



## DEBATE PACK

CDP 0015 (2021) | 16 March 2021

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

House of Commons chamber  
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Backbench Business Cttee debate

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

## **Civil War ends in 2009**

In May 2009, Sri Lanka's long civil war came to an end, with the decisive military defeat of the Tamil Tigers (also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE).

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 against the military and civilian Government at the time, and argued Tamil forces had used civilians as "human shields".<sup>2</sup>

## **2011 Reconciliation Commission report**

The then Sri Lankan Government, at that time led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (in power from 2005-2015), established a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' (LLRC), which published its [final report](#) in December 2011. It concluded that government forces had not deliberately targeted civilians.

The UK Government stated at the time that the report contained "many constructive recommendations for action on post-conflict reconciliation and a political settlement", however it noted that "many credible allegations of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, including from the UN panel of experts report, are either not addressed or only partially answered"<sup>3</sup>.

## **2015 UN OHCHR report**

An [investigation by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) into the Civil War that reported in 2015, detailed a "horrific level of violations and abuses that occurred in Sri Lanka, including indiscriminate shelling, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, harrowing accounts of torture and sexual violence, recruitment of children and other grave crimes".<sup>4</sup> The report also called for a special court to be set up to investigate crimes, and that it should include international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators, alongside Sri Lankan counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, '[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.

<sup>3</sup> HC Deb, [Sri Lankan Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission Report](#), 12 Jan 2012 : Column 21WS.

<sup>4</sup> '[UN Human Rights Council urges Sri Lanka war crimes court](#)', BBC News, 16 September 2015

### **New UNP Government commits to UN process**

In 2015, the election of a new United National Party (UNP) led Government, resulted in a shift in approach to reconciliation. The new Government co-sponsored a landmark [UN Human Rights Council resolution, 30/1](#), (adopted in October 2015) making commitments to promote reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka.

The resolution committed the Government to investigate and prosecute war-related crimes as part of a package of wide-ranging legal reforms and transitional justice measures.

The UNP Government, however, still insisted that only domestic courts and processes should investigate any crimes committed during the civil war.

### **New Sri Lankan Government elected 2019**

In November 2019, a new Government led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was involved in directing military operations at the end of the civil war was elected. He is also the brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was appointed Prime Minister.

President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, has [faced accusations](#) of being involved in crimes during the civil war and intimidating journalists, claims [he has denied](#).

Critics of his Government [have said](#) the rule of law and human rights have suffered since he came to power. President Rajapaksa is [hugely popular](#) with the majority Sinhala group, principally because of his role as Defence Secretary in 2009 in crushing the Tamil forces rebellion.

### **Rajapaksa Government withdraws support for UN reconciliation process**

In February 2020, the Government of Sri Lanka [informed](#) the Human Rights Council of its decision to withdraw its co-sponsorship of Council resolution 40/1 and related resolutions 34/1 and 30/1, expressing its intention to pursue an “inclusive, domestically designed and executed reconciliation and accountability process”.<sup>5</sup>

The UK, alongside the Governments of Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro and the UK, the “Core Group on Sri Lanka”, [announced](#) their “profound disappointment at this development”. They added that they remained “firmly committed to advancing the resolution’s goals of accountability, reconciliation, and inclusive peace in Sri Lanka”. They stated further that:

While the Government of Sri Lanka has stated its own commitment to advancing these principles through domestic processes, we stress that any accountability mechanism must have the confidence of those affected.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [Statement by the Minister of Foreign Relations, Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations of Sri Lanka](#), 26 February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> FCO, ‘[UN Human Rights Council 44: statement on behalf of the Core Group on Sri Lanka](#)’, 30 June 2020.

### **Latest UN Human Rights Council session and resolution**

The UN's [Human Rights Council](#) is holding its [46<sup>th</sup> Regular Session](#), that lasts from 22 February 2021 to 23 March 2021.

In February 2021, the UK [announced](#) that alongside the Core Group of nations, that it would present a further resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, to the Council. It said that the resolution would be "informed by the [recent report](#) of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights".<sup>7</sup>

Human Rights Commissioner released [a statement](#) alongside the report, condemning the inaction of successive Sri Lankan Governments to properly investigate crimes committed during the civil war, and called upon the Council to:

[E]xplore new ways to advance various types of accountability at the international level, for **all** parties, and seek redress for victims, including by supporting a dedicated capacity to collect and preserve evidence and information for future accountability processes, as well as to support relevant judicial proceedings in Member States.

