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Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Situation of human rights in Sri Lanka

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*

Summary

In the present report, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights provides, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/1, an update on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. It identifies challenges and opportunities to address the effects of the deep economic crisis of 2022 and long-term political and social issues. The crisis continues to have a severe impact on the rights of many Sri Lankans, with sharply increasing poverty levels. Victims of human rights violations continue to wait for truth, justice, reparations and measures to guarantee non-repetition. There are opportunities ahead to address those challenges through governance reforms and reconciliation initiatives, but these need to be accompanied by meaningful and independent accountability measures. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights calls for deeper institutional reforms and tangible progress on accountability, reconciliation and human rights, which would be particularly timely in a year that marks both the seventy-fifth anniversary of the country's independence and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Member States can help Sri Lankans at this economic juncture while pressing for justice, reconciliation and human rights.

* The present report was submitted after the deadline so as to include the most recent information.



I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/1 of October 2022, in which the Council requested the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to submit a written update on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka at its fifty-fourth session. In the present report, OHCHR covers developments since October 2022.

2. OHCHR welcomes the Government's engagement in the preparation of the present report, while noting its consistent rejection of Human Rights Council resolution 46/1, in particular paragraph 6, and resolution 51/1, in particular paragraph 8. OHCHR sent questions to the Government and the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, for which it received responses, and shared the draft report with the Government for factual comments. OHCHR is also grateful to all other stakeholders who have cooperated with it and contributed to the report.

3. Sri Lanka has been participating actively and constructively in the regular United Nations human rights mechanisms. The sixth periodic report of Sri Lanka was considered by the Human Rights Committee in March 2023.¹ In February 2023, Sri Lanka took part in the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review. The Government made 12 voluntary pledges, supported 173 recommendations and took note of 121 recommendations, of which 6 that referenced previous Human Rights Council resolutions were rejected.² As of August 2023, the Government had seven pending requests for visits by special procedure mandate holders.

II. Context

4. The severe economic crisis that hit Sri Lanka in 2022, against the backdrop of global economic stresses, significantly affected the enjoyment of rights of large segments of the population. While the severe shortages of fuel, electricity, food, medicines and other essential items were partially alleviated and the economy stabilized during 2023, many in Sri Lanka have seen their living standards sharply decline and the country still faces a heavy debt burden and economic restructuring.

5. Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was elected by Parliament as President of Sri Lanka on 20 July 2022, launched several reforms, including on economic policies, and announced initiatives to advance reconciliation. Delays in holding local government elections initially scheduled for 9 March 2023, ostensibly due to financial constraints, brought the Election Commission and the Government close to an institutional crisis. The Election Commission rescheduled the election date for 25 April 2023, but the Government failed to make the necessary financial allocations for conducting the polls and the elections were postponed indefinitely. The delays were criticized by sections of society and the political establishment, which perceived that there were political calculations in the postponement. Four provincial governors (three men and one woman) were appointed in May and June 2023 (including in the Northern and Eastern Provinces), but provincial councils – an important element of devolution under the thirteenth constitutional amendment – remain suspended since 2017.³ Meanwhile, presidential and parliamentary elections are envisaged for 2024. Women's political representation remains low: the 21-member Cabinet of Ministers includes only 1 woman, and women comprise only 5.8 per cent of seats in Parliament and 1.9 per cent of local authority representatives.⁴ In March 2023, the Government launched a National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and is preparing related legislation to establish a national women's commission.⁵

¹ [CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6](#).

² [A/HRC/53/16/Add.1](#), para. 5.

³ In a speech to Parliament on 9 August 2023, the President emphasized the necessity of implementing the thirteenth constitutional amendment but that consensus within Parliament was required.

⁴ See https://elections.gov.lk/en/all_inclusive_election/all_inclusive_women_representation_E.html.

⁵ Observations of the Government to the advanced unedited version of the present report.

6. On 20 March 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a 48-month extended fund facility for a loan of approximately \$3 billion,⁶ in support of the economic policies and reforms of Sri Lanka.⁷ Under the IMF programme, the Government has committed to sustainably expand the country's tax base, by introducing a more progressive personal income tax system, increasing the corporate income tax rate to 30 per cent and reducing tax incentives.

7. The effects of the economic crisis, tensions around economic policies and structural reforms and the delay in holding local elections have given rise to a number of protests that, while not reaching the intensity of those in 2022, still reflect social unrest. More than a year after mass protests demanding better governance and an inclusive vision for Sri Lanka, the potential for a historic transformation that would address long-standing challenges has not yet been realized and there is a high risk that electoral calculations and political expediency might jeopardize the chance for genuine reforms.

III. Human rights impact of the economic crisis

8. The economic crisis and wider strains on the global economy continued to affect the capacity of Sri Lankans to maintain their standards of living, with a devastating impact on the large and starkly increasing number of poor people. Pricing and access to essential imports stabilized in the second half of 2022, despite the economy contracting by 7.8 per cent over the year. Projections from IMF suggest that the economy will continue to contract by 3 per cent in 2023.⁸ Inflation has eased from its peak of 69.8 per cent in September 2022, with growth in the Colombo Consumer Price Index slowing to 6.3 per cent over the year to July 2023.⁹ Notwithstanding, household welfare is deeply affected by diminishing national income and higher price levels, with projections from IMF indicating that gross domestic product per capita will fall to its lowest level in a decade in 2023.

