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Continuing impunity will only lead to more doom and gloom in Sri Lanka

A new documentary from Britain's Channel 4 (Sept. 6, 2023) alleges senior government officials close to the Rajapaksa family engineered 2019 Easter Sunday attacks which took the lives of 270 people including 45 foreigners. The implication was a sense of insecurity and blatant communalism were what was needed for the Rajapaksas to recapture power.

The sad reality is that this shocking allegation won't shock anyone in Sri Lanka. There was some understanding and even acceptance among many that Easter Sunday attacks were not what they were portrayed to be. In fact, loss of human lives and deterioration in inter-communal relations were often viewed as acceptable price for acceding to political power. This appalling culture was built on the unshakable confidence that Sri Lankan judicial system will never be able to deliver truth or justice.

The demand for international investigation into Easter Sunday attacks is widespread, from senior opposition political leaders to the leaders of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. Global Tamil Forum (GTF) strongly supports this demand.

At this critical juncture, GTF would like to recall the previous Channel 4 video, "[Sri Lanka's Killing Fields](#)" (June 3, 2011) and its impact. The video – featuring Sri Lankan troops executing blindfolded and bound naked Tamil men and women – shocked the world and led to many UN investigations and sanctions. But the Sri Lankan government dismissed the video as fake, claiming it's all conspiracy against the country. The majority population, perhaps still on war victory euphoria, chose to ignore the atrocity crimes committed on their fellow citizens.

Impunity for serious crimes in Sri Lanka – whether war related crimes or economic crimes – is total. After tens of thousands of deaths of Tamils and indisputable evidence of proof, Sri Lanka could not find within it the will or capacity to punish even one perpetrator.

Sri Lanka has been under the watch of the UNHRC for fourteen years, and yet again, the defining theme of the most recent [report](#) from High Commissioner Volker Turk (Sept. 6, 2023) was, "Sri Lanka suffers from a continuing accountability deficit – be it for war crimes atrocities, more recent human rights violations, corruption, or abuse of power – which must be addressed for the country to move forward."

GTF welcomes the comprehensive report from the High Commissioner, the Joint Statement from the Core Group of countries and India's intervention during the Interactive Dialogue - all highlight Sri Lanka's continuing failure to fulfil its own commitments to justice, accountability and reconciliation. The

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outright rejection of the key parts of the High Commissioner's report by the Ranil Wickremesinghe led government shows the prospects for accountability within Sri Lanka is non-existent. In this hopeless reality, the only hope for accountability for the crimes committed in Sri Lanka is through the UNHRC based, Sri Lanka Accountability Project (SLAP), and we are grateful to the High Commissioner for his update on this important work.

GTF would like to take this opportunity to highlight the targeted unlawful activities by some extremist Buddhist monks in the Tamil majority North-East, which involve erecting new temples in areas where no Buddhists live and preventing the locals from continuing with their subsistence economic and religious activities. This has the potential to erode religious harmony and the government seems to be impotent in dealing with it. This is an area that needs added focus from the OHCHR in the future.

Sri Lanka's unwillingness to address the past but adopt deceptive measures to evade international scrutiny had no limits. When compelled, appointing commissions as time buying exercise was one of them. As [stated jointly](#) by the International Commission of Jurists and eight other reputed human rights organisations (Sept. 4, 2023), Sri Lanka has a strong legacy of failed commissions setup between 2006 to 2021 to address serious violations of human rights, and none of which led to any tangible outcome for the affected people.

We have no doubt that the Sri Lankan government's attempt to manage the serious allegations levelled by the recent Channel 4 video through a Parliamentary Select Committee and investigation by a retired Judge is just one more step in this time-tested tradition.

It is the same discredited approach Sri Lanka followed when dealing with Transitional Justice commitments it made at the UNHRC in 2015. The two institutions it set up in response to international pressure – the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations – were overly weak and ineffective to offer any meaningful truth, justice or reparation.

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's present initiative to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has caused much alarm, rather than offering comfort to the victims and their advocates. Their worry that the proposed mechanism is not positioned to succeed, but to help Sri Lanka avert UNHRC scrutiny after 2024, is shared by many human rights organisations, including the International Crisis Group (ICG). The [ICG report](#) (Sept. 7, 2023) argues that in the absence of major course correction by the state, the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission would have no chance of success and lists many conditions that should be met before the international community endorse the proposed Commission.

GTF shares the sentiments expressed by these reputed human rights organisations and the OHCHR, and strongly believe that without taking decisive steps to end the culture of impunity prevalent in the country, the people of Sri Lanka will only face more doom and gloom in the future.

The critical message conveyed by the Channel 4 videos is just that. If Sri Lanka had addressed the serious accusations aired in the first Channel 4 video, there would not have been the second. Failing to address

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the crimes alleged in the second Channel 4 video will create fertile conditions for more crimes in the future. That is the destructive power of impunity.

GTF earnestly calls on the people of Sri Lanka and their leaders to rise to the challenge of eradicating impunity for international and domestic crimes.

We would also like to stress it is the responsibility of the international community to ensure Sri Lanka is firmly under their scrutiny, until such time as it recovers from its entrenched culture of impunity.

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Notes: Global Tamil Forum (GTF) is an influential Tamil diaspora organisation - established in 2009 following the end of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. GTF is absolutely committed to a non-violent agenda and it seeks lasting peace in Sri Lanka, based on justice, reconciliation and a negotiated political settlement.