lanka in addressing HRC resolution 51/1.]

**UN HRC52: UK statement on behalf of the Sri Lanka Core Group**

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**7 March 2023**

Statement delivered by the UK's Ambassador to the WTO and UN in Geneva, Simon Manley, on behalf of the Sri Lanka Core Group:

Thank you Mr Vice-President

This statement is by the Sri Lanka Core Group comprising Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the UK and the United States.

We welcome recent commitments with respect to the protection of human rights in Sri Lanka, including those of persons from all religious and ethnic groups. Together with recent efforts at constitutional reform, and initiatives

aimed at fostering political inclusion, these provide a basis upon which to build.

We also welcome Sri Lanka's positive engagement in the Universal Periodic Review process in January. We are keen to assist Sri Lanka in implementing its UPR recommendations.

However, our concerns over heavy-handed responses to peaceful protests remain. Sri Lanka must safeguard the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and freedom of expression. We call for accountability for any protest-related violence. Civil society has an important part to play in encouraging the protection of human rights and we underline the importance of protecting space for civil society's important work, including through any future legislation.

We stress the crucial importance of upholding the rule of law and safeguarding representative democracy, including by ensuring the independence of institutions and governance systems. This includes the electoral system, in which maintaining the confidence of Sri Lankans is crucial.

We urge the Sri Lankan authorities to address long-standing impunity and corruption. We also underline the need for good governance, which together with sound economic policies, should better support the prosperity of all Sri Lankans.

Noting commitments made to the Council in September by the Government of Sri Lanka, we emphasise the importance of transitional justice, including promotion of truth and accountability, with the goal of reconciliation and accountability for all communities. We also emphasise the importance of replacing the Prevention of Terrorism Act with legislation that aligns with Sri Lanka's international obligations.

The Core Group calls on Sri Lanka to work with the High Commissioner and his Office. We remain ready to support Sri Lanka in addressing HRC resolution 51/1.

Thank you.

### **42nd Universal Periodic Review of human rights: UK statement on Sri Lanka**

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**28 February 2023**

The UK's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva gave a statement during Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the Human Rights Council:

Thank you, Mr President,

We welcome Sri Lanka's commitments on respect for the rights of those from all religious and ethnic groups. Its recent efforts to foster political inclusion and constitutional reform are particularly welcome. We emphasise the importance of reconciliation, justice and accountability for all communities,

independent domestic institutions, the preservation of civil society space and the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

We recommend that Sri Lanka:

1. Allow all its communities freely to commemorate and memorialize victims of the civil war.
2. Repeal sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, end criminalization of same-sex conduct and ensure equality and non-discrimination in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity.
3. Address concerns around land expropriation in the North and East by government departments, including the Archaeological department, and related restrictions on access to land.

Thank you, Mr President.

## 5

## PQs

### Sri Lanka: Civil Liberties

05 Feb 2024 | 12009

**Asked by: Bob Blackman**

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, if he will make an assessment of the potential impact of the Sri Lankan Online Safety Act on freedom of expression and religion in that country.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Despite concerns expressed by civil society, opposition parties and international internet providers regarding the potential negative impacts of the Online Safety Act, the Sri Lankan Parliament passed it into law on 24 January. The UK also raised concerns about the impact of this Act on freedom of expression and economic growth, including when I met Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe in October, and when Lord (Tariq) Ahmad, Minister of State for South Asia, met Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry on 25 January. The UK will continue to closely follow developments on this Act.

### Sri Lanka: Drinking Water

08 Jan 2024 | 7427

**Asked by: Fleur Anderson**

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, whether his Department has taken recent steps to help ensure that Tamils in northern Sri Lanka have access to clean drinking water.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We are aware of the challenges Sri Lanka faces around water management and quality, particularly by communities in the Northern Province. The British High Commission Colombo regularly meets a range of stakeholders in the Northern Province to hear their experiences and issues. A number of public bodies in Sri Lanka, including the National Water Supply and Drainage Board, have conducted tests into the water quality, after concerns were raised by local communities. The UK Government supports the International Water Management Institute, an international water management research organisation, to provide solutions to increasing water scarcity in Puttalam and Kilinochchi.



## **Sri Lanka**

12 Dec 2023 | 742 cc733-4

### **Asked by: Anne McLaughlin**

Whether his Department is taking diplomatic steps to help ensure that perpetrators of alleged human rights violations against the Tamil community in Sri Lanka are held to account.

### **Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK is working closely with international partners on this long-standing priority, including at the UN Human Rights Council, where the UK led resolution 51/1 on Sri Lanka.