9. The crisis has resulted in a dramatic increase in the poverty rate, which the World Bank¹⁰ estimates to have doubled from 13 to 25 per cent between 2021 and 2022: namely, an additional 2.5 million poor people. The poverty rate is forecast to rise to 27.4 per cent in 2023 and remain above 25 per cent for the next few years due to "multiple risks to households' livelihoods".¹¹ That level of material deprivation leads to growing inequalities and serious impacts on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights of Sri Lankans.

10. Food insecurity remained a major barrier for the enjoyment of human rights. Some 37 per cent of households were estimated to have faced acute food insecurity in November 2022¹² and 86 per cent of Sri Lankan families are buying cheaper, less nutritious food, eating less and in some cases skipping meals altogether.¹³ Poverty in urban areas has tripled in recent

⁶ Namely, 2.286 billion special drawing rights.

⁷ IMF, "Transcript on IMF-supported EFF program press briefing for Sri Lanka", 21 March 2023. The reform programme prioritizes five pillars: revenue-based fiscal consolidation; debt restructuring; a multi-pronged strategy to restore price stability, rebuild reserves and alleviate inflation; policies to safeguard financial sector stability; and structural reforms to address corruption vulnerabilities and enhance growth.

⁸ IMF, "Sri Lanka: request for an extended arrangement under the extended fund facility", IMF Country Report, No. 23/116 (Washington, D.C., 2023).

⁹ Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics, "Colombo Consumer Price Index: July 2023", 31 July 2023.

¹⁰ See

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099060523101512718/pdf/BOSIB0abb778e20650b1540d16634cb4fb1.pdf>.

¹¹ World Bank, "Sri Lanka development update: time to reset" (Washington, D.C., April 2023), para. 21.

¹² See

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099060523101512718/pdf/BOSIB0abb778e20650b1540d16634cb4fb1.pdf>.

¹³ See www.wfp.org/news/wfp-launches-emergency-response-sri-lanka-amid-escalating-food-crisis.

years.¹⁴ In rural areas, while agriculture for self-consumption has provided a safety net for some, it has often come at a cost in terms of lost revenue from selling crops and overuse of natural resources.

11. The right to health was also affected by food insecurity.¹⁵ The United Nations Children’s Fund expects the number of malnourished children to rise further following the economic crisis, with more than 2.3 million children in need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁶ Furthermore, food insecurity – and the economic crisis more broadly – is having a negative impact on mental health as people face multiple stressors, such as price increases, scarcity, shortages in essential goods and loss of income.

12. Access to education has been a key factor in social progress in Sri Lanka but could be put at risk by rising school dropout rates due to competing economic needs and higher transport and food costs. Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and girls in general, are at higher risk of dropping out of school, perpetuating in turn cycles of poverty and gender inequality. Budgetary cuts have resulted in reduced school meals programmes, which are important to reduce malnutrition and to prevent pupils dropping out of school.

13. Women have experienced the impact of the economic crisis in distinct ways, as they continue to be primarily engaged in the informal sectors of the economy.¹⁷ As a result, they have limited access to social protection and are more vulnerable to job losses. The crisis has increased the burden on them, as obtaining basic livelihood products becomes increasingly challenging.

14. While the Government has expanded social protection programmes and has shown commitment to sustaining its performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, possible austerity measures to overcome the crisis, such as increasing taxes, reducing government expenditure and limiting investments in health, education and care services, may result in unintended and adverse impacts on various human rights and targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, disproportionately affecting persons in situations of vulnerability.¹⁸ As the Government implements difficult economic reforms, it must be guided by its international obligations, including those under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Austerity measures should be proportionate and non-discriminatory, and compatible with the core content of the rights recognized in the Covenant.¹⁹

15. The 2022 economic crisis is a demonstration of the indivisibility of human rights and how impunity, corruption and the weakening of democratic and rule of law institutions ultimately affected the economic situation. In order to achieve a path to recovery and sustainable development, Sri Lanka will need to address the longer term serious governance and accountability deficits, as well as the continuing legacy of the armed conflict.

IV. Human rights trends and developments

A. Legal and institutional changes

16. As previously reported, a powerful executive presidential system was reintroduced through the twentieth amendment to the Constitution in October 2020. That amendment negatively affected the independence of key institutions. Some of the most concerning features of the twentieth constitutional amendment were rolled back in October 2022 through

¹⁴ According to the World Bank, the poverty rate in urban areas grew from 5 to 15 per cent between 2021 and 2022.

¹⁵ See www.unicef.org/media/122356/file/2022-HAC-Sri-Lanka.pdf.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/sri-lanka/wee>.

¹⁸ See <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/news/press-release-appeal-usd-107-million-meet-urgent-needs-women-and-girls-sri-lanka>.

¹⁹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, open letter addressed to States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 16 May 2012, available at <https://www.2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/lettercescrtosp16.05.12.pdf>.

the twenty-first amendment, which aimed at restoring and strengthening the balance of power among the executive, legislature and judiciary. The Constitutional Council was re-established and its members were appointed by January 2023 (eight men and two women), including three ex officio members (the Speaker of Parliament, the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition), other appointed Members of Parliament and three independent individuals “of eminence and integrity”. The Constitutional Council plays an important role in proposing appointments to independent institutions, including the Election Commission and the Human Rights Commission, as well as approving appointments to key posts in the judiciary and other bodies.