No official version of the joint-UK draft resolution has been published, however [versions](#) have been leaked to the press.

### **Sri Lankan Government reject resolution**

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister, Dinesh Gunawardena, has urged the Council to reject the resolution, [saying](#) in a video address to the Council that Sri Lanka had been subjected to an "unprecedented propaganda campaign". He added "it is regrettable that ... elements working against Sri Lanka intend to table another country-specific resolution." Mr Gunawardena said further that Members should choose whether Sri Lanka "warrants the urgent attention of this council – or if this campaign is essentially a political move that contravenes the very values and principles on which this council has been established".<sup>8</sup>

### **Concerns over treatment of minorities**

The then [Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2019 Human Rights and Democracy report](#), expressed concerns over "increased intercommunal tensions, violence against minority groups, and intimidation of human rights defenders" in Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup>

A series of suicide bombing on Easter Sunday 2019, claimed by the Islamic State terrorist group, several of which were directed at Christian churches and resulted in the deaths of around 280 people, raised inter-communal tensions.

Tensions further rose in 2020, when the Government introduced [a policy of "enforced cremations"](#) for the victims of Covid-19, upsetting

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<sup>7</sup> FCDO, '[Human Rights Council organisational meeting: UK statement on resolutions and events for the 46th session](#)', 9 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> '["Political move": Sri Lanka urges rejection of UNHRC resolution](#)', Al Jazeera, 24 February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> FCO, '[Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2019 Human Rights and Democracy report](#)', July 2020.

Sri Lanka's Muslim community, a policy the Government [have now ended](#).

The Government is about to introduce a [ban on face coverings](#) including the Burka, and may shut down several hundred madrassa Islamic schools that are not registered with the Government.

### **UK aid to Sri Lanka**

The UK spent around £8.44 million in bilateral development aid in 2018 in Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup> Some of that funding was delivered through the cross-Government [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#) (CSSF) that aims to tackle instability and prevent conflicts that threaten UK interests. The [most recent review](#) of CSSF work in Sri Lanka, published in March 2020, revealed that the funding for the programme in 2018/19 was £3.3 million. The review reported that the programme contributed in delivering the following goals:

- clearing 533,922 square kilometres of high-density minefield; and providing mine risk education to approximately 40,000 people;
- resettling nearly 2000 internally displaced people;
- building anti-bribery and corruption capacity in the civil service and judiciary; and
- providing technical support to security sector reform, and also strengthened community policing and police response to gender and human rights.

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<sup>10</sup> DfID, [Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20](#), Table B.2

## 2. 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 Lanka to ban burqa and shut many Islamic schools, minister says](#)**

Independent  
14 March 2021

**[China strongly supports Sri Lanka during UNHRC Session](#)**

Daily News (Sri Lanka)  
27 February 2021

**[Covid-19: Sri Lanka reverses 'anti-Muslim' cremation order](#)**

BBC News Online  
26 February 2021

**[Impunity for Civil War Crimes in Sri Lanka Risks Future Offenses, UN Says](#)**

VOA [Voice of America]  
Lisa Schlein  
25 February 2021

**[Sri Lanka at 'tipping point' with risk of return to past atrocities, activists warn](#)**

Guardian  
Karen McVeigh  
24 February 2021

**[Sri Lanka human rights: UK seeks new UN resolution on abuses](#)**

BBC News Online  
Anbarasan Ethirajan  
23 February 2021

**[National Unity is National Security](#)**

Daily News (Sri Lanka)  
6 February 2021

**[Sri Lanka approaches India for support in UNHRC](#)**

The Citizen (India)  
P.K. Balachandran  
31 January 2021

**[Consensual resolution with Core Group: politically challenging – Govt.](#)**

Sunday Morning (Sri Lanka)  
Lahiru Pothmulla  
31 January 2021

**[Sri Lanka: Tamil war monument to be rebuilt after hunger strike](#)**

BBC News Online

11 January 2021

**[Sri Lanka prisoners killed in riot over coronavirus conditions](#)**

Guardian

30 November 2020

**[Sri Lanka Parliament votes to strengthen presidential power](#)**

Independent

23 October 2020

### 3. Press releases

#### [UN Human Rights Council 46: Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Sri Lanka](#)

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

**25 February 2021**

Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK's Minister for the UN and Human Rights, delivered this statement during the Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Sri Lanka:

Thank you, Madam President.