### **Asked by: Anne McLaughlin**

Many prominent Sri Lankans were credibly accused of war crimes against the Tamil minority, particularly towards the end of the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka. But all these years on, they are still at large, unlike the nearly 18,000 Tamils who went missing and are still unaccounted for. In response to the SNP spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), we were told earlier that evidence of war crimes would be taken seriously. How can the people of Palestine have any faith in that if the Tamil people of Sri Lanka have had the evidence sitting there for all these years and the Government are doing nothing, other than wringing their hands?

### **Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We all take these issues very seriously. I was in Sri Lanka just a few weeks ago, and I was able to raise the need for progress on human rights, on reconciliation and, indeed, on accountability with the President of Sri Lanka during my visit.

### **Asked by: Elliot Colburn**

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils, may I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to assure the House that the FCDO is actively considering the evidence for sanctioning those credibly accused of war crimes who are active participants in Sri Lankan high society, and that she will pass that evidence on to the United Nations Human Rights Council, in line with resolution 30/1?

### **Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I commend my hon. Friend for his active and championing work as chair of the APPG. He is right, and we absolutely recognise the concerns of the Sri Lankan public, and indeed victim groups, about the creation of a credible domestic accountability process. We continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to address those concerns. As I said, I raised them when I was there. I was also

able to discuss human rights and justice issues with members of civil society, Tamil representatives and the governor of the Northern Province when I visited Jaffna.

**Asked by: Catherine West**

Sri Lanka is a key member of the Commonwealth family and occupies a strategically vital position geographically. Warm relations are vital, but for far too long, those accused of brutal crimes in the past, including against the Tamil minority, have escaped justice. Will the Minister outline what steps she is taking to support the Tamils' calls for justice, including, if necessary, by taking action against existing and former Sri Lankan Ministers? Will she outline the support for Sri Lankan democracy and human rights?

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We welcomed the recent written update on Sri Lanka by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and, in September, the UK Government issued statements that emphasised the importance of inclusive transitional justice and effective governance reforms in order to highlight the arbitrary use of laws to suppress dissent. As I said, we led UNHRC resolution 51/1 on Sri Lanka, providing the mandate for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to report on Sri Lanka, and we continue to work with it.

**British Indian Ocean Territory: Sri Lanka**

**25 Oct 2023 | 203235**

**Asked by: Andrew Rosindell**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, whether he has had recent discussions with his Sri Lankan counterpart on the treatment of Sri Lankan nationals in the British Indian Ocean Territory.

**Answering member: David Rutley | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The welfare and safety of Sri Lankan Nationals in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) has been a top priority for the BIOT Administration. The migrants have received dedicated 24-hours-a-day medical support, access to telecoms, food, education and facilities for welfare, recreation and religious worship. In April, the Permanent Under Secretary met with the Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary where, on the Foreign Secretary's behalf, he discussed BIOT and illegal migration. He also thanked the Sri Lankan Government for facilitating the voluntary return of migrants; 133 have so far returned home in this manner.

### **Sri Lanka: Tamils**

25 Oct 2023 | 201553

**Asked by: Andrew Rosindell**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the purported persecution of the Tamil population in northern Sri Lanka.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Sri Lanka is a UK human rights priority country. The UK has led, with the Core Group on Sri Lanka, international efforts to promote human rights for all communities, including through UNHRC resolution 51/1. We recommended addressing issues around the expropriation of land in the North and East during Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review. The UK encourages establishment of a meaningful Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Whilst visiting Sri Lanka from 10-13 October I raised issues over progress on human rights and accountability mechanisms with the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). We welcome the GoSL commitment to address longstanding grievances of minority communities through the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

### **British Indian Ocean Territory: Sri Lanka**

18 Jul 2023 | 193556

**Asked by: Andrew Rosindell**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the veracity of allegations of the false imprisonment of Sri Lankan nationals in Diego Garcia in the British Indian Ocean Territory; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: David Rutley | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Sri Lankan migrants are not routinely detained on the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) and we strongly dispute any allegations of false imprisonment. These allegations are subject to ongoing legal proceedings, and it would be inappropriate to comment any further on this matter until such proceedings have concluded.

Around 130 migrants of Sri Lankan nationality have so far voluntarily returned to their home country on six separate flights chartered by the BIOT Administration. We are grateful to the Sri Lankan Government for their assistance in facilitating these returns. The welfare and safety of the remaining migrants on Diego Garcia is also a top priority for the BIOT Administration. They are provided with accommodation, food,

communications and dedicated 24/7 medical support, as well as educational and welfare facilities.

### **Sri Lanka: Alleged War Crimes**

**18 Jul 2023 | 736 cc749-750**

**Asked by: Theresa Villiers**

If he will take steps with his Sri Lankan counterpart to ensure accountability for alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.