17. In June 2023, upon the recommendation of the Constitutional Council, the President appointed new chairpersons and members to the Human Rights Commission (four men and one woman) and the Election Commission (three men). The Human Rights Commission had lost its A-status accreditation in 2022 following a special review²⁰ by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, notably because the method of appointment established by the twentieth constitutional amendment did not satisfy international standards of independence.²¹ The appointment of new commissioners under the revised constitutional process therefore offers an opportunity for the Human Rights Commission to revitalize its role and seek to regain A-status accreditation.

18. On 26 May 2023, the Government unveiled plans to regulate broadcasting media. A draft bill proposes the establishment of a broadcasting regulatory commission with the power to issue, renew or cancel annual licences for all broadcasting channels, including media institutions already operating under existing laws. The proposed broadcasting regulatory commission would comprise five government-appointed officials,²² raising serious questions about its independence. The draft bill states as its aim to “ensure that broadcasting services shall provide people true and accurate information”, a vague and ambiguous standard that could lead to arbitrary application.²³ It also contains a prohibition on broadcasting “anything that may create a threat to the national security or economy or possibility to have a conflict among races or religions”. Similar formulations are used in problematic national legislation, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which have been frequently applied in an arbitrary manner. Thus, the draft bill raises concerns about its potential to unduly restrict²⁴ freedom of expression and appears incompatible with article 19 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

19. The new Anti-Corruption Act was elaborated, which included provisions to strengthen the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption. While it contained several important improvements over previous laws, such as an increase in penalties, a publicly accessible assets declaration system and the recognition of sexual bribery as a form of corruption, concerns were raised about incompatibilities with the Right to Information Act (by imposing an oath of secrecy on anti-corruption officials) and the risk that some provisions could discourage whistle-blowers. In its determination, the Supreme Court ruled that 34 amendments were necessary to align the bill with constitutional provisions.²⁵ The bill with the proposed amendments was passed by Parliament on 19 July and certified on 8 August 2023.²⁶

20. Legislation on drug rehabilitation passed in Parliament in January 2023 also raised human rights concerns.²⁷ The Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill was subject to Supreme Court revision, but even after incorporation of the amendments proposed by the Court, it is still

²⁰ See www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/SCA-Report-October-2021_E.pdf.

²¹ Principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles).

²² Sect. 3 (1).

²³ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 34 (2011), para. 25.

²⁴ [CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6](#), para. 41.

²⁵ Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, special determination No. 16/2023.

²⁶ Anti-Corruption Act, No. 9 of 2023 (8 August 2023).

²⁷ Bureau of Rehabilitation Act, No. 2 of 2023 (24 January 2023).

contrary to the country's international human rights obligations as it envisages a model of military-run, non-voluntary rehabilitation of drug users.²⁸

21. The Human Rights Committee had recommended that Sri Lanka take additional measures to protect individuals from violence on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, to combat negative stereotypes and prejudice and to address discrimination.²⁹ In a positive legal development in May 2023, the Supreme Court determined that a bill³⁰ seeking amendment of the Penal Code to decriminalize same-sex relations was consistent with the Constitution and may now proceed before Parliament.

Anti-Terrorism Bill and Prevention of Terrorism Act

22. On 22 March 2023, the Government gazetted an Anti-Terrorism Bill designed to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979. The Bar Association, trade unions, human rights organizations, civil society and political parties raised concerns about the Bill due to its potential infringement of the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. The Bill was subsequently withdrawn for further consultation.³¹

23. OHCHR provided preliminary analysis on the draft law on 3 May 2023,³² noting that the Bill contained some positive reforms, such as improving access to bail, removing the admissibility of confessions made to a police officer while in custody and introducing torture prevention measures, such as regular and unannounced visits to places of detention by the judiciary. However, the Bill raised numerous concerns including: (a) an overly broad definition of "terrorism", which could lead to arbitrary interpretations and to criminalization of behaviour protected under the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; (b) the introduction of other terrorism-related offences, such as encouragement of terrorism and disseminating terrorist publications, which do not appear to meet the requirements of legality, necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination; and (c) the expansion of military and police powers to arrest and issue detention orders. Ten special procedures of the Human Rights Council issued a communication³³ regarding the proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill, recommending the use of a definition of terrorism guided by international standards³⁴ that would ensure precision and legal certainty in relation to criminal offences.

24. Meanwhile, the Prevention of Terrorism Act remains in effect and continues to apply to all ongoing cases pursuant to the Act. According to government data, as of August 2023, 21 detainees were on remand under the Act and there were a further 25 serving prison sentences who had been convicted under the Act.³⁵ Despite announcements in June 2022 that the Government was applying a de facto moratorium on the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, it has brought new cases under the law. For example, three student leaders were arrested under the provisions of the Act on 18 August 2022. They were all subsequently released and cleared of all charges after having spent five, three and one and a half months, respectively, in detention.

25. The authorities have also continued to review long-term cases under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and facilitated some releases. The Government had indicated that

²⁸ In its 2021 study on arbitrary detention related to drug policies (A/HRC/47/40), the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention pointed out that drug treatment should always be voluntary, based on informed consent and left exclusively to health professionals. There should be no court supervision or monitoring of the process, which should rest exclusively with trained medical professionals.

²⁹ CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6, para. 19.

³⁰ Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, special determination No. 13/2023.

³¹ Consultations conducted on 27 July and 2 August 2023. Government submission TPN 695/2023 HR/4R.