The United Kingdom welcomes the High Commissioner's detailed and most comprehensive report on Sri Lanka.

We share the concerns regarding the reversal of progress on issues of accountability, and also the current human rights situation, and the risk and recurrence of past violations.

We are also concerned at the increase in surveillance and indeed harassment of civil society actors, the militarisation of these civilian governmental functions, and the impact of the government's forced cremation policy on different communities in Sri Lanka, particularly the Muslim community, who continue to face persecution.

We also regret the Government of Sri Lanka's decision to withdraw support for resolution 30/1, and note that previous domestic initiatives have all failed regrettably to deliver meaningful accountability. The appointment of senior military officials allegedly implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity also calls into question Sri Lanka's commitment to accountability and justice.

Therefore the Human Rights Council must continue to consider the situation in Sri Lanka and press for progress on justice, reconciliation and accountability, and improved respect for human rights. Enhanced monitoring by the Office of the High Commissioner is critical to support this. Together with our Core Group partners, we will present a new resolution to continue the Council's engagement on these important issues, and have indicated our desire to work with the Government of Sri Lanka in support of accountability and lasting reconciliation for all communities.

#### [Sri Lanka on alarming path towards recurrence of grave human rights violations – UN report](#)

**UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**27 January 2021**

A new UN report published on Wednesday warns that the failure of Sri Lanka to address past violations has significantly heightened the risk of human rights violations being repeated. It highlights worrying trends over the past year, such as deepening impunity, increasing militarization

of governmental functions, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, and intimidation of civil society.

Nearly 12 years after the armed conflict in Sri Lanka ended, impunity for grave human rights violations and abuses by all sides is more entrenched than ever, with the current Government proactively obstructing investigations and trials, and reversing the limited progress that had been previously made, states the report, mandated by UN Human Rights Council resolution 40/1.

The report urges enhanced monitoring and strong preventive action by the international community, warning that "Sri Lanka's current trajectory sets the scene for the recurrence of the policies and practices that gave rise to grave human rights violations."

Among the early warning signals the report highlights are: the accelerating militarization of civilian governmental functions, reversal of important constitutional safeguards, political obstruction of accountability, exclusionary rhetoric, intimidation of civil society, and the use of anti-terrorism laws.

Since 2020, the President has appointed at least 28 serving or former military and intelligence personnel to key administrative posts, the report states. Particularly troubling are appointments of senior military officials who were implicated in United Nations reports in alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity during the final years of the conflict. These include Shavendra Silva as Army Chief in August 2019 and Kamal Gunaratne as Secretary to the Ministry of Defence in November 2019.

The Government has created parallel military task forces and commissions that encroach on civilian functions, and reversed important institutional checks and balances, threatening democratic gains, the independence of the judiciary and other key institutions, the report says.

The report also documents a pattern of intensified surveillance and harassment of civil society organisations, human rights defenders and victims, and a shrinking space for independent media. More than 40 civil society organizations have reported such harassment from a range of security services - including the Criminal Investigation Department, Terrorist Investigation Division and State Intelligence officials.

"The High Commissioner urges the authorities to immediately end all forms of surveillance, including intimidating visits by State agents and harassment against human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, social actors and victims of human rights violations and their families, and to refrain from imposing further restrictive legal measures on legitimate civil society activity," the report states.

It warns that despite the Government's stated commitment to the 2030 Agenda, Tamil and Muslim minorities are being increasingly marginalized and excluded in statements about the national vision and Government policy. Divisive and discriminatory rhetoric from the highest State officials risks generating further polarization and violence. Sri Lanka's Muslim community is increasingly scapegoated, both in the

context of COVID-19 and in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks of April 2019.

The report notes that Sri Lanka's armed conflict emerged against the backdrop of progressively deepening discrimination and marginalization of the country's minorities, particularly the Tamils. Grave human rights violations and abuses committed by all parties have been documented in successive UN reports, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture and sexual violence affecting Sri Lankans from all communities.

Numerous commissions of inquiry appointed by successive governments have failed to credibly establish truth and ensure accountability for the violations, the report notes. The Government has now appointed a new commission of inquiry to review the findings of previous commissions, but its membership lacks diversity and independence, and its terms of reference do not inspire confidence it will produce any meaningful result.

A Presidential Commission of Inquiry to investigate alleged "political victimisation" of public officials, security forces and others has undermined police investigations and court proceedings related to several high profile human rights and corruption cases.

