

# From Chemmani To Geneva

Will Sri Lanka Face Its Truth?



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HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST June 30, 2025

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## Disclaimer

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## Editor's Note

*This article was prepared in the aftermath of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk's June 2025 visit to Sri Lanka. The mission was seen as pivotal for post-war reconciliation and accountability. We recognize that the content touches on deeply sensitive and painful issues for many communities. In editing this piece, our goal has been to center the voices of survivors and victims while providing accurate, fair, and well-contextualized reporting. Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity, but not for tone or meaning.*

## Methodology

*This report draws upon a wide range of verified primary and secondary sources, including:*

- Official UN OHCHR press releases and end-of-mission statements
  - Publicly available transcripts and summaries of High Commissioner Türk's meetings and speeches
  - Statements from the Sri Lankan government, Tamil political representatives, civil society organizations, and protest groups
  - Letters, memoranda, and advocacy briefs submitted by Tamil communities and international NGOs
  - On-the-ground media reports from Sri Lanka between June 23 and July 1, 2025
  - Expert commentary, academic articles, and social media statements vetted for credibility
- All facts presented reflect developments up to and including July 1, 2025.*

## Author Information

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**Contributor:** Microsoft Copilot (AI Research Assistant)

**Support:** This article was developed with research and editorial support from Microsoft Copilot, an AI companion trained to synthesize complex global developments into accessible knowledge. All source material was human reviewed to ensure accuracy and editorial integrity.

## Editor's Remark

Distinguished Readers,

We respectfully call upon all advocates for justice for the victims of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes of aggression to steadfastly uphold the principles of international law and order. In these challenging times marked by conflict and devastation, the United Nations General Assembly, comprising 194 member states, stands as a beacon of hope for those who have endured immense suffering.

**The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated.** It is of paramount importance that we unite in our unwavering commitment to justice, ensuring that the voices of the oppressed are heard and their rights are safeguarded. **Immediate action is essential** to prevent further atrocities and to provide the necessary support and protection to the victims.

Your dedication to these fundamental values is essential in our collective endeavor to cultivate a just and peaceful world. **We must act now** to uphold justice and human dignity.

With the utmost respect,

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# From Chemmani to Geneva: Will Sri Lanka Face Its Truth?

UN Rights Chief's Visit Raises Hope, but Accountability Hangs in the Balance

## Background and Context of the High Commissioner's Visit

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights **Volker Türk** paid an official visit to Sri Lanka from **June 23–26, 2025** – the first by a UN human rights chief to the island in nearly a decade. The visit came under a new Sri Lankan government led by President **Anura Kumara Dissanayake** (elected earlier in 2025), which had pledged reforms on human rights and reconciliation. During his four-day mission, Türk travelled to **Colombo, Jaffna, Trincomalee, and Kandy**, meeting top leaders (including the President, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, and key ministers) as well as opposition politicians, religious leaders, civil society members, and victims' families. The trip was seen as a “*landmark*” given Sri Lanka's troubled human rights record and ongoing scrutiny by the UN Human Rights Council. It also came ahead of the **UNHRC's next session in September 2025**, where Sri Lanka's accountability efforts are due for review.

### Context:

For **16 years** since Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, successive governments have largely failed to deliver justice or reconcile with the Tamil minority, prompting repeated UNHRC resolutions. A UN evidence-gathering initiative (the **Sri Lanka Accountability Project**, or **OSLAP**) is ongoing to document war-era atrocities for potential prosecutions. Leading up to Türk's visit, **Tamil politicians and civil society** expressed hope but **also skepticism**: they urged that the visit is not used to “*undermine international pressure*” or weaken the UNHRC's push for accountability. Indeed, over 100 Sri Lankan civil society organizations reportedly wrote to Türk asking him to postpone the trip until after tangible progress or the **September UNHRC session**, fearing a premature visit could bolster the government's image without real results. Despite these concerns, Türk proceeded, aiming to assess the human rights situation firsthand and offer UN support for reforms.

## Volker Türk's Engagement and Key Messages During the Visit

Throughout his visit, **Volker Türk engaged** a broad spectrum of Sri Lankan society and delivered strong public messages on addressing past abuses and strengthening human rights. He met with victims of enforced disappearance (from both Tamil-majority north and Sinhalese south) and paid an emotionally charged visit to a recently exhumed **mass grave at Chemmani** in Jaffna. Standing at the gravesite where remains of 19 people (including infants) were uncovered, Türk noted how “*the past haunts the lives of many in Sri Lanka*” and stressed that thousands of families still yearn for the truth about missing loved ones. He joined Tamil families of the disappeared at the “**Unextinguished Flame**” vigil near Chemmani, laying flowers in tribute and acknowledging their decades-long struggle for justice. In Trincomalee, he similarly met protesting Tamils who handed

him memoranda detailing grievances – from the loss of Tamil self-determination to ongoing “*constructive genocide*” through land grabs and militarization.

In Colombo, Türk conferred with Sri Lanka’s leadership and national institutions. He noted a “*genuine openness*” from the new government to discuss difficult issues, and commended President Dissanayake’s recent gestures acknowledging the shared pain of all communities. However, Türk was clear that **acknowledgment must lead to concrete action**. In a **final statement** at the end of his mission, he outlined the major human rights challenges ahead – effectively a roadmap of reforms and accountability measures needed for Sri Lanka to turn the page. **Key issues and recommendations** highlighted by the High Commissioner included:

### Transitional Justice and Accountability:

Sri Lanka has “*struggled to move forward*” with credible domestic accountability, eroding victims’ trust. Türk emphasized that this must change – truth-telling, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence are “*important steps towards healing and closure*”. Notably, he acknowledged why many Sri Lankans “*have looked outside for justice*” and affirmed that international support is indispensable. He reminded that his own office’s **OSLAP project** is preserving evidence that can aid future prosecutions “here in Sri Lanka and internationally”. Ultimately, while accountability should be “*nationally owned*,” it can and should be “*complemented and supported by international means*” to ensure credibility.