³² See www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/ohchr-preliminary-comments-sri-lankas-draft-anti-terrorism-bill.

³³ See communication LKA 4/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28057>.

³⁴ Security Council resolution 1566 (2004) and the model definition of terrorism recommended by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (A/HRC/16/51).

³⁵ Government responses to the questions of OHCHR received on 11 August 2023, NV 695/2023 HR/4R.

presidential approval had been granted for the release of 11 long-term prisoners.³⁶ On 18 July 2023, two members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, serving a life sentence and a 200-year sentence, respectively, were granted a presidential pardon and released. On 3 April 2023, three detainees who had been held in pretrial detention under the Act for 14 years were acquitted and released by the Vavuniya High Court after it ruled that their confessions had been coerced. Long periods of pretrial detention³⁷ and use of coerced confessions in court proceedings³⁸ are prohibited under international human rights law. Securing convictions in terrorism-related proceedings based solely on confessions raises concerns about respect for the right to a fair trial and the right not to testify against oneself.³⁹ The Act does not provide for an effective remedy for long periods of pretrial detention (often longer than the actual sentences for serious crimes) in case of a subsequent acquittal.

26. Bail has also been granted in some cases related to the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. For instance, Abdul Cader Fathima Saadiah, wife of the suspected main organizer of the attack, the deceased cleric Zahran Hashim, was released on bail by the Kalmunai High Court in March 2023 after four years of detention on charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

27. In other instances, the courts have taken a tougher approach to sentencing. On 24 January 2023, the Court of Appeal turned a suspended two-year prison sentence into the death penalty in the case of a convicted woman who had been an accomplice in a suicide bombing by a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam at Kollupitiya police station in 2004. On 29 March 2023, the Colombo High Court found a 67-year-old man guilty of an attempt to detonate a bomb inside a passenger bus in Colombo in 2008. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, despite requests made by the defence counsel that the Court should take into account the 15 years that he had already spent in pretrial detention and the fact that the device had been discovered before it detonated, causing no casualties or damage.

B. Security sector reform

28. On 13 January 2023, the Ministry of Defence stated that the Sri Lankan Army would reduce its size from the current figure of approximately 200,800 personnel to 135,000 by 2024 and 100,000 by 2030. OHCHR encourages the Government to undertake further downsizing of the military and adapt its budget so that it reflects the fundamental changes the country has undergone in recent years. Those measures should be accompanied by deeper security sector reform, including a comprehensive and transparent vetting process that removes individuals who, and disbands units that, have been implicated in serious human rights or international humanitarian law violations. The reform should also include phasing out the military presence in former conflict zones, in which current levels of deployment seem disproportionate to security requirements.

29. Concerns remain regarding the use of military personnel for civilian functions, such as crowd control during protests, law enforcement, intelligence gathering in civilian settings, drug control and rehabilitation, manning checkpoints or appearing alongside police at roadblocks.

C. Inclusion and reconciliation

30. In previous reporting,⁴⁰ the High Commissioner expressed concern about the trend towards hardline nationalist rhetoric that undermined reconciliation between ethnic and religious communities. The President has set a different tone in several speeches, promising to settle those national questions and initiating dialogue with Tamil political parties. A Cabinet subcommittee on reconciliation has been established, chaired by the President and

³⁶ TPN 695/2023 HR/4R.

³⁷ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 35 (2014), para. 37.

³⁸ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 32 (2007), para. 6.

³⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 14 (3) (g).

⁴⁰ A/HRC/51/5.

supported by a special unit in the President's Office, to expedite initiatives. The Office for National Unity and Reconciliation has also continued its programmes, the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was adopted and the Office for Overseas Sri Lankans has been established for outreach to the diaspora. Some officials who represented hardline centralist positions have been removed or have resigned in the past year and the President promised to stop land acquisition for archaeological, forestry or security purposes, which has been an increasing source of local conflict and tension.

31. However, land disputes between the State and citizens from local communities continue to be reported, with 26 such disputes recorded between October 2022 and June 2023, mostly in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Over the reporting period, the main State actors involved were the army (10 cases), the Department of Archaeology (6 cases) and the Mahaweli Authority⁴¹ (5 cases).

32. The Government reported that the release of land by the military and police was ongoing, with a further 87 out of 3,754 acres to be released in the coming months, and seasonal cultivation to be allowed on a further 290 acres. A national archaeology policy is being prepared and steps taken to strengthen the Land Reform Commission.

D. Surveillance and intimidation of and threats to civil society and victims

33. OHCHR continues to receive reports of surveillance, intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders, activists and persons involved in memorialization initiatives by the intelligence services, the military and the police or by unidentified individuals affiliated with former paramilitaries.

34. During the last quarter of 2022, police officers conducted several visits to local non-governmental organizations based in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Staff were questioned about activities carried out by their organizations, funding sources, beneficiaries and their personal information. On 28 December 2022, unknown persons broke into a women's organization in Kilinochchi and stole assets and documents. Three members of another organization received calls from the Terrorist Investigation Division in Batticaloa and were questioned for eight hours, while being threatened with being forcibly disappeared.

35. Family members of the disappeared in the Eastern and Northern Provinces continue to receive police visits with summonses or restraining orders ahead of emblematic dates (for example, Independence Day) preventing them from organizing or participating in protests, rallies or memorialization events. Reportedly, summonses have been delivered during late evening hours or with an excessive police presence, adding an element of harassment and dissuasion.

