

Justice Minister visits mass grave of Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka

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On June 19, a delegation led by Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government Justice and National Integration Minister Harshana Nanayakkara visited the excavation site of the Chemmani Siththupaththi mass grave in northern Jaffna, which contains the remains of hundreds of Tamil civilians murdered by the Sri Lankan military during its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Speaking to the media, the minister declared that while the excavation work was progressing successfully, "the government wants to conduct investigations to find justice and truth to bring an end to this matter within two years."

Accompanied by officials from the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), Nanayakkara visited the site just as hundreds more skeletal remains had been uncovered during recent weeks. His visit, however, was not aimed at delivering justice to the relatives of the victims but at defusing mounting anger among the Tamil masses over decades of state cover-ups.

Although hundreds of people held protests demanding justice, the minister and the delegation ignored them.

The latest court-ordered excavations began in April this year. By June 17, archaeologists had discovered more skeletal remains, bringing the total to 412, of which 409 had been exhumed. Many were found buried together in clusters and in a highly irregular manner, revealing the protracted character of the killings and burials.

The most horrifying discovery so far has been the remains of children. Eighteen children, including six infants, have so far been identified among the remains.

Chemmani has become the largest mass grave discovered in Sri Lanka, surpassing the mass grave at the Mannar Wholesale Cooperative premises mass grave, where 380 skeletal remains were found.

Attempting to present the government as committed to uncovering the truth, Nanayakkara further stated that his government had allocated sufficient funds and was ready to release additional funds.

The government's own record exposes this claim as false.

After approximately 240 skeletal remains had been unearthed during the first phase of excavation, work was suspended on September 6, last year, because the court-approved funds needed to continue had not been released. The excavation remained suspended for about eight months before resuming in April. The

authorities later cited the rainy season to justify the prolonged delay.

The major expenses, however, begin only after the exhumation process. DNA extraction and testing from bones and teeth, forensic anthropological examination of every skeleton, collection and testing of DNA samples from relatives, storage and cataloguing of evidence, and lengthy judicial and investigative procedures all require substantial financial resources.

Despite the minister's promises, the government has not initiated these processes, nor has it sought genuine international forensic or technical assistance.

The *Island* reported that on June 25 Nanayakkara told parliament that "international assistance for forensic analysis of the remains unearthed at the Chemmani mass grave will be sought when the need arises."

Such empty phrases are used only to prevent a genuine investigation. The government fears any independent investigation that would reveal the extent of the Sri Lankan military's wartime atrocities and the state's responsibility.

Only five days earlier, speaking to relatives of the disappeared at the Jaffna District Secretariat, the same minister had promised: "Our government will carry out all necessary processes to ensure accountability and truth" and "will not deceive the Tamil people."

These promises are no more credible than those repeatedly made by previous governments over the past quarter century.

Information about the Chemmani mass grave first emerged in 1998 when an army lance corporal, Somaratne Rajapakse, one of those convicted of the rape and murder of schoolgirl Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, and the murder of her mother, brother and a neighbour, made a confession in court. He revealed that he knew about 300 to 400 Tamil civilians who had been buried at Chemmani.

The corporal implicated senior military officers in the killings and cover-up. He identified 20 army officers allegedly involved in torture and murder and described the rape and killing of Tamil civilians.

The period he referred to was after the war had resumed in 1996, when the so-called peace talks between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the LTTE broke down.

Excavations began after Rajapakse's testimony, but investigators dug at only three locations before abruptly ending the search after recovering a limited number of bodies. Investigations continued into 2000, and in March that year warrants were issued

for the arrest of seven military personnel. All the suspects were subsequently released on bail, and by 2004 the entire case had effectively been buried.

For more than two decades, successive governments ensured that the truth remained concealed. In February 2025, workers digging the foundation for a crematorium accidentally rediscovered the mass grave.

Court-ordered excavations began on May 15 under a team led by archaeologist Professor Raj Somadeva. During the first 45 days, approximately 240 skeletal remains were recovered before the excavation was halted because of the government's failure to provide sufficient funding.