One former chief of the Criminal Investigation Division, who led investigations into several emblematic human rights cases, has been arrested while another inspector from the Division left Sri Lanka, fearing reprisals for his lead investigative role in several emblematic cases, and now faces criminal charges.

"While the criminal justice system in Sri Lanka has long been the subject of interference, the current Government has proactively obstructed or sought to stop ongoing investigations and criminal trials to prevent accountability for past crimes," the report states.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet stressed that the failure to deal with the past continues to have devastating effects on tens of thousands of family members from all communities who persist in seeking justice, reparations – and the truth about the fate of their loved ones.

"I urge the international community to listen to the determined, courageous, persistent calls of victims and their families for justice, and heed the early warning signs of more violations to come," Bachelet said, calling for resolute measures by UN Member States.

"Given the demonstrated inability and unwillingness of Government to advance accountability at the national level, it is time for international action to ensure justice for international crimes. States should also pursue investigations and prosecution in their national courts – under accepted principles of extraterritorial or universal jurisdiction – of international crimes committed by all parties in Sri Lanka," Bachelet said.

“States can consider targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes and travel bans against credibly alleged perpetrators of grave human rights violations and abuses.” Sri Lanka’s contributions to UN peacekeeping operations must be kept under review, the High Commissioner added. Bachelet also urged the Council to support a dedicated capacity to collect and preserve evidence for future accountability processes.

The High Commissioner stressed that Sri Lanka will only achieve sustainable development and peace if it effectively addresses systemic impunity and ensures civic space.

“The failure to do so carries with it the seeds of repeated patterns of human rights violations and potential conflict in the future,” she said.

In preparing the report, the UN Human Rights Office sent detailed questions to the Government and received written responses, followed by a substantive virtual meeting with Government representatives on 7 January 2021. The Government also commented on the report.

The [report](#) will be formally presented to the Human Rights Council on 24 February, followed by an interactive dialogue.

**[UN Human Rights Council 45: statement on behalf of the Sri Lanka Core Group](#)**  
**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**  
**15 September 2020**

The UK's International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, delivered this statement on behalf of Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro and the UK, the Core Group on Sri Lanka:

Thank you, Madam President.

We note the High Commissioner’s concerns on Sri Lanka in her update.

The Core Group pays tribute to the people of Sri Lanka and to all those involved in delivering safe and peaceful Parliamentary elections, despite the challenges of Covid-19.

Next March, the Council will consider an important report by the High Commissioner, on human rights, reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka. Specifically, it will consider the steps taken to implement resolution 30/1, through which, in 2015, the Council created a consensual framework to help Sri Lanka heal the wounds of its past and to address unresolved serious violations and abuses documented by the High Commissioner. This framework was renewed twice by this Council by consensus and with the explicit support of Sri Lanka.

The Government of Sri Lanka has been clear to this Council that it no longer supports resolution 30/1. The Core Group, once again, reiterates its profound disappointment at this development.

The Sri Lankan Government has also stated its continuing commitment to fostering reconciliation, justice and peaceful coexistence among Sri

Lanka's diverse communities. It has suggested that a new domestic process will take this agenda forward. While we appreciate this continued commitment, previous such processes have, regrettably, proved insufficient to tackle impunity and deliver real reconciliation. This Council will want to pay particular attention to how the new approach, will differ from these previous attempts and put the victims of conflict at its heart. The future of the Independent Commissions including the Office for Missing Persons and Office for Reparations will be particularly important.

In the meantime, we continue to hear concerns about an increasingly difficult operating environment for civil society and human rights groups in Sri Lanka. Instances of intimidation, harassment and surveillance continue, including threats to families of disappeared persons. Individuals are detained indefinitely without appearance before court, such as lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah.

Sri Lanka's dynamic and diverse civil society lies at the heart of its vibrant democracy. The Core Group expresses its strong solidarity with Sri Lanka's civil society, and human rights defenders, and calls on the government to take all steps necessary to allow them to operate freely.

Thank you.

## 4. PQs

### [Sri Lanka: War Crimes](#)

9 Mar 2021 | HL13479

**Asked by: Lord Naseby**

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they notified the UN Human Rights Council about the existence of despatches written by Lieutenant Colonel Gash, the former defence attaché of the British High Commission in Sri Lanka about events in that country between 1 January and 18 May 2009 relating to the civil war; and if so, when.

**Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government has not received a request from any UN Human Rights Council mechanism for copies of despatches written by the former defence attaché Lieutenant Colonel Gash, and has no plans to provide any.