36. The High Commissioner reiterates his calls⁴² for the immediate end of all forms of surveillance and harassment, noting with concern that such acts not only have a chilling effect on civil society activity, but also derail the delivery of essential services that some organizations provide. The High Commissioner also notes that a change of paradigm with regard to relations between the security forces and civil society are urgently required.

E. Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly

37. While the Government committed, during its universal periodic review,⁴³ to permit peaceful protests and the number of protests has decreased since the previous reporting period, there have still been cases of crowd control in contravention of international standards by law enforcement actors in which water cannons and tear gas were used to disperse peaceful

⁴¹ A river management and irrigation scheme, which has been perceived as promoting settlement of Sinhalese farmers in villages in the Northern and Eastern Provinces to distort the ethnic composition in those regions for electoral gains.

⁴² For instance, [A/HRC/49/9](#), para. 67 (j).

⁴³ [A/HRC/53/16](#), para. 65.145, accepted by the Government ([A/HRC/53/16/Add.1](#), para. 8).

assemblies.⁴⁴ For example, on 26 February 2023, the use of tear gas and water cannons in a confined area during a demonstration held in Colombo protesting postponement of local elections prevented the crowd from dispersing and resulted in the death of one protester and in injuries and suffocation of several others. In June 2023, peaceful demonstrations of students demanding the release of those arrested in connection with previous protests were confronted with disproportionate use of water cannons and tear gas.

38. Despite its stated objective, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act has continued to be misused to stifle freedom of expression,⁴⁵ as demonstrated by recent arrests. For instance, on 28 May 2023, stand-up comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya was arrested as a result of her remarks about Buddhism. She was released on bail on 5 July 2023. On 31 May 2023, a YouTube creator was arrested for broadcasting Edirisooriya's show. A Christian preacher, Pastor Jerome, avoided arrest over remarks about other religions made during a sermon only because he was outside the country when a travel ban on him was announced. On 28 May 2023, Buddhist monk Rajangane Saddharathana Thera was arrested following a complaint from another monk over remarks reportedly offending Buddhism. He was granted bail on 12 July 2023.

F. Other human rights developments

39. During the reporting period, there have been new cases of deaths in custody or during encounters with law enforcement officers as reported in previous updates. For instance, on 12 May 2023, a 41-year-old woman died in Welikada after allegedly being beaten up while in police custody following her arrest for theft. Several police officers were suspended or transferred during the investigation. On 20 July 2023, a 29-year-old murder suspect died during a shootout with the police's special task force in Minuwangoda. As of July 2023, the Human Rights Commission reported receiving at least seven cases of extrajudicial killings in 2023 and eight cases of deaths in custody.⁴⁶

40. On 27 April 2023, a magistrate ordered the prison officers who had been involved in the shooting of 11 inmates during the Matara jail riots in November 2020 to be arrested and brought before the court.

V. Reconciliation and accountability

A. Transitional justice mechanisms and confidence-building measures

41. The President has committed to advance reconciliation, including plans for the establishment of a truth-seeking mechanism. The Government has appointed an advisory committee to hold discussions with stakeholders and facilitate drafting of the necessary legislation. According to the Government, as of July 2023, it had consulted a number of stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society, trade unions and Tamil politicians.⁴⁷ On 29 May 2023, the Cabinet approved establishment of an interim secretariat for a truth and reconciliation mechanism and issued vacancy notices in July 2023.⁴⁸

42. However, consultations so far have not been extensive and victims, their associations, human rights defenders and many notable transitional justice experts have not been included. Some civil society organizations and victims' groups issued statements expressing deep

⁴⁴ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 37 (2020), para. 76.

⁴⁵ [CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6](#), para. 40 (b).

⁴⁶ Response to OHCHR questions received on 7 August 2023.

⁴⁷ See www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2023/07/27/trade-unions-and-civil-organizations-updated-about-truth-commission.

⁴⁸ See www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/Documents/New_AD_English.pdf.

concerns about the Government's proposal and urged the international community to assess the proposed truth-seeking commission in the best interests of victims.⁴⁹

43. To achieve its objectives, a truth-seeking process should be trusted by victims and affected communities, which starts with genuine consultations. To be effective, it would require significant buy-in from all stakeholders, including the political will to implement recommendations. It would need to take place in an environment in which victims are not only free to engage without fear of reprisals, but in circumstances enabling their meaningful participation. A truth-seeking process must also be conducted independently and impartially by bodies and/or individuals with full integrity and adequate expertise, supported by competent staff and sufficient financial resources. Most importantly, in the case of Sri Lanka, any such commission would need to show the potential to go further than previous similar commissions that have failed to pave the way for accountability or provide adequate redress to victims. OHCHR appeals to the Government to take time to lay the proper foundation for any truth commission through broad-based consultations and confidence-building measures, building on the valuable work of the 2016 Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms.⁵⁰

44. In previous reports, OHCHR highlighted the lack of progress in addressing the issue of enforced disappearances and how, 14 years after the end of the armed conflict, families of those disappeared are still demanding answers regarding the fate and whereabouts of their relatives. Any strategy for transitional justice and reconciliation needs to take into account that issue, which remains unresolved despite the establishment of the Office on Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations. The Office on Missing Persons has held preliminary inquiries in 4,088 out of a total of 14,988 complaints, while the Office for Reparations disbursed 405.3 million rupees for 2,402 conflict-related cases in 2022. OHCHR believes that the Office on Missing Persons requires proactive, independent leadership and more robust investigative and tracing capacities, including to investigate suspected mass grave sites and to identify remains.