**Answered by: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Foreign Secretary met Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry on 14 July, when they discussed Sri Lanka's human rights initiatives. We will continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to make meaningful progress on human rights, justice and accountability. That includes at the UN Human Rights Council, where the UK and our partners made resolution 51/1 on Sri Lanka in October last year.

**Asked by: Theresa Villiers**

Will the Minister appeal to the Sri Lankan Government to ensure that the possible establishment of a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation commission does not mean that those responsible for war crimes in Sri Lanka will not be brought to justice?

**Answered by: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We recognise the concerns from some members of the Sri Lankan public and victims groups about the creation of a credible domestic accountability process, given the history of impunity and unfulfilled commitments. We encourage the Sri Lankan Government to create an environment for meaningful reconciliation by addressing those long-standing and emerging concerns. That includes ensuring proper consultation, sufficient consensus of key communities and a commitment to accountability.

**Asked by: Margaret Ferrier**

Human Rights Watch has reported that Tamil families looking to memorialise those who died in Sri Lanka's civil war remain subject to intimidation and banning orders. Alongside the Minister's Sri Lankan counterparts, what steps is she taking to promote free expression in Sri Lanka?

**Answered by: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

As I said, we all understand and see that long history of impunity and broken commitments. We will continue to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to

create that climate of recognition for all parties and communities, making sure that no one is left out of that process.

**Asked by: David Lammy**

Nearly 15 years after the end of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war, the Sri Lankan Government continue to evade accountability and delay any scrutiny. As the Minister said, instead of justice there is impunity. Last week's FCDO human rights and democracy report recognises Sri Lanka as a priority so, in simple terms, will the Minister say when the UK will sanction those individuals responsible for the worst human rights abuses in that conflict?

**Answered by: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We will continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to uphold their constitutional and democratic processes. Those concerns were made clear in statements to the UN Human Rights Council, most recently on 20 June. Imposing sanctions is one response among other diplomatic tools to tackle serious human rights violations and abuses, but the shadow Foreign Secretary knows well that it would not be appropriate for me to speculate about future designations because that could reduce the impact.

**[Sri Lanka: Poverty](#)**

**22 Jun 2023 | 189664**

**Asked by: Fleur Anderson**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent steps his Department has taken to work with the international community to help reduce poverty in Sri Lanka.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK has provided £3 million of targeted support for those most severely affected by Sri Lankan economic crisis, including providing multipurpose cash transfers for vulnerable families and food for school children, delivered through our UN partners and the Red Cross. The UK also provided economic support through multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. We welcome the IMF Executive Board approval, on 20 March, for a four-year \$3 billion Extended Fund Facility to support Sri Lanka's economic policies and reforms. As a member of the Paris Club, we will continue to work closely with creditors and the Sri Lankan Government to help restore debt sustainability and macroeconomic stability in line with IMF programme parameters.

### **Sri Lanka: Tamils**

**04 Apr 2023 | HL6687**

**Asked by: Lord Mann**

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the UN Human Rights Council about the situation of Tamil communities in Sri Lanka.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK, alongside our partners in the Core Group, have led international efforts to promote human rights for all communities in Sri Lanka, including through resolution 51/1 at the UN Human Rights Council. The resolution renewed the mandate of the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights to report on Sri Lanka and to protect and preserve evidence of past human rights abuses to use in future accountability processes. We have made our stance clear in statements to the Council, most recently on 7 March. The UK also made recommendations including on the need to address issues around the expropriation of land in the North and East during Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review in February.

### **Sri Lanka: Politics and Government**

**13 Mar 2023 160367**

**Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the political and security situation in Sri Lanka.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We believe that a stable and inclusive political settlement is an essential foundation for the economic recovery and growth that Sri Lanka needs and we closely monitor political, economic and security developments in this regard.

The Minister for South Asia, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, and the British High Commissioner, have called for a peaceful, democratic and inclusive approach to resolving the current political and economic issues. They also emphasised that violence against peaceful protestors is unacceptable.

We call on the Sri Lankan authorities to safeguard citizens' rights and ensure security responses are proportionate and in line with international human rights standards.

**Sri Lanka: Human Rights**

**13 Mar 2023 | 160366**

**Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent discussions he has had with his Sri Lankan counterparts on human rights in Sri Lanka.

**Answering member: Anne-Marie Trevelyan | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We regularly raise human rights with the Government of Sri Lanka. The British High Commission in Colombo was able to do so most recently with senior representatives of the Sri Lankan government in February. The FCDO Permanent Under Secretary, Sir Philip Barton, spoke to Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Ali Sabry, during a visit to Sri Lanka on 17 January. He emphasised the UK would support human rights reform and encouraged efforts to take forward reconciliation.