### [Sri Lanka: Tamils](#)

4 Mar 2021 | 160619

**Asked by: Toby Perkins**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department plans to take to help ensure that the international community (a) upholds the rights of Tamils living in Sri Lanka and (b) ensures that Tamils are not subject to (i) prosecution and (ii) state harassment in the event that they engage in peaceful protests in that country.

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK is working closely with international partners on a new resolution on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council. This resolution will provide a framework for continued international engagement on human rights and post-conflict accountability in Sri Lanka. The resolution will highlight concerns about the protection of minorities, and will call on the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that the human rights of people in all of its communities are protected.

The Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, has raised the importance of protecting the rights of all communities, including minority groups, on several occasions with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, most recently during calls on 9 February and 22 January respectively. We will continue to engage with the Government of Sri Lanka to underline the importance we attach to this issue.

Officials from the British High Commission in Colombo will continue to monitor closely events linked to the right to peaceful protest.

[Sri Lanka: Tamils](#)

**4 Mar 2021 | 160618**

**Asked by: Toby Perkins**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the Sri Lankan authorities in permitting the rights of the Tamil community to engage in peaceful protest in that country.

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government is aware of the recent demonstrations that took place in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, and is concerned at reports of intimidating behaviour experienced by some demonstrators. Officials from the British High Commission in Colombo will continue to monitor closely events linked to the right to peaceful protest.

[Sri Lanka](#)

**2 Mar 2021 | 690 cc99-100**

**Asked by: Sam Tarry**

What (a) diplomatic and (b) development work his Department is undertaking in Sri Lanka. (912751)

**Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

What steps he is taking to propose a new UN resolution to hold the Sri Lankan Government to account on their responsibilities for justice and reconciliation processes following that country's civil war. (912774)

**Asked by: Fleur Anderson**

What recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. (912775)

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Minister for South Asia, Lord Ahmad, set out our serious concerns about human rights in Sri Lanka in a statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 25 February. On 22 February, the Foreign Secretary confirmed that the UK would lead a new resolution on post-conflict reconciliation, accountability and human rights. We continue to engage with Sri Lanka on these issues and on climate change, trade and the covid-19 response. UK-funded programmes in Sri Lanka support peacebuilding, resettlement, police reform and demining.

[Sri Lanka](#)

**2 Mar 2021 | 690 c99**

**Asked by: Sam Tarry**

For decades, the UK has provided extensive military and police support to the Sri Lankan police and military, and this support has continued despite deeply troubling reports of the widespread use of torture by the Sri Lankan police, including the use of the death penalty for drugs charges. Will the Minister please explain why the UK has spent more

than £7 million through its conflict, stability and security fund to assist the Sri Lankan police and military? More importantly, will he commit to publishing the full overseas security and justice assistance assessments for activities under this programme to reassure the House that the UK is not contributing to serious human rights violations?

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I know the hon. Member takes a very keen interest in Sri Lanka. Our engagement with the military in Sri Lanka is designed to support the development of a modern, effective and human rights-compliant military. Engagement with the police is focused on community policing, increasing women's representation, and improving responses to sexual and gender-based violence. Our engagement is subject to ongoing overseas security and justice assessments, as he says, to ensure that it supports UK values and is consistent with human rights obligations.

[Sri Lanka](#)

**2 Mar 2021 | 690 c99**

**Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

Many of my Slough constituents, especially those worshipping at Masjid Al-Jannah, were extremely distressed by the alarming reports of forced cremations of Sri Lankan coronavirus victims, including Muslims and Christians, for whom burial rights and traditions are sacred. As the country hopefully progresses with truth, justice and reconciliation after its devastating civil war, what representations has the Minister made to his Sri Lankan counterpart on respect for and the protection of everyone's religious beliefs and freedoms?

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter, which I know is of great concern to his constituents and to many other hon. Members' constituents. My colleague, Lord Ahmad, who is the Minister responsible for Sri Lanka, has raised the important issue of human rights, accountability and reconciliation with his counterpart, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, and the UN high commissioner, but he also has deep concerns about the decision to mandate cremations for those deceased due to covid. The United Kingdom has shared guidance on how burials can happen within World Health Organisation guidelines to the Sri Lankan authorities.