45. While the Government affirms its commitment to reconciliation, it continues to obstruct memorialization initiatives, further eroding victims' trust. For instance, on 23 July 2023, the police violently dispersed a civil society memorial in honour of the victims of the 1983 Black July riots. Allowing victims safe spaces to remember and mourn is an important gesture towards reconciliation and a form of recognition by the State.

B. Emblematic cases

46. During the reporting period, there have not been many developments in the investigation or adjudication of past emblematic human rights cases, most of which remain unresolved or pending before the courts.

47. The case concerning the attacks that took place on Easter Sunday in 2019 in multiple sites across Sri Lanka moved forward as the Colombo High Court Trial at Bar on 31 March 2023 started reading out the 23,270 charges of aiding, abetting and conspiring to commit acts of terrorism, collecting explosives and weapons, murder and attempted murder to the 25 individuals accused under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. On 12 January 2023, the Supreme Court directed senior government officials, including former President Maithripala Sirisena, to compensate the victims and their families from their personal funds. The Court considered that the officials were responsible for failing to prevent the terrorist attacks despite receiving intelligence ahead of them.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See, for example, observations of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence following his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, available at www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2015/04/observations-special-rapporteur-promotion-truth-justice-reparation-and.

⁵⁰ See www.omp.gov.lk/storage/app/uploads/public/5fa938/65a/5fa93865aa0a0196003109.pdf.

⁵¹ See https://supremecourt.lk/images/documents/sc_fr_163_2019.pdf. See also www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/01/comment-un-human-rights-office-spokesperson-jeremy-laurence-sri-lanka-supreme.

48. On 14 March 2023, the Human Rights Committee adopted its Views⁵² in the case of *V.M. v. Sri Lanka*, concerning the torture, rape and ill-treatment in 2009 of a man who had been a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam between 1990 and 2000, and the subsequent lack of an effective remedy and investigation. The Committee found that Sri Lanka had violated its international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and was under an obligation to provide, inter alia, adequate compensation to the complainant.

C. Activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 46/1

49. In its resolution 46/1, the Human Rights Council decided to strengthen the capacity of OHCHR in relation to advancing accountability for the gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law and related crimes committed by all parties in Sri Lanka. To that end, OHCHR established a specialized project, the OHCHR Sri Lanka accountability project. In October 2022, the Council decided to extend and reinforce that capacity through resolution 51/1. The Government of Sri Lanka has consistently rejected Human Rights Council resolution 46/1, in particular paragraph 6, and resolution 51/1, in particular paragraph 8, and has declined the offer of the project team to provide briefings and engage in an exchange of information with officials. The terms of reference for the project were published in three languages (English, Tamil and Sinhalese) in March 2023.

1. Collecting, consolidating, analysing and preserving information and evidence

Repository

50. The project team continues to prioritize the establishment and development of a repository of information and evidence, to maximize the long-term contribution of OHCHR in supporting accountability initiatives. The repository was originally populated with data from the earlier OHCHR investigation on Sri Lanka, together with other material collected over the years by the Office. It has since been supplemented by material drawn from the archives of nine key non-governmental organizations and academic sources. The project team is engaging with other stakeholders to seek to bolster the repository's holdings, subject to appropriate terms of access. A particular focus for the next period will be working with partners for the digitalization, preservation and safe transfer of information and evidence.

51. During that period, there has been significant investment in refining the electronic data management system for the repository, so as to increase capacity to provide useful and timely responses to requests, in particular those being received from State authorities. The project will continue to assess additional digital tools and data management applications with a view to further refining the cataloguing, identification and analysis of relevant material, to maximize the possibility of its use and admissibility in accountability processes.

Investigations

52. An initial analysis of available material by the project team highlighted that further investigations would be necessary to address outstanding gaps in the factual basis of some violations, as well in material linking violations and related crimes to specific individuals, whether those directly involved or bearing command responsibility. Given the scale of violations and crimes alleged in Sri Lanka, the project prioritizes cases according to objective criteria, including the gravity of the violations and related crimes, their representativeness (taking into account, for instance, the parties involved and geographical factors, while factoring in underrepresented cases, including those involving sexual and gender-based violence), the strength of the existing information base concerning the patterns of violations/crimes and potential perpetrators, appropriate access to further information and likely accountability opportunities. As a result of that analysis, four priority areas were selected: unlawful killings; sexual and gender-based violence and torture in detention settings; enforced disappearances; and violations against and affecting children, including

⁵² Human Rights Committee, *V.M. v. Sri Lanka* (CCPR/C/137/D/2406/2014).

the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. In carrying out its work, the team retains the flexibility to respond to future requests for assistance.

2. Advocating for victims and survivors

53. OHCHR places the highest priority on victim-centred approaches in its work. It is acutely aware of the real threats facing those speaking out about the violations of the past and continues to develop methodologies to ensure compliance with the overriding imperative to “do no harm”. In all its operations, the project team carries out participatory assessments of the level of threat and risk of harm to victims, witnesses and other persons engaging with the project before, during and after establishing contact with them. Tailored protection strategies are developed accordingly. The project team has sought to map existing local protection networks and support mechanisms, including psychosocial support, and make referrals as appropriate to such services.