Additionally, we also make clear our concerns in statements to the UN Human Rights Council, including most recently on 7 March alongside other members of the Sri Lanka Core Group.

## 6

# Further Parliamentary material

## Debates

### [Sri Lankan Tamils and Human Rights](#)

**05 Dec 2023 | 742 cc32-57WH**

Motion that this House has considered Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights. Agreed to on question.

### [Economic Aid to Sri Lanka](#)

**11 May 2023 | 732 cc549-556**

UK's economic aid to Sri Lanka. Agreed to on question.

### [Sri Lanka](#)

**09 Nov 2022 | 722 cc299-326**

Motion that this House is concerned by reports of increased militarisation and human rights violations in Sri Lanka, particularly during the country's current economic crisis; calls upon the Government, as a key stakeholder of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to propose conditionalities on any IMF financial assistance for Sri Lanka during the current economic crisis, including that Sri Lanka carries out a Strategic Defence and Security Review to reduce its military spending and remove the military from engaging in commercial activities, that Sri Lanka meets the criteria required for Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus, and that Sri Lanka re-engages with the United Nations Human Rights Council process and fully implements resolution 30/1; and calls upon the Government to implement targeted sanctions against individuals who are credibly accused of committing war crimes during the Sri Lankan Civil War. Agreed to on question.

### [Sri Lanka](#)

**18 Mar 2021 | 691 cc542-572**

Motion that this House notes with concern the reports of a systematic attack in Sri Lanka on democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights including renewed discrimination against the Tamil and Muslim communities; is profoundly concerned that the Sri Lankan Government has refused to investigate accusations of war crimes including by key members of the current government and has withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1; welcomes the significant leadership role played by successive UK Governments at the Human Rights Council and urges the Government to provide clear policy direction and leadership to ensure a new substantive resolution is passed at the upcoming Council session in March 2021 that will enable continued monitoring by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and mandate a mechanism to gather, preserve and analyse evidence of violations for future investigations and



prosecutions; and calls upon the Government to develop a consistent and coherent policy to assist the Sri Lankan people through its trade, investment and aid programmes, and in its diplomatic and military relations. Agreed to on question. Sitting suspended.

## Urgent Questions

### [Sri Lanka](#)

13 Jul 2022 | House of Commons | 718 cc345-352

**Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Foreign Secretary if she will make a statement on the state of emergency declared in Sri Lanka.

**Amanda Milling (Minister for Asia and the Middle East):** We are closely monitoring the fast-moving and fluid political, economic and security situation in Sri Lanka. The Minister of State with responsibility for south Asia, Lord Ahmad, has engaged directly with our high commissioner and team on the ground. We encourage all sides to find a peaceful, democratic and inclusive approach to resolving the current political and economic challenges. Sri Lanka's political and economic challenges should be resolved through an inclusive and cross-party process. Any transition of power should be peaceful, constitutional and democratic. I call on all parties to exercise restraint and refrain from violence.

## Statements

### [Sri Lanka](#)

13 Jul 2022 | House of Lords | 823 cc1485-8

Lords statement on the state of emergency declared in Sri Lanka.

## Early Day Motions

### Water quality in Sri Lanka

**EDM 287 (session 2023-24)**

**Munira Wilson**

**16 January 2024**

That this House expresses concern regarding water quality in northern Sri Lanka; is concerned by reports stating that the Sri Lankan Government refused to allow independent assessments of water quality in the region; notes that the consumption or use of water contaminated by waste oil has been linked to many diseases and birth defects; calls for steps to be taken to allow all citizens in northern Sri Lanka, the majority of whom are Tamils, to have access to clean drinking water; calls for the area around the Chunnakam power plant complex to be subjected to a full independent investigation; believes that organisations responsible for pollution of ground water in Chunnakam should have a duty to carry out remedial works; and further believes that all citizens affected by water contamination should be provided with competent medical follow-up and be compensated adequately by the Sri Lankan Government.

### Water quality in northern Sri Lanka

**EDM 858 (session 2022-23)**

**Munira Wilson**

**20 February 2023**

That this House expresses concern regarding water quality in northern Sri Lanka; is concerned by reports stating that the Sri Lankan Government refused to allow independent assessments of water quality in the region; notes that the consumption or use of water contaminated by waste oil has been linked to many diseases and birth defects; calls for steps to be taken to allow all citizens in northern Sri Lanka, the majority of whom are Tamils, to have access to clean drinking water; calls on the area around the Chunnakam power plant complex to be subjected to a full independent investigation; believes that organisations responsible for pollution of ground water in Chunnakam should have a duty to carry out remedial works; and further believes that all citizens affected by water contamination should be provided with competent medical follow-up and be compensated adequately by the Sri Lankan Government.