[Sri Lanka](#)

**2 Mar 2021 | 690 cc99-100**

**Asked by: Fleur Anderson**

With reference to the expiry of UN Human Rights Council resolution 40/1 this month, what success have the Government had in their role as leader of the core group on Sri Lanka at the UNHCR in drafting a new UN Human Rights Council resolution that secures international support and reflects the eight areas of focus set out by the UNHCR's recent report?

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We are very concerned by the recent UN report on human rights and accountability in Sri Lanka. As I have said previously, we have made our concerns about the human rights situation clear. The Foreign Secretary has confirmed that the United Kingdom would lead a new resolution on post-conflict reconciliation, accountability and human rights.

**[Sri Lanka: Minority Groups](#)**

**24 Feb 2021 | 154612**

**Asked by: Patrick Grady**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent representations he has made to his Sri Lankan counterpart on the rights of minority groups to lawful peaceful protest in that country.

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The right to peaceful assembly is a vital part of a democratic society. The UK Government is aware of the recent demonstrations that took place in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, and are concerned at reports of threatening behaviour experienced by some demonstrators. Officials from the British High Commission in Colombo will continue to monitor the events closely.

**[Sri Lanka: Minority Groups](#)**

**24 Feb 2021 | 154604**

**Asked by: Patrick Grady**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations he has made to his counterparts in Sri Lanka on the protection of marginalised Tamil and Muslim people in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

**Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK has long supported efforts to promote peace and reconciliation for all communities in Sri Lanka, and made clear our concern about the marginalisation of minority groups in a statement delivered on behalf of the Core Group on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in June 2020.

The Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, has raised the importance of protecting the rights of all communities including minority groups on several occasions with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, most recently during calls on 9 February and 22 January respectively. We will continue to engage with the Government of Sri Lanka to underline the importance we attach to this issue.

The UK and Core Group have tabled a new resolution on Sri Lanka which signals the international community's continued commitment to reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka. The new resolution will call on the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that the human rights of people in all of its communities are protected.

### **Sri Lanka: Human Rights**

**26 Jan 2021 | 140111**

#### **Asked by: Stephen Kinnock**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps he has taken towards securing a new resolution on human rights in Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021.

#### **Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK has long supported efforts to promote accountability, reconciliation and human rights in Sri Lanka, including in our role as penholder on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). We firmly believe that UNHRC resolution 30/1, and its successor resolutions 34/1 and 40/1, remain the best framework for establishing truth and achieving justice and lasting reconciliation following the conflict in Sri Lanka. We have made this clear in statements delivered on behalf of the Core Group on Sri Lanka at the UNHRC in February, June and September 2020.

The Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, has raised the importance of justice and accountability on several occasions with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner and the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, most recently on 21 December and 22 January respectively. The UK's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka also regularly raises human rights issues in her discussions with the government of Sri Lanka.

Ahead of the March 2021 session of the UNHRC, the UK are working closely with international partners on our approach, and have discussed this with representatives of the Sri Lankan Government.

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

**19 Jan 2021 | 138048**

#### **Asked by: Afzal Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he made of the implications for his policies of the Sri Lankan Government's recent passing into law of the 20th amendment which appears to remove almost all checks on the power of the Executive President.

#### **Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK government monitors political developments in Sri Lanka very closely, including the recent 20th Amendment to the Constitution

which extends executive power over appointments to the judiciary and independent institutions. The UK Government has had regular discussions with the Government of Sri Lanka about democratic space, the centralisation of executive power and the military's role in governance. In a statement, delivered on behalf of the Core Group on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council in June, the UK called on Sri Lanka to ensure that the country's democratic space remained open and accountable. The UK Government will continue to engage with the Government of Sri Lanka on this important issue.

### **Sri Lanka: Foreign Relations**

**19 Jan 2021 | 134555**

#### **Asked by: Ruth Jones**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, when he last spoke to his Sri Lankan counterpart.

#### **Answered by: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs last spoke with the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena in May 2020. The Minister of State for South Asia speaks regularly with Foreign Minister Gunawardena and with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner to the UK, most recently in November and December 2020 respectively. The UK's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka also has regular engagement with the Government of Sri Lanka, most recently in January 2021.

### **Arms Trade: Sri Lanka**

**14 Jan 2021 | 133221**

#### **Asked by: Taiwo Owatemi**

To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, for what reason her Department approved an export license to Sri Lanka for military helicopters on 4 March 2020 with a value of £149,724; and what assessment was made of the risk of those items being used in violations of international humanitarian law.