54. During the reporting period, the project team has carried out an intense process of engagement with civil society organizations, including representatives of victims. That has involved consultations with more than 120 civil society organizations, including 30 women’s rights organizations, the majority of which are based in Sri Lanka. There have been specific efforts to engage with organizations from across the different geographical areas of Sri Lanka and from different religious and political affiliations, as well as with organizations that focus on gender issues. In conjunction with partners, it also sought to strengthen the ongoing capacity of civil society organizations, with a series of workshops on the topic of security, including digital security and protection strategies. Moving forward, the project team anticipates expanding its communication and outreach programme to allow for a wider flow of information. In recognition of the importance of enforced disappearances, OHCHR will convene focused victim consultations on accountability for enforced disappearances.

55. Some victims have expressed disillusionment and frustration about the fact that previous national and international investigations that they contributed to did not lead to specific action in relation to accountability. OHCHR is grateful to all those who have been willing to re-engage with the United Nations and entrust the project with their personal accounts and supporting documentation. While any future results will ultimately depend upon the willingness of the authorities, both in Sri Lanka and in other States, OHCHR will continue to amplify the demands of victims for justice and support initiatives designed to achieve that.

3. Supporting relevant judicial and other proceedings, including in other States, with competent jurisdiction

56. The project team has provided increased support to jurisdictions that are investigating and prosecuting international crimes committed in Sri Lanka. It has noted a steady increase in the number of requests being made by State investigative, prosecutorial or judicial authorities for information and evidence. To date, requests have been received from authorities in relation to 10 named individuals. OHCHR will only share information if it has the relevant form of consent, that it is not contraindicated by a risk assessment and that the information would not be used in a manner that is inconsistent with international human rights law. Once relevant information and evidence is identified, it is reviewed in the light of those and other applicable criteria for the purpose of sharing such information and evidence with the requesting authority in an appropriate form.

57. During the reporting period, the project has also sought to increase its engagement with State prosecutorial authorities. In April 2023, the project briefed representatives from 29 national prosecutorial authorities and/or law enforcement agencies on the mandate and work of the project and to explore opportunities for cooperation.

4. Developing possible strategies for future accountability processes

58. OHCHR continues to carry out work on developing future accountability strategies, which will be addressed in more detail in the comprehensive report to the Human Rights Council at its fifty-seventh session. Despite the steps now being taken to establish a truth-seeking mechanism, the Government appears reluctant to support independent criminal

investigations and prosecutions for those responsible for the egregious violations that have taken place or to make progress in relation to the establishment of a special judicial mechanism for that purpose, as committed to by a previous Government.

59. It remains vital for the international community to remain engaged on the issue of accountability and contribute alongside national processes. There have been some encouraging developments in this arena, such as a number of States pursuing criminal investigations against persons implicated in violations and abuses and related crimes in Sri Lanka and taking other accountability steps. It is to be hoped that the international community, through the United Nations and other multilateral forums, as well as individual States on a bilateral basis with Sri Lanka, will continue to work together to advance accountability.

VI. Conclusions

60. Sri Lanka is still facing a difficult economic, social and political situation. The economic crisis continues to have a severe impact on the rights and well-being of many Sri Lankans. Financial support from international financial institutions and structural reforms are important steps to bring the economic crisis under control, but it is essential that the burden of reforms does not fall unequally upon some segments of society. Robust safety nets and social protection are required to shelter the most vulnerable from the negative spillovers of economic restructuring. It is vital to address the underlying factors in the crisis, including corruption, centralization of power, lack of transparency and institutional checks and balances, and the unresolved legacy of conflict, including accountability. The High Commissioner urges the international community to keep supporting Sri Lanka in its recovery, in line with obligations around international cooperation and assistance, while pressing for genuine progress in governance, transparency and accountability. Solutions will only be long-lasting if supported by society as a whole. Both the necessary economic reforms and the historical institutional challenges affecting Sri Lanka require tremendous political capital, broad consensus and the trust of society.

61. Lack of accountability at all levels remains the main fundamental human rights problem. Whether it refers to war crime atrocities, post-war emblematic cases, torture and deaths in police custody, excesses in crowd control, corruption or the abuse of power, Sri Lanka suffers from an extraordinary accountability deficit that, unless addressed, will drag the country further behind. The High Commissioner urges the Government and Sri Lankan political parties to strive for and deliver on long overdue democratic renewal, deeper institutional reforms and tangible progress on accountability, reconciliation and human rights. That would be particularly appropriate in a year that marks both the seventy-fifth anniversary of the country's independence and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

62. Last July also marked the fortieth anniversary of Black July, the anti-Tamil pogroms in Colombo in 1983 that killed many hundreds and left thousands homeless, exponentially magnifying the ethnic divide and setting the scenario of armed conflict that defined Sri Lanka for the following three decades. OHCHR welcomes the intention of the President to enter into dialogue with Tamil political parties and diaspora groups and advance reconciliation options through truth-seeking and other political solutions for devolution, as presented in the thirteenth constitutional amendment. However, accountability remains a crucial element of any genuine reconciliation agenda and any new transitional justice measures, including a truth-seeking commission, must meet international standards and the expectations of victims and their relatives to deliver lasting gains.

63. While it remains the responsibility of the Sri Lankan authorities to acknowledge past violations and carry out credible investigations and prosecutions, the international community can play an important complementary role, including by supporting relevant criminal justice investigations and prosecutions, the use of universal

jurisdiction and consideration of appropriate targeted sanctions against persons credibly implicated in serious human rights violations.