### Repeal of Draconian Security Laws:

In a firm appeal echoing long-standing demands, Türk **called for the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)** – Sri Lanka’s notorious anti-terror law – and urged an immediate moratorium on its use. He noted that despite PTA being in force for decades (and even criminalized torture in law), **reports of torture and abuse persist** across the country. He pressed for the expedited review and release of long-detained PTA prisoners. Türk likewise criticized the new Online Safety Act, urging it be revoked due to concerns it severely curtails freedom of expression.

### Ending Security-Sector Abuses:

The High Commissioner highlighted ongoing complaints of torture, sexual violence, and heavy surveillance by security forces. He stressed the need for urgent **police and security sector reforms** to end these “*systemic*” problems. He commended Sri Lanka’s Human Rights Commission for work on preventing custodial deaths, but underscored that **surveillance of human rights defenders must end** so that civil society can operate as partners in nation-building.

### Return of Military-Occupied Land:

Türk urged the government to **release private lands still under military occupation**, especially in the war-torn Northern and Eastern provinces. Land disputes involving archaeological or religious claims should be resolved in consultation with local communities, he said, and displaced Muslim residents (expelled during the war) must be facilitated to return to their lands. Ongoing state appropriation of Tamil lands – often under the guise of archaeology or forestry – was singled out as a harmful practice that must stop. (*Indeed, just a day after Türk’s visit, Sri Lanka’s Supreme*



***Court intervened to halt a government gazette that sought to take over nearly 6,000 acres of “unclaimed” land in the North, a move Tamil groups had decried as a state land grab.)***

## “Quick Wins” for Reconciliation:

Emphasizing the new government’s stated goal of “*national unity*,” Türk encouraged **confidence-building measures** to rebuild trust. Small but meaningful steps – such as returning even a few emblematic pieces of land or delivering justice in a longstanding human rights case – would have a “*powerful confidence-building effect*,” he noted. These tangible actions could validate the government’s rhetoric and give victims hope that change is real.

## Equality and Legal Reforms:

Beyond war-related issues, the High Commissioner addressed broader human rights. He welcomed Sri Lanka’s recent moves towards **decriminalizing same-sex relationships** and urged rapid passage of that reform. He also pressed for amending the **Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act** to meet international standards (eliminating discriminatory provisions). Türk highlighted persistent *gender inequality, noting women earn ~27% less than men and face rampant sexual violence* – and called for stronger protection of women’s rights. He further acknowledged the economic hardships, especially among plantation workers, and spoke of building a “*human rights economy*” addressing inequality and corruption in the wake of Sri Lanka’s 2022 crisis.

In summary, Volker Türk used his visit to validate victims’ suffering and to press Sri Lanka’s leaders on a comprehensive set of reforms. He praised the “momentum of change” he sensed and offered the UN’s support to achieve it, but he also publicly warned against falling into an “impunity trap” and letting reconciliation stall. As he departed Colombo, Türk tweeted that he was leaving “with strong hope”, wishing for Sri Lanka to “become a story of hope” where diversity is embraced as a strength. This hopeful tone underscored the opportunity presented by the new government – but also served as a gentle challenge to Sri Lanka to live up to its promises. “Sri Lanka can become an example of peaceful co-existence...while at the same time embracing diversity,” Türk remarked, signaling optimism if reforms take hold.

## Sri Lankan Government’s Response and Commitments

The Sri Lankan government, for its part, gave **full cooperation** to the UN High Commissioner’s visit and signaled policy commitments in line with some of Türk’s recommendations. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, President Dissanayake and cabinet ministers had “*constructive discussions*” with Volker Türk on advancing human rights, reconciliation, and social justice. The government “*reiterated its sincere commitment*” to these goals, briefing Türk on both actions taken and plans underway. Notably, officials highlighted a series of intended reforms and initiatives, including:

## Repealing the PTA:

The government assured the High Commissioner of its intention to abolish the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, a pledge it had made during election campaigns. (Despite these assurances, it’s important to note the PTA was still in force as of June 2025, and arrests under PTA continued, drawing criticism that progress was too slow.)

## Revising or Repealing the Online Safety Act:

A controversial cybersecurity law passed by the previous administration, the Online Safety Act, would be revisited. Sri Lankan leaders told Türk they plan to “revise” the law to better safeguard freedom of expression. This aligns with Türk’s own call to scrap the act.

## “Confidence Building” Measures for Reconciliation:

The government spoke of further strengthening reconciliation mechanisms and undertaking confidence-building steps. This includes bolstering existing offices like the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations, and possibly new initiatives. (Türk met with these institutions’ representatives, who reported on their work, though he also heard criticisms that past political interference hindered their effectiveness.)

## Anti-Corruption and Governance Reforms:

Officials highlighted a Clean Sri Lanka anti-corruption program and efforts to promote “ethical governance,” which Türk praised as positive steps. The High Commissioner said he was “encouraged” by measures against corruption and mismanagement and hoped the momentum would continue. However, he gently reminded that similar energy must be applied to human rights accountability, not just financial crimes.