### Political and economic situation in Sri Lanka

**EDM 297 (session 2022-23)**

**Ed Davey**

**15 July 2022**

That this House notes the developing political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka; acknowledges the widespread corruption and economic mismanagement at the hands of the Rajapaksa government that led to protests in the first place; recognises that the economic solution needed to address this situation must be coupled with political reform that involves all minority groups and includes accountability for human rights abuses and atrocities which have been carried out against Tamils; notes the allegations of human rights abuses levelled against Gotabaya Rajapaksa; urges the International Criminal Court to fully investigate those claims; and calls on the Government to work with its international partners to press for peaceful political reform in Sri Lanka.

### Detention of Tamil refugees in the British Indian Ocean Territory

**EDM 88 (session 2022-23)**

**Ed Davy**

**23 May 2022**

That this House acknowledges that at least 89 Eelam Tamils, including 20 children, are being detained indefinitely on the British Indian Ocean Territory Diego Garcia after their boat was intercepted by British military; recognises that these refugees cannot return to Sri Lanka, where they have faced persecution as Tamils and in some cases even torture; is aware that 42 of the refugees have gone on a hunger strike to protest their situation, which is having a catastrophic impact on their mental health; notes with concern that British authorities are not offering legal counsel or assessing asylum claims on Diego Garcia, despite reports the group has made clear they are seeking international protection; emphasises the UK's international legal commitments to allow anyone to apply for asylum; and calls on the Government to provide enabling support to allow the Tamil refugees on Diego Garcia to claim asylum in a safe country of their choosing.

### Water pollution in northern Sri Lanka

**EDM 367 (session 2021-22)**

**Munira Wilson**

**22 July 2021**

That this House expresses concern regarding water quality in northern Sri Lanka; is concerned by reports stating that the Sri Lankan Government refused to allow independent assessments of water quality in the region; notes that the consumption or use of water contaminated by waste oil has

been linked to many diseases and birth defects; calls for steps to be taken to allow all citizens in northern Sri Lanka, the majority of whom are Tamils, to have access to clean drinking water; calls on the area around the Chunnakam power plant complex to be subjected to a full independent investigation; and believes that all citizens affected by water contamination should be provided with competent medical follow-up and be compensated adequately by the Sri Lankan Government.

### **12th anniversary of the end of the Sri Lankan civil war**

**EDM 64 (session 2021-22)**

**Anne McLaughlin**

**18 May 2021**

That this house recognises that 12 years on from the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, most alleged human rights abuses primarily against Tamil people are yet to be investigated; acknowledges that those allegations include indiscriminate bombing in no-fire zones, summary executions of surrenderers, torture, sexual violence and abductions; appreciates the UK Government has played a vital role as leaders of the core group on Sri Lanka within the Human Rights Council; remains deeply concerned that despite various international resolutions and the establishment in 2015 of institutions in Sri Lanka to investigate the impact of the war, very little investigation has taken place and some of those facing investigation hold powerful positions in Sri Lanka today; is further concerned that in recent months the independence of the judiciary has been undermined by amendments to the Sri Lankan constitution and has little confidence any further investigations will take place; calls on the UK government to take action as laid out by various hon. Members in recent debates; and urges the Government to mark the 12th anniversary by following the equivalent actions of the US in adding General Shavendra Silva, Acting Chief of Defence Staff and the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army to the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, thus demonstrating the UK's commitment to international human rights obligations and that international action is the only way that accountability, reconciliation and peace will come to the beautiful island of Sri Lanka and all of its people across the world.

## 7

# Further reading

## Commons Library briefing papers

[Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights,](#)

Commons Library Debate Pack

CDP-0217 | 1 December 2023

[UK response to the human Rights and economic situation in Sri Lanka](#)

Commons Library Debate Pack

CDP-0194 | 8 November 2022

[The UK's commitment to reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka](#)

Commons Library Debate Pack

CDP-0015 | 16 March 2021

## UK Government reports

[Human Rights and Democracy Report 2022](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office | 13 July 2023

A summary of activity in 2022 by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and its diplomatic network to defend human rights and promote democracy worldwide.

## Webpages

[Amnesty International: Sri Lanka](#)

[Human Rights Watch, Country Profile: Sri Lanka](#)

[Center for Human Rights and Development \(CHRD\)](#)

[All Ceylon Human Rights Federation](#)

[All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka](#)

[All-Party Parliamentary Group for Tamils](#)

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