These excavations had exposed the scale of the massacre far beyond what earlier investigations revealed. Yet, like every previous Colombo government, the JVP/NPP administration is determined to prevent any genuine investigation into the military's responsibility.

The government insists that the investigation remain entirely under the control of the Sri Lankan state while rejecting meaningful international forensic participation.

Nanayakkara declared that "if evidence is provided that military forces had committed crimes, then the government will take harsh legal action against the military."

At the same time, speaking to relatives of the disappeared, he said they could expect justice to be gained through prosecutions, but added that sometimes this would not happen. "It all depends on the evidence and information," he said.

This argument deliberately ignores the fact that the Sri Lankan military has spent decades destroying evidence of its crimes. Nevertheless, substantial evidence had already emerged from the Chemmani investigations since 1998, including the sworn testimony implicating senior military officers.

The central obstacle is not the absence of evidence but the determination of successive governments to shield the military from prosecution.

Throughout the war, the JVP, which has been steeped in Sinhala chauvinism since its inception, vehemently supported the military campaign against the separatist LTTE. The JVP opposed every attempt at limited peace negotiations with the LTTE and campaigned aggressively for military recruitment.

The JVP celebrated the military crushing of the LTTE in 2009 despite the enormous loss of civilian life. It has consistently rejected calls for investigations into war crimes, covering up the responsibility of political leaders and the military top brass.

Today, the JVP/NPP government continues to rely heavily on the military, the police, the courts and the state apparatus to impose its rule. It has established a separate Tri-Force reserve incorporating nearly 40,000 retired military personnel, many of whom served during the final stages of the war.

During the 2024 election campaign, the JVP/NPP, which had never previously been in power, exploited the anger of the masses against the traditional bourgeois parties by making numerous false promises. JVP leader and current president Anura Kumara Dissanayake promised the Tamil people in the Northern and Eastern provinces that his government would release all lands held by the military to their legitimate owners and deliver "justice"

regarding the missing persons.

All these promises have since been abandoned. Deputy defence minister, retired Major General Aruna Jayasekera, recently held discussions with the military top brass in the East and said that the government was looking for a "balance" in returning military-held land to civilians—that is, keeping part of the land under military control.

The Chemmani mass grave points to the brutality of the war against the LTTE that began in 1983 and ended in May 2009. Around 100,000 or more people are believed to have been killed during the war. The UN estimates that around 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed during the last months of the war alone, while thousands more disappeared.

Seventeen years after the war, more than 100,000 military personnel continue to occupy the North and East and play a major role in administration while maintaining surveillance over the population.

The Tamil nationalist parties have consistently diverted people into seeking the support of the so-called international community for investigating war crimes. Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) leader S. Sritharan said that "the Chemmani mass grave indicates genocide against Tamils" and that the "international community must accept this at least now."

The leaders of the Tamil National People's Front, organisations of the Relatives of the Forcibly Disappeared, and various civil society organisations repeat the same demand. During the protest against the minister's visit, they declared: "We need an international investigation. We do not have any hope in an internal investigation. We do not want reparations. We don't need death certificates."

But the so-called international community, including the US, India and European powers, backed the Sri Lankan governments in prosecuting the communal war. In recent months, they have backed Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran.

The Tamil parties in Sri Lanka did not condemn the genocide in Gaza or the war against Iran, indicating their political alignment with Washington and Israel. Tamil workers and rural toilers cannot rely on these imperialist lackeys for justice or democratic rights. Their allies are the working class throughout Sri Lanka, India and internationally.

Discrimination against the Tamil masses and other minorities is rooted in the efforts of the Sri Lankan ruling class to defend capitalist rule by dividing the working class along ethnic lines. Ending all forms of oppression and securing genuine democratic rights for Tamils can be achieved only through the united struggle of the working class, rallying the rural poor to overthrow capitalism and establish a workers' and peasants' government based on an international socialist perspective.



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