## Social and Economic Rights Initiatives:

The government pointed to programs aimed at social justice and helping vulnerable groups. For example, they mentioned plans for new legislation to advance the rights of persons with disabilities. They also emphasized restoring economic stability as a prerequisite for improving overall human rights – President Dissanayake noted that reviving the economy remains a top priority alongside reconciliation.

In direct meetings, President Dissanayake sought to convince Volker Türk of his administration’s resolve. He spoke of having “*a deep understanding*” of victims’ pain – referencing that his own party (**the JVP/NPP**) lost thousands of members to enforced disappearances in the late 1980s. The President affirmed “*full commitment to implementing the necessary reforms to ensure national unity, foster reconciliation and safeguard human rights*” across the country. He stressed the need to strengthen the institutions dealing with the **missing persons issue**, conceding that ***past political cultures hindered*** these bodies from delivering results. Dissanayake also made a point to connect Sri Lanka’s struggles with those of victims elsewhere, remarking that Sinhala and Tamil families of the disappeared “*share the same pain*”, and that his government “*will honour the trust these families have placed in it*”.

The government welcomed Türk’s supportive stance. State media highlighted that Türk “*expressed complete support for the direction Sri Lanka is pursuing*” under President Dissanayake. The High Commissioner’s positive acknowledgment of a “*real momentum of change*” was touted as an endorsement of the new leadership. Indeed, officials appeared pleased that Türk noted the confidence people in both North and South have in the current government’s agenda. Sri Lanka’s Foreign Ministry concluded that the visit and frank dialogue reflected the country’s “*continuing*



*constructive engagement*” with the UN human rights system – a contrast to the antagonistic stance of previous regimes.

## No Immediate Policy Changes Yet: It’s important

It is to note that while the government’s rhetoric during the visit was largely reassuring, tangible actions remained pending in its aftermath. By June 30 (just days after Türk’s departure), parliament had not yet repealed the PTA or amended the Online Safety Act, despite possessing a two-thirds majority that could expedite such moves. Critics pointed out that these were “low-hanging fruits” the administration could have delivered within its first months, yet hadn’t. Likewise, deeper accountability measures (such as prosecuting perpetrators of past atrocities or demilitarizing the Tamil regions) were not announced during the visit. In fact, statements by the Sri Lankan delegation at recent UN forums continued to downplay international accountability, echoing prior nationalist positions. This suggests that, despite a change in tone, the new government may not have fundamentally shifted its stance against international investigations or tribunals. According to one analysis, the NPP-led administration has “outright rejected” the idea of an external accountability mechanism and has sought to persuade the UN to wind down its scrutiny.

Going forward, the government will be measured by how it follows through on the promises reiterated to Volker Türk. Will it quickly repeal repressive laws and implement “quick wins” to build trust? Or will momentum stall once the spotlight moves on? These questions linger as Sri Lanka’s leaders digest the High Commissioner’s parting advice. Notably, the Supreme Court’s injunction against the Northern Province land seizure on June 27 (mentioned above) serves as a reminder – even the judiciary expects the state to change course and respect minority rights. The President has appealed for continued international support and understanding, saying Sri Lanka needs help to convey “actual circumstances” and improve its global image. Such support, however, likely hinges on concrete progress in the coming months. The government’s engagement with Türk has bought it some goodwill; now it must translate words into actions to maintain that goodwill.

## Tamil Political and Civil Society Reactions

**Tamil civil society and political leaders** approached Volker Türk’s visit with a mix of cautious welcome and resolute advocacy. For many Tamils – especially in the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces – the UN envoy’s presence was an opportunity to voice decades-old grievances directly, but also a moment fraught with distrust based on past disappointments. Following the conclusion of Türk’s visit on June 26, Tamil groups assessed what was (and wasn’t) achieved, and they have continued to press their core demands:

### Joint Tamil Memorandum:

During the visit, a coalition of Tamil political parties and civil society representatives handed Volker Türk a **joint letter** titled *“Need for a sincere and genuine approach to ensure accountability in Sri Lanka.”* This letter implored the High Commissioner not to let the Sri Lankan State use his trip as “an exercise in boosting their legitimacy” or to weaken the UN’s resolve on accountability. It stressed that **16 years have passed with no significant progress** on justice for mass atrocities, and warned that the current administration was continuing oppressive policies of its predecessors. The signatories cited recent examples of bad faith: a government order **seizing**

over **6,000 acres of Tamil land** as state property, refusal to return private lands (such as in **Thayiddy** where the **military backed** construction of a Buddhist temple), and apparent backtracking on promises to repeal the PTA. These illustrate, in Tamil leaders' view, "*no real change*" in how Tamils are treated. The joint letter urged the UN to maintain a **firm international accountability process**, recalling a 2021 Tamil appeal that called on UN member states to refer Sri Lanka to the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** for alleged genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. In essence, Tamil representatives welcomed Türk's engagement but underscored that only rigorous international action – not just dialogue – will satisfy the long-denied quest for justice.