#### **Answered by: Ranil Jayawardena | Department for International Trade**

Whatever the destination, HM Government will not grant an export licence if to do so would be inconsistent with the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria (the 'Consolidated Criteria'), including if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

HM Government publishes Official Statistics (on a quarterly and annual basis) on export licences granted, refused and revoked to all destinations on GOV.UK and these reports contain detailed information, including the overall value, the type (e.g. Military, Other), and a summary of the items covered by these licences.

This information is available at: [gov.uk/government/collections/strategic-export-controls-licensing-data](https://gov.uk/government/collections/strategic-export-controls-licensing-data) (opens in a new tab) and the related quarterly publication was on 14th July 2020, covering the period 1st January to 31st March 2020.

As the above report shows, no licences for military helicopters were issued for Sri Lanka in this period. A licence authorising the export of 'components for NBC protective/defensive equipment' (control entry ML7) with a value of £149,725 was issued for Sri Lanka, on 4th March 2020. On the same day, we also issued a licence authorising the export of 'components for military helicopters' (control entry ML10) with a value of £161,477 for Sri Lanka. In both cases, these licences were for goods for incorporation in other products and the items were ultimately destined for third countries.

### **[Sri Lanka: Military Aid](#)**

**11 Jan 2021 | 133670**

#### **Asked by: John Healey**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Answer of 6 February 2020 to Written Question 11516 on Sri Lanka: Military Aid, whether the fact that Sri Lanka had recently lifted the moratorium on executions for drug offenders in March 2019, was specifically considered in any OSJA assessments completed in respect of the assistance.

#### **Answered by: James Heapey | Ministry of Defence**

Since April 2019, we have delivered some counter-terrorism assistance to the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. This limited assistance has focused on Counter Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED) training, improving Sri Lanka's capacity to tackle the current and potential future threat from violent extremism. We have not provided any further support to the Sri Lankan Armed Forces in combating drug trafficking.

We carefully consider all our engagement with the Sri Lankan Armed Forces which aims to support the development of a modern, professional and human rights compliant military. Our supporting Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA) Assessment is regularly updated to ensure our assistance and engagement is in line with our values and is consistent with our domestic and international human rights obligations. Successive OSJAs have considered the moratorium on executions for drug offenders. Following an injunction by the Sri Lankan Supreme Court in July 2019 the moratorium has not been lifted and remains official Sri Lankan government policy.

### **[Sri Lanka: Politics and Government](#)**

**24 Dec 2020 | HL11305**

#### **Asked by: Baroness Kennedy of Cradley**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their latest assessment of (1) the economic and (2) the political, situation in Sri Lanka.

**Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government monitors economic and political developments in Sri Lanka very closely, including through the British High Commission in Colombo. Like all countries, Sri Lanka has been affected by the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, and the government of Sri Lanka has introduced measures to respond to this. On 10 December, the Sri Lankan parliament passed the government's budget for 2021. The UK Government has underlined the importance of an inclusive economic response, including for marginalised groups and those most affected by the impacts of the pandemic.

Sri Lanka held parliamentary elections in August. In November, the government passed a constitutional amendment which consolidated executive power over appointments to the judiciary and independent institutions. The human rights situation remains concerning, including harassment of civil society, continued militarisation of civilian functions, and increased anti-Muslim sentiment. The UK Government regularly engages with the Government of Sri Lanka up to ministerial level on a broad range of issues, including our human rights concerns.

**[Sri Lanka: Human Rights](#)  
22 Dec 2020 | HL11240**

**Asked by: Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what discussions they have had with the government of Sri Lanka about human rights in that country.

**Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Sri Lanka is a human rights priority country for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and we regularly raise our concerns about the human rights situation with the Government of Sri Lanka. These concerns include the increased harassment of civil society, the militarisation of civilian functions, and the government's withdrawal of support for the UN Human Rights Council resolution on post-conflict truth, accountability and reconciliation. I have raised concerns on several occasions with the Sri Lankan High Commissioner and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, most recently during calls on 4 and 5 November. The UK's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka also regularly raises human rights issues in her discussions with the government of Sri Lanka.

**[Sri Lanka: BBC World Service](#)  
8 Dec 2020 | HL10742**

**Asked by: Lord Collins of Highbury**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the decision to bring forward the termination of the BBC World Service Sinhalese service; and whether they plan to make representations to prevent its termination.

**Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign,  
Commonwealth and Development Office**

The BBC announced in September 2020 their decision to close the Sinhala radio service, and we understand that plans for the closure are proceeding on the planned schedule. The BBC are maintaining their newsgathering presence in Sri Lanka and will focus on developing digital output. The BBC are operationally and editorially independent from Government, and the FCDO cannot dictate where changes to services may fall. The Sinhala service is also outside of the FCDO-funded World2020 programme.

## 5. Debates

### [Global Britain](#)

11 Jan 2021 | House of Commons | 687 cc70-199

Extract:

[...]

#### **Siobhan McDonagh**

The measure of success for global Britain comes not just in rhetoric, but in the actions that we take on the international stage, particularly in the face of international injustices. I will therefore use my time today to draw the Minister's attention to the situation in Sri Lanka, and particularly to the vital upcoming UN Human Rights Council meeting.

The challenges in Sri Lanka are well documented. Its President and his brother, the Prime Minister, face accusations of crimes against humanity for their role in killing thousands of their own people — Tamil civilians, at the end of the civil war. They have placed their closest allies in senior Government positions, including military commanders accused of war crimes and politicians accused of corruption, violence and common criminality. Just this weekend, I received thousands of emails from shocked and frightened members of the Tamil community following the destruction of the Mullivaikkal Tamil genocide memorial monument at the University of Jaffna — an act that completely undermines the process of truth, justice and accountability that would set Sri Lanka on a path to lasting peace.

How the UK responds to the ongoing injustice in Sri Lanka and in support of democracy, human rights and the rule of law will speak volumes for our leadership role on the international stage. The 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council will take place in March; what preparations are the Government making to ensure that a new resolution on the issue is agreed? Such a resolution should maintain human rights monitoring by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; mandate a mechanism to gather, preserve and analyse evidence for future investigations and prosecutions that build on the work of previous UN investigators; and call on the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a report on options for international action for the promotion and protection of human rights, justice and accountability in Sri Lanka. I urge the Minister, in the strongest terms, to ensure that we use the unique opportunity that March provides to continue the global leadership that we have previously demonstrated on this issue and show on the international stage that we are truly global Britain.

[...]

## 6. Early Day Motions

### Human Rights in Sri Lanka and the Relocation of the BBC Sinhala Service

**EDM 1210 (session 2019-21)**

**30 Nov 2020**

**Barry Gardiner**

That this House notes the recent Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office reports that the human rights environment in Sri Lanka worsened, with the continuation of surveillance and intimidation of activists and human rights defenders, the detention without charge of a high profile human rights lawyer, and a presidential pardon of the only member of the armed forces convicted of a wartime atrocity; further notes the withdrawal of the Government of Sri Lanka's support for UN Human Rights Council resolutions 30/1, 34/1, and 40/1 on post-conflict transitional justice, accountability and reconciliation, coupled with the Sri Lankan military forming task forces operating beyond parliamentary scrutiny and being given oversight of civilian functions, as a result of the delays to parliamentary elections without the reconvening of the Sri Lankan Parliament; believes now is not the time to be relocating the BBC Sinhala service to India with the consequent loss of jobs in the UK as well as the experience, continuity and ability to report impartially on events and to hold the government and military of Sri Lanka to account for their actions; and therefore urges the BBC to reconsider its decision.

### Closure of BBC Sinhala Radio Service

**EDM 1201 (session 2019-21)**

**26 Nov 2020**

**Grahame Morris**

That this House notes with concern the decision of BBC World Service to close the Sinhala radio broadcast service, which serves the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka who constitute around three-quarters of the population; notes that Sri Lanka has experienced much unrest in the last several decades, and is currently the subject of warnings from human rights organisations regarding the deteriorating situation, resulting in its inclusion in the FCO's top 30 Human Rights Priority Countries; further notes the potential security implications posed by the country's developing relationship with the People's Republic of China; understands the long-term strategy of investing in building digital audiences, but observes that currently 7% of the Sinhalese population listen to the radio service each week, compared to just 0.6% who use digital services; and therefore calls on BBC management to reverse the closure announcement and continue to invest in this valuable news service.

## 7. Further reading

**[Correspondence with the Foreign Secretary relating to Sri Lanka](#)**

Foreign Affairs Select Committee  
Unprinted Paper UP 6 2019-21  
23 February 2021

**[Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)**

A/HRC/46/20  
Human Rights Council  
Forty-sixth session: 22 February–19 March 2021  
9 February 2021

**[Open wounds and mounting dangers: blocking accountability for grave abuses in Sri Lanka](#)**

Human Rights Watch  
1 February 2021

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