VII. Recommendations

64. OHCHR reiterates the recommendations made in previous reports⁵³ and those made by United Nations human rights mechanisms. OHCHR remains ready to provide technical assistance for the implementation of those recommendations, as required, including through the strengthening of its country presence to support the Government and people of Sri Lanka at this critical time.

65. OHCHR recommends that the Government of Sri Lanka:

(a) Take all necessary measures, within its available resources, to guarantee people's economic and social rights during the economic crisis, on the basis of non-discrimination and protection of human rights, and strengthen social protection by increasing financing and extending it to cover emerging needs;

(b) Decisively tackle corruption, increase investments in health, social security and education, including through international cooperation, and assess the potential human rights impact of international financial assistance programmes and take preventive measures to reduce it to a minimum;

(c) Create as a matter of priority an enabling environment for a successful and sustainable transitional justice process, including by ensuring the full, free and safe participation of victims, witnesses and civil society, ending all forms of harassment and unlawful and arbitrary surveillance against them, and supporting initiatives to acknowledge and memorialize the experience of victims;

(d) Develop and implement, in full consultation with victims and civil society, a coherent time-bound plan that connects the elements of truth, accountability, redress and non-recurrence, drawing also on the work of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms, and ensure that any truth-seeking process is developed through broad-based consultations, complies with international norms, standards and best practice and is complemented by an independent ad hoc special court;

(e) Pursue other transitional justice measures, including strengthening the Office on Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations to their full potential, and adopt institutional and other measures preventing violations in the future;

(f) Carry out comprehensive security sector reform, including considerably reducing military spending, vetting and reducing the military presence in areas affected by armed conflict;

(g) Take all measures necessary to increase women's participation in political life, including in decision-making regarding the economic crisis, at the national, provincial and local levels, including by ensuring respect for the 25 per cent quota for women's representation in local government, combating harmful stereotypes and protecting politically active women from harassment and violence;

(h) Make public relevant documentation concerning violations of the past, including reports of the commissions of inquiry, and documentation concerning those taken into the custody of the State;

(i) Engage and cooperate with OHCHR in relation to advancing work on accountability, including through sharing relevant information and evidence and permitting OHCHR to visit Sri Lanka in pursuance of the mandate under resolution 51/1;

(j) Review practices in departments dealing with archaeology, forestry, irrigation and other services regularly implicated in land disputes. Impartially and

⁵³ [A/HRC/46/20](#), paras. 60–62; [A/HRC/49/9](#), paras. 67–69; and [A/HRC/51/5](#), paras. 70–72.

transparently adjudicate land disputes, particularly those with an intercommunity/interreligious aspect;

(k) Ensure that new legislation replacing the Prevention of Terrorism Act and regulating broadcasting media fully comply with the obligations of Sri Lanka under international law; observe a strict moratorium on use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and continue expediting the release of those detained and imprisoned for a long period under the Act;

(l) Accelerate investigations and prosecutions in emblematic cases of human rights violations, as well as the Easter Sunday bombings, in accordance with international human rights standards and with international assistance, and ensure the full participation of victims and their representatives;

(m) Ensure the right to political participation and the free expression of voters through free and fair elections at all levels of government;

(n) Review and amend in accordance with the international human rights requirements of legality, necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination laws that unduly restrict freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association;

(o) Invite OHCHR to strengthen its country presence and provide technical assistance to authorities and civil society in Sri Lanka.

66. OHCHR reiterates the recommendations made to the Human Rights Council and member States in its reports in 2021⁵⁴ and 2022⁵⁵ and further recommends that they:

(a) Prioritize activities that help create an enabling environment and lay the foundation for effective and meaningful transitional justice processes, taking into account the views of all stakeholders, particularly victims;

(b) Support transitional justice measures insofar as they are in compliance with international norms and standards and take into account the needs, priorities and expectations of victims and affected communities;

(c) Cooperate in investigating and prosecuting alleged perpetrators of international crimes committed by all parties in Sri Lanka through judicial proceedings in national jurisdictions, including under accepted principles of extraterritorial or universal jurisdiction, through relevant international networks and in cooperation with victims and their representatives;

(d) Explore further targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes and travel bans against those credibly alleged to have perpetrated gross international human rights violations or serious humanitarian law violations;

(e) Support Sri Lanka in the investigation of economic crimes that have an impact on human rights and in the tracing, recovery and return of stolen assets, and in ensuring that returned assets are allocated in an accountable, transparent and participatory manner that contributes to the realization of human rights.

67. OHCHR recommends that all United Nations agencies, funds and programmes operating in Sri Lanka and international financial institutions:

(a) Take into account the international human rights obligations of Sri Lanka with regard to economic, social and cultural rights and pay special attention to issues of accountability, governance and diversity when negotiating or implementing support programmes;

(b) Support the design and implementation of transitional justice and reconciliation measures in compliance with international standards and the resolutions of the Human Rights Council;

⁵⁴ A/HRC/46/20, para. 61.

⁵⁵ A/HRC/51/5, para. 72.

(c) **Ensure broad cooperation and engagement with the work of OHCHR on accountability in Sri Lanka, including that OHCHR is given full access to materials held within the United Nations system concerning violations and related crimes that have occurred in Sri Lanka.**

68. **OHCHR recommends that the Human Rights Council continue to monitor developments closely.**