## Meetings with Tamil MPs:

Volker Türk held a closed-door meeting in Jaffna with several Tamil parliamentarians from different parties (**including TNA, TNPF, and others**). Those present said the High Commissioner **assured them** that the plight of Tamil people will **not** be sidelined at upcoming UN forums, even amid numerous global crises. **MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam** reported that he asked Türk whether Sri Lanka's issues would remain a priority given conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine; Türk replied that Sri Lanka would indeed "*remain on the agenda*" at the **UNHRC** and that the push for justice would continue. The discussion touched on **urgent Tamil demands**: expediting the release of **political prisoners**, ending **military land occupation**, investigating **mass graves**, and uncovering the fate of the **disappeared**. Tamil politicians urged that UNHRC resolutions — which mandate ongoing monitoring and evidence-gathering — be fully implemented, and that Sri Lanka is not allowed to wriggle off the hook. One former **MP, Dharmalingam Siddharthan**, said he stressed to Türk the importance of continuing UNHRC's work and not scaling down now. They also personally thanked Türk for visiting sites like Chemmani, seeing it as validation of their calls for international forensic experts to investigate these graves. Another MP, **S. Shritharan**, raised specific instances of stalled justice – pointing to the Chemmani grave and ongoing **militarized grabs of Hindu temple lands (e.g. at Kurundur Hill)** – as evidence that "*accountability is not presented in an honest and dignified manner*" by Sri Lanka. Even a Tamil member of the ruling party (NPP), MP Sri Bhavanandaraja, who attended the meeting, acknowledged that Tamils in the North-East have "*not seen any progress*" in the **16 years since the war's end**, and insisted that the current government is "*very committed*" to addressing this. This rare admission from a governing party Tamil MP highlighted that even within the government's ranks, there is awareness of the unmet needs of Tamil constituents.

## Civil Society Voices from the North-East:

Outside of formal politics, grassroots Tamil civil society groups were vocal during and after Türk's visit. In the Eastern Province, organizations of victims and activists penned a letter "*welcoming*" Türk yet laying out stark **urgent concerns**. They described how Tamils in the East still suffer **systematic militarization, land grabs, enforced disappearances**, and repression – even **16 years post-war**. The letter spoke of ongoing "*constructive genocide*," accusing the state of trying to erase Tamil identity through demographic change and cultural domination. It lamented the **lack of accountability** – noting that the government has even denied visas to international investigators

(**preventing OHCHR's staff from doing their job in-country**) and ignored court orders to return land. These Eastern Province groups reiterated demands that mirror those across the Tamil areas:

- **International Justice** for atrocities (they explicitly call for international criminal tribunals to address what they term Tamil genocide).
- **Referral to the ICC** by UN member states.
- Proper **forensic exhumations of mass graves** with international experts.
- An **end to land grabs** and colonization in Tamil regions.
- Answers about the **forcibly disappeared**.
- Repeal of repressive laws like PTA and the Online Safety Act (echoing Türk's recommendations).
- Protection for activists and a **durable political solution** that grants Tamils autonomy (touching on the long-dormant issue of self-determination).

This letter, like others, appealed to the **UNHRC as the “last hope”** for Tamil people to get justice and rights. It underscores the near-total collapse of trust in domestic remedies.

## Reactions After the Visit:

When Volker Türk left Sri Lanka expressing optimism, many Tamil activists reacted with guarded skepticism. Tamil civil society groups appreciated that Türk had listened to them and echoed some of their demands (**for instance, his final statement did urge international support, PTA repeal, and land returns, all long-standing Tamil asks**). However, there is palpable concern that **just words** will not alter Colombo's behavior. As one Tamil commentator put it, *“for Tamils, hope now rests on whether the words of the High Commissioner will be met with concrete action.”* In other words, they are waiting to see if the Sri Lankan government and international community actually follow through. Some victims' groups expressed disappointment that Türk's Colombo speech leaned heavily on reconciliation rhetoric and did not explicitly demand mechanisms like an international tribunal or mention the word *“genocide”*. The **Tamil families of the disappeared** – who have been protesting for years – remain steadfast: while appreciative of Türk's solidarity at their vigil, they insist that only tangible outcomes (such as answers about their missing relatives or prosecutions of perpetrators) will count as success. A sense of fatigue and wariness pervades Tamil civil society statements post-visit: they have *“heard these words before, year after year, from global leaders and previous High Commissioners alike”*, one editorial noted, calling Türk's message a *“painful repetition of a familiar script”* if not accompanied by action.

In sum, Tamil stakeholders used Volker Türk's visit to spotlight their enduring grievances and to extract assurances that the international pursuit of justice will continue. They were encouraged that Türk bore witness to their reality – visiting mass graves, hearing testimonies, and publicly acknowledging Sri Lanka's failure to win victims' trust. Yet they remain only cautiously optimistic. Tamil leaders and civil society have effectively put the UN and Sri Lankan government on notice: **do not treat this visit as a public relations exercise**. They expect **actionable follow-up** – whether that be concrete domestic reforms or escalated international measures – and they are prepared to keep pressing until they see results. As a Tamil advocacy group warned, any attempt by Sri Lanka to

use a veneer of engagement to “*feign legitimacy without meaningful reform*” will be called out. The true test, from the Tamil perspective, lies in what happens in the coming months now that their appeals have been heard once again at the highest levels.

## International Community and Human Rights Organizations’ Reactions

**International human rights organizations** and other global stakeholders closely followed Volker Türk’s Sri Lanka visit, seeing it as a barometer for the UN’s resolve in addressing Sri Lanka’s long-standing human rights issues. Both before and after the visit, these actors weighed in with recommendations and cautionary notes:

### Joint NGO Letter (Pre-Visit):

Ahead of Türk’s arrival, **five leading international human rights groups – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Commission of Jurists, Forum-Asia, and the Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace & Justice** – issued a joint public letter on June 17, 2025, outlining what they believed the High Commissioner should push for. This letter commended Türk’s engagement but **warned him to ensure the trip would not be misused by Sri Lanka to undermine the UNHRC’s mandate**. Key points these NGOs urged included:

#### *Don’t Let Sri Lanka Derail UNHRC Mechanisms:*

The letter explicitly said Türk’s visit “*must not be used by the Sri Lankan government to reinforce its calls to end the mandate*” given to his office by the UNHRC – namely, the **OHCHR’s Sri Lanka Accountability Project (OSLAP)**. They noted the government has been lobbying to terminate the evidence-collection mandate, and implored Türk to resist that and instead champion its renewal.

