

UN report says Sri Lankan government terrorising families of the disappeared

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A three-member delegation of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID), led by Vice Chairman Bernard Duhaime and members Tae-Ung Baik and Ariel Dulitzky, visited Sri Lanka last month to investigate disappearances of civilians during the country's three-decade civil war. It found that successive governments systematically employed military and paramilitary forces to abduct, torture and ultimately disappear civilians, political opponents and journalists—irrespective of the ethnicity of the target.

The Working Group's findings point to the reactionary character of the government and of the US-led regime-change operation that brought President Maithripala Sirisena to power in January. Nearly a year later, it saw hardly any change in the government's attitude to the thousands of disappeared. It observed an "almost complete lack of accountability and decisive and sustained efforts to search for the truth, in particular the determination of the fate or whereabouts of those who disappeared."

After a 10-days' stay in Sri Lanka, the Working Group charged the Sri Lankan government with using terror methods of the previous regime. The team called for the immediate cessation of the threats, harassment and intimidation of the military, security and other forces towards the families demanding to know the fate of the disappeared.

The Working Group reported that many people they met had been intimidated and threatened by officials of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), who demanded they reveal details of their meetings. Relatives reported officials consistently demanded bribes to provide information about the whereabouts of the disappeared. In several instances, female relatives were sexually abused.

Relatives undergo these violations, the Working Group reported, in "exchange for promises that their loved one would reappear, which almost never happens.... [This is] absolutely unacceptable in a democratic society, our group considers that the rights of the families must be exercised without threat, fear, or harassment."

The Working Group met with more than 200 family members of the disappeared in the cities of Colombo, Batticaloa, Galle, Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Matale, Mullaitivu and Trincomalee. Relatives were advised not to disclose any details of the meetings to the press. Military intelligence threatened some of the participants to reveal the content of the meeting.

In the port city of Trincomalee, the group visited an underground secret torture centre in the naval base. They found 12 cells with evidence of "systematic torture" of detainees. Inscriptions on the wall indicate that the cells were in use from early 2010.

In the final days of the civil war, in 2009, 20,000 suspected LTTE associates were reportedly taken to various part of the country to be detained in such centres. The existence of torture cells in Trincomalee was known to the media before the group's visit; the government had every possibility to prepare the premises to present them. Dulitzky, a member of the group, said: "It is likely that there are many more like this. Trincomalee is a success story in detecting illegal detention centres."

Former Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliament member Suresh Premachandran first revealed the existence of torture cells in Trincomalee in March, saying that he would be able to produce witnesses if they received assurances their lives would not be threatened.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and then-Law

and Order Minister John Amaratunga denied that there were any such detention centres. Even after the denial, the TNA nonetheless supported the Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) in the August parliamentary elections.

Despite the Working Group's critical comments about the government, it was organised to provide political cover to the Sirisena government. It was clearly understood, even before its investigation began, that its findings would not be allowed to seriously inconvenience the Sirisena government or its backers in the United States and the other imperialist powers.

The UN resolution in Geneva endorsed Sirisena's election and the new pro-US government as a "democratic transition" and abandoned original demands for an international investigation of war crimes in Sri Lanka. The resolution proposed to establish a local investigating body with international participation. The aim of this maneuver was to whitewash war criminals inside the present government and the opposition parties by local investigators beholden to the government.

The Working Group's visit began on the government's invitation, and its representatives were accompanied by the security forces during their visit to detention centres, military bases and other institutions. They also met with Sirisena, Wickremesinghe, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera as well as other high-level officials.

In fact, the Working Group's statement went on to praise the government, saying that its "increasing openness to international engagement are very positive and encouraging steps". It called on the government to take "profound measures to satisfy the rights of the victims as a fundamental step for a sincere reconciliation process."

Calling on the government to sincerely aid the victims is to promote political illusions. Since the regime change in January, nothing substantial has changed in the life of the Tamil masses, or of the working class across Sri Lanka. What the report calls the Sirisena government's "increasing openness" is in fact its subordination to the US "pivot of Asia" to prepare war against China. As for the government's fraudulent promises, recycled by the TNA, they meet with increasing opposition among Tamils.

Ahead of the arrival of the delegation, Amnesty

International (AI) in a statement said the WGEID first visited Sri Lanka in 1991 and subsequently organised investigations in 1992 and 1999. Reports of the investigations fully confirmed the sole responsibility of the state forces in enforced disappearances. Recommendations were presented to the respective governments, "aimed at addressing existing cases of enforced disappearances, preventing new ones and bringing perpetrators to justice." Most of these recommendations were never implemented, however.

In 1989–1990 alone, 60,000 Sinhalese youth, including many minors, were disappeared in a counter-interagency campaign against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Fewer than 30 low-ranking military men were convicted, while the vast majority of crimes were neither investigated nor prosecuted. Among 30 well-documented cases presented by AI dating back to the 1980s, only two resulted in the conviction of low-ranking military personnel, both on charges less serious than murder.



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