#### *Meet Victims and Visit Key Sites:*

They urged him to directly **stand in solidarity with victims** – e.g. meet families of the disappeared from both the north and south, and visit Mullivaikkal, the site of the war’s final massacres. (In the end Türk did not go to Mullivaikkal, which some have criticized as a missed opportunity, but he did meet many victims elsewhere and visited Chemmani and other gravesites).

#### *Publicly Call for Specific Reforms:*

The NGOs provided a checklist of public calls Türk should make, which mirrored many Tamil demands. These included urging **PTA repeal and a moratorium** on its use, stopping land seizures and demographic engineering in Tamil areas, fully investigating the **2019 Easter bombings** and ending harassment of Muslim civilians, and insisting any domestic truth or justice initiatives meet international standards and involve victims (so as not to be a sham). They also boldly suggested Türk should ask Sri Lanka to **accede to the Rome Statute of the ICC**, committing it to international justice, something successive governments have refused.

## Support OSLAP and Universal Jurisdiction:

The letter asked Türk to “*publicly support*” the **continued mandate of OSLAP** and to **demand** Sri Lanka **allow OSLAP investigators access to the country**. It highlighted that the evidence gathered could feed into future prosecutions and that many survivors depend on this international process since domestic avenues failed. It also called on using **universal jurisdiction** – encouraging other nations to prosecute Sri Lankan atrocity crimes in their courts – as a way to break the cycle of impunity.

This robust NGO letter essentially set a benchmark for evaluating Türk’s visit. Post-visit, these organizations have been dissecting his actions against their recommendations. They welcomed, for instance, that Türk did echo calls to repeal PTA and urged land returns, and that he met with victims and went to Chemmani. However, they also **noted shortcomings**, such as his **avoidance of politically charged terms like “genocide”** and the lack of a clear outline of next steps for international justice. **Human Rights Watch and Amnesty have continued to insist that the UNHRC’s evidence-gathering be extended and strengthened**. They argue that **Türk’s hopeful tone should not lead states to prematurely relax pressure** on Sri Lanka. In their view, the visit will be positive only if it galvanizes concrete outcomes – otherwise, it risks becoming, as one observer put it, a “*propaganda victory*” for the **Sri Lankan government** that makes **accountability harder**.

## Diplomatic Reactions:

As of now (**late June 2025**), there have not been many public statements from foreign governments directly in response to Türk’s visit. However, countries that take an interest in Sri Lanka’s human rights file (like the UK, Canada, the EU, and the US) are undoubtedly assessing it. The **coming UN Human Rights Council session (September 2025)** will be the key venue where international reactions crystallize. Notably, the co-sponsors of the Sri Lanka resolution will have to decide whether to renew the accountability mandate again. **Türk’s end-of-mission remarks** – emphasizing hope and domestic momentum – could influence these discussions. Some worry his upbeat framing “*will reverberate in Geneva... and might be met with skepticism*” when civil society argues for continued pressure. In other words, diplomats might question: **If the UN High Commissioner himself is optimistic, should we still press Sri Lanka hard?** Conversely, others will note that even Türk listed many unmet reform needs, and thus use the visit as further justification to keep Sri Lanka on the agenda. The **UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka** and other UN officials who accompanied Türk have not explicitly stated much yet, but likely they will work behind the scenes with the government on follow-up steps, per the High Commissioner’s offers of technical support.

## Media and Analyst Opinions Internationally:

International media coverage of the visit was relatively limited (given other global crises dominating headlines). The AFP news agency reported on the Supreme Court halting the Tamil land grab immediately after Türk’s trip, framing it as Sri Lanka’s top court preventing a “*state land grab from Tamils*” – implicitly crediting the climate of accountability reinforced by the visit. Outlets like **The Hindu** (India) and **Yahoo News** also picked up that story, highlighting the ongoing land rights struggle of Tamils and possibly linking it to issues raised during Türk’s meetings.



**Devex/Devdiscourse**, a development news site, labelled the visit “*Volker Türk’s landmark visit*” and noted it came as the UNHRC continues to **scrutinize Sri Lanka’s wartime abuses**. They emphasized that Türk’s trip underscored **accountability for past violations** and was supposed to **add momentum ahead of Geneva’s deliberations**.

## Diaspora Organizations:

Tamil diaspora groups around the world have been vocal as well. The **ABC Tamil Oli (ECOSOC/NOG)**, for example, has **repeatedly called for the extension of the UN’s evidence-gathering mandate and for any findings to be transmitted to higher UN bodies for action**. After Türk’s visit, **diaspora advocates are amplifying the message that *now is the time for action***. Some have pointed out that previous High Commissioners (**like Navi Pillay in 2013 and Zeid in 2016**) also paid visits and gave warnings, yet international follow-through was limited, enabling Sri Lanka’s continued defiance. These groups are lobbying foreign capitals not to take Sri Lanka’s new promises at face value and to instead tighten measures, such as travel bans or asset freezes on alleged war criminals (so-called **Magnitsky sanctions**). The Tamil Guardian’s editorial on June 29, pointedly titled “*Will the international community finally act?*”, reflects diaspora impatience: it argues that “*resolution after resolution*” in Geneva has yielded little, and that “*preservation without prosecution is not justice*.” It calls for the UN to **look beyond the Human Rights Council** if needed, hinting at avenues like the UN General Assembly or Security Council, or ad-hoc international tribunals, to achieve accountability. While those routes face political obstacles, the message from international rights advocates is clear: **don’t let this moment slip away**. They want Volker Türk’s visit to be the catalyst for decisive moves – be it via the UNHRC renewing and beefing up its mandate, or individual states launching prosecutions under universal jurisdiction, or other creative mechanisms to deliver justice to victims at last.

In summary, the international human rights community is essentially guardedly applauding Türk’s engagement but simultaneously **holding his and the UN’s feet to the fire**. They recognize the value of the visit in spotlighting Sri Lanka’s issues, yet they are determined that it must now lead to concrete international **actions**, not a relaxation of scrutiny. There is a consensus among these organizations that **accountability in Sri Lanka is far from achieved** and that **continued (even heightened) international involvement is needed**. Their recommendations, from extending UN mandates to pursuing global justice initiatives, set a decisive tone. The coming months up to the September UNHRC session will reveal how much influence these voices have on shaping the international community’s course of action vis-à-vis Sri Lanka.

## Analysis: Outcomes of the Visit and Outstanding Challenges

Volker Türk’s visit to Sri Lanka concluded with high hopes, cordial engagements, but also an acute awareness of the “*daunting challenge*” ahead. In weighing the **outcomes** of the visit, one finds a mix of positive developments, symbolic gestures, and lingering skepticism:



## Positive Outcomes and Signals:

### *Reaffirmation of Commitments:*

The visit yielded public reiteration by the Sri Lankan government of key human rights commitments – **PTA repeal, legal reforms, anti-corruption, and reconciliation efforts. This in itself is notable**, as it reflects that the government felt compelled to at least *verbalize* an agenda aligning with human rights norms in the High Commissioner's presence. The importance of this cannot be dismissed: it provides benchmarks against which the government can now be held. For example, having told the UN High Commissioner that the PTA will be scrapped and political prisoners addressed, Colombo will face greater pressure to actually do so. Türk's very **visit** helped extract or solidify these pledges.

### *Visibility to Victims' Plight:*

By visiting the North, East, and engaging directly with victims' families, Volker Türk shone an international spotlight on issues often ignored by Colombo. Images of the UN rights chief at Chemmani mass grave or speaking with Tamil mothers of the disappeared send a powerful message that their suffering is recognised at the highest levels. This moral validation was widely welcomed by victims and may also dissuade local authorities from harassing these groups (at least in the short term, given global attention). One concrete result: shortly after Türk's visit, the government **allowed a memorialization event in Jaffna** (the continuation of the "Unextinguished Flame" vigil) that earlier might have been shut down – suggesting a bit more space for such remembrance activities. Türk himself noted "*a growing space for memorialisation*" and indeed his visit likely contributed to expanding that space.

### *Momentum for Immediate Fixes:*

The High Commissioner's emphasis on "*quick wins*" and concrete measures appears to have resonated. Within days, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court intervened to suspend a controversial land acquisition in the North, as mentioned earlier, potentially spurred by the heightened scrutiny. While that court action was independent, it aligns with the visit's call for respecting minority land rights. Additionally, there are reports (unconfirmed publicly) that the government may fast-track the release of a group of PTA detainees as a goodwill measure following discussions during Türk's trip. Even small steps like reducing military checkpoints in Jaffna or inviting UN experts for training can be counted as subtle outcomes prompted by the visit's collaborative spirit – though these need verification. At minimum, the dialogue channels between the UN human rights office and the Sri Lankan government are now wide open, with Türk offering technical assistance and the government appearing willing to receive it. This could facilitate progress on things like reviewing legislation or improving the Office of Missing Persons.

### *International Continuity:*

Türk's public assertion that **Sri Lanka will remain on the UNHRC agenda** and his vow to Tamil MPs that he would not let global focus fade, provided reassurance to victims and activists. The visit thus served to reaffirm the UN's continued engagement. It also allowed Türk to gather first-hand information that will feed into his next report to the Human Rights Council. Observers expect that

his September oral update or report will be richer and more pointed thanks to insights from this mission. In effect, the visit strengthens the evidentiary basis for international decisions going forward. The interactions and promises made can also be cited in future UN resolutions (for instance, acknowledging the government's pledges or noting civil society's concerns delivered to him).

## Ongoing Challenges and Caveats:

*Despite the positives, there remain serious challenges and unresolved questions post-visit:*

### Lack of Concrete Agreements:

The visit did not yield any **formal** agreement or new mechanism between the UN and Sri Lanka. Unlike some past high-profile visits, there was no joint communiqué outlining a roadmap, nor an announcement of a specialized hybrid court or truth commission. Some had hoped Türk might broker a deal for a **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** or a revitalization of the **OMP** with international involvement, but that did not happen openly. Thus, the outcomes are largely **promises and understandings**, whose implementation is uncertain. The government's reluctance to commit to any international judicial mechanism remained evident – **they gave no indication they would accept foreign judges or sign onto the ICC**. Without a clear structural path to justice, the fundamental gap between Tamil demands and the government position persists.

### Trust Deficit with Victims:

As highlighted, many victims' groups remain mistrustful. The Daily FT editorial (a Colombo-based perspective sympathetic to victims) noted that **Tamil families protested even before Türk arrived**, questioning the value of his visit. This indicates a deep-seated skepticism that one trip by a UN official can alter ground realities. Indeed, families of the disappeared in Mullaitivu held banners asking what difference this visit would make. After the visit, their stance is essentially *"we'll believe it when we see it."* The onus is now on delivering tangible relief (be it answers on missing persons or releasing prisoners) to validate their cautious optimism. Until then, the trust deficit remains. The failure of Türk to visit **Mullivaikkal** – the symbolically important site of **mass civilian killings in 2009** – was particularly painful to some survivors and was seen as him sidestepping the most politically sensitive truth. That choice may have slightly dented his standing among the more hardline rights advocates, who argue he gave too much deference to the government's sensitivities.

### Government Follow-through:

Serious doubts remain about the Sri Lankan State's willingness to conduct meaningful reforms that threaten entrenched interests. While President Dissanayake leads a new coalition, his security apparatus and bureaucracy still contain many figures resistant to change. Notably, surveillance of activists reportedly continued even during Türk's visit – Tamil journalists in the North were blocked from covering his stop at Chemmani by police, who cordoned off the area. This shows the reflex of securitization is alive and well. Furthermore, as of end of June, PTA arrests were still happening (one Tamil student was allegedly detained under PTA even during the visit week, highlighting the dissonance between promises and practice). The government's rhetoric at the UN in prior months – described as *"regurgitations of the same ethno-nationalist positions"* by commentators – suggest that once international attention wanes, old habits might return. The coming weeks will

evaluate if the administration enacts even the simplest promised changes (**like releasing a few PTA prisoners or repealing the Online Safety Act**) – failures on those fronts would signal that the visit's impact is already fading.

## International Decisiveness:

A major lingering question is whether the **international community will act more decisively** in response to Sri Lanka now. The Tamil Guardian's post-visit editorial argued that if Zeid's 2016 visit was a test that Sri Lanka largely failed, then *"Türk's visit... must be taken as a final verdict on its failure."* Their point: Sri Lanka has been given years of chances; now the world should pursue justice without its consent. However, it is unclear whether key international players are prepared to escalate measures. So far, no country has announced new sanctions or universal jurisdiction cases post-visit. Everything hinges on the UNHRC session – will member states merely extend the status quo (**keeping OSLAP running**), or will they **ramp up pressure with a stronger resolution**? If Volker Türk's hopeful framing causes states to be lenient, that could undercut victims' hopes. On the other hand, if his cataloging of needed reforms stiffens resolve to keep Sri Lanka under scrutiny, it could be a win. The real outcome internationally will play out in diplomatic corridors in the next two months. **In essence, the visit set the stage; now the main act (deciding Sri Lanka's accountability path) is up to UN member states and other global actors.**

## Domestic Political Risks:

The new Sri Lankan government faces its own domestic pressures that could hamper progress. Hardline Sinhala nationalist opposition elements (though currently weaker after electoral defeat) could seize on any concession to Tamil demands as betrayal. Already, some nationalist voices criticized Türk's visit. An ultranationalist commentary lambasted Türk as a foreign meddler *"lecturing Africans and Asians on human rights... harking back to colonialism"*, and questioned his silence on issues like Israel's actions in Gaza to discredit his moral authority. Such rhetoric, though extreme, could pressure the government to tread carefully. If President Dissanayake is seen as bowing too much to UN pressure, it may cost him politically among more conservative sections of the Sinhala public or the military. Thus, the government might attempt a balancing act – doing the minimum to satisfy the UN while assuring domestic skeptics that sovereignty isn't compromised. This could mean terribly slow, symbolic gestures rather than bold leaps, unless international incentives or pressures alter the calculus.

## In analyzing the net effect:

Volker Türk's visit certainly injected new energy and focus into Sri Lanka's human rights discourse, but it did not itself resolve core issues. It can be seen as a catalyst – one that has created a window of opportunity for change. Whether that window yields real progress or closes with disappointment will depend on how both Sri Lankan authorities and international stakeholders move forward from here.

As **Savitri Hensman observed in a Groundviews commentary**, Türk left Sri Lanka *"hopeful"* but *"little doubt"* was left about the enormity of tasks ahead – from legal reforms to accountability for decades of abuses. The **fault lines** between what is required (by victims and international law) and what the authorities are willing to do are still evident. Many of these fault lines – **PTA**, impunity for

the military, land disputes – remain **unresolved** after the visit. **If Sri Lanka acts on even some of Türk's recommendations in the coming months**, the visit will be remembered as the turning point when the country finally heeded the call for change. **If it doesn't**, then the visit may be remembered as another well-intentioned but ultimately fruitless exercise that bought Sri Lanka more time without justice – something Tamil activist's dread. As one Tamil mother of the disappeared said during Türk's visit, *"we have hope, but we have had hope before"* – a poignant reminder that promises have been made and broken too often in the past.

## Next Steps and Future Outlook

With Volker Türk's mission now completed, attention shifts to what comes **next**. All parties – the UN, the Sri Lankan government, Tamil representatives, and international actors – are looking ahead to ensure that the visit's momentum translates into sustained progress rather than fading away. The coming weeks and months are critical. Here are the **key anticipated steps and developments** to watch:

### 1. Implementation of Government Pledges:

Sri Lanka's government will be expected to start implementing the promises reiterated during Türk's visit. **Repealing the PTA** will be a litmus test – **drafting of a new security law (or amendments)** should ideally be underway by July, with the aim to present it to Parliament soon. Similarly, movement to **amend or repeal the Online Safety Act** could happen quickly given the ruling coalition's supermajority. If August arrives with no action on these fronts, it will signal backtracking. Additionally, watch for **releases or sentencing reviews of PTA detainees**; human rights lawyers anticipate that a handful of long-term prisoners might be freed as a goodwill gesture. The government may also unveil some new reconciliation initiatives – for instance, a plan to expedite pending cases of wartime abuses through a special inquiry or to beef up the Office on Missing Persons with fresh resources. President Dissanayake is under pressure to demonstrate tangible changes before the UNHRC meets, to bolster his credibility.

### 2. UN Human Rights Council Session (Sept 2025):

The **51st regular session of the UNHRC** (expected in September 2025) will be the centerpiece. High Commissioner Türk will deliver an update on Sri Lanka's situation to the Council. His update (and any report released before it) will incorporate observations from the June visit. Diplomatically, negotiations will occur on a **new resolution on Sri Lanka**. The current UNHRC resolution (which authorized the evidence collection by OHCHR) is up for renewal. We should expect a draft resolution to be tabled by the **Core Group on Sri Lanka (likely led by the UK, Canada, Germany, etc.)** in early September. The tone of that resolution will be telling: Will it continue the current monitoring for another year or two? Will it strengthen language on exploring international avenues for justice? Or conversely, will it tone things down, citing improvements under the new government? Civil society is lobbying hard for a strong resolution – including an extension (or even expansion) of the **accountability project mandate**. One suggested idea is for the High Commissioner, at the completion of the evidence-collection project, to **share its findings with UN bodies like the Security Council or Secretary-General** for possible action (similar to how UN investigations on Myanmar or North Korea have been escalated). The upcoming resolution might encourage such steps. On the other hand, if Sri Lanka can show it is moving on some domestic reforms, some

states may opt for a softer approach, giving Colombo more time. **September's UNHRC outcome** will be a direct consequence of how convincing or not the follow-up to Türk's visit has been.

### 3. OHCHR Follow-up and Engagement:

The Office of the High Commissioner (**OHCHR**) will keep a close eye on Sri Lanka. Türk indicated that his team stands ready to assist Sri Lanka in technical areas. In practice, this could mean deploying experts to advise on legal reforms (**for example, helping draft a PTA replacement that meets international standards**) or providing forensic support for investigating mass graves (he specifically encouraged seeking international forensic expertise for sites like Chemmani). If the Sri Lankan government is serious, we may see formal requests for such assistance. Additionally, OHCHR's **Sri Lanka Accountability Project (OSLAP)** will continue its work of collecting evidence. A milestone to watch is **April 2026 (if two years from 2024 report)** or as mandated by **UNHRC** – that might be when **OHCHR** has to report on what it has compiled. But even before that, **OSLAP** might quietly begin sharing information with jurisdictions pursuing cases. The **UN Special Procedures** (special rapporteurs) **might also increase visits – for instance, the Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, and Reparation could be invited to Sri Lanka as a next step, to build on Türk's visit.**

### 4. Domestic Justice Initiatives:

Locally, it will be important to see if Sri Lanka launches any new **domestic accountability mechanism** in response to the calls. There have been mentions that the government might propose a fresh **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**, or reform the **OMP** to give it more teeth. If such a mechanism is announced, its credibility will be scrutinized – victim's groups have already warned they will reject any “whitewashed commission” without real powers. Engaging victims in the design will be crucial. Another area is prosecutions of a few emblematic cases: for example, advancing the long-stalled case of the **Trinco 5 students** or the *Navy's “disappeared 11”* case. **Any concrete justice delivered in even one case** would be heralded as a breakthrough. Türk explicitly said achieving results in some longstanding cases would build confidence. Thus, keep watch if the Attorney General suddenly files indictments or if any military officers are charged in the coming months. Conversely, lack of any legal action will reinforce the impunity narrative.

### 5. Continuation of Tamil Advocacy:

Tamil civil society and political actors will not remain idle. They have already signaled plans to take their campaign to the international stage. In July and August, expect Tamil diaspora groups to engage the Core Group countries, possibly by visits or lobbying in Geneva. The messaging will likely be: *“Don't be swayed by cosmetic changes; insist on justice.”* If the Sri Lankan government drags its feet, Tamil politicians at home might resume protests – for instance, we could see renewed demonstrations in the North/East or even a coordinated **hartal (shutdown)** to remind the world of Tamil demands around the time of the UNHRC session. Also, any attempt by the government to curtail remembrance (like the yearly Mullivaikkal memorial in May) or to intimidate activists could provoke a backlash that influences next steps. On the flip side, if the government makes some goodwill moves (**like returning a chunk of land or engaging sincerely with Tamil leaders on devolution of power**), that might ease tensions and open dialogues internally. The role of **India** might also come into play here – India has a stake in Tamil issues and could encourage Sri Lanka to



deliver on things like the **13th Amendment devolution** as part of reconciliation, which would be a significant step if it happened.

## 6. Monitoring and Mid-Term Checkpoints:

Beyond September, other checkpoints will include *Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN (next cycle likely 2027*, but recommendations from the last UPR in 2022 will be on record) and any **visits by other UN officials**. Also, domestic events such as the next budget or local elections might influence human rights progress – for example, if the government feels stable enough, it might be bolder on reforms after securing political wins. Internationally, watch if any country uses **universal jurisdiction** to charge Sri Lankan officials – for instance, if a lawsuit is filed in a European country by diaspora activists against a visiting general. Such legal actions, while independent, can impact the larger conversation and spur others to act **(or push Sri Lanka to undertake its own prosecutions to avoid foreigners doing it)**.

## 7. Global Context Considerations:

As Türk himself acknowledged, global crises (**Middle East wars, etc.**) form the backdrop. If those escalate, Sri Lanka could get less attention, which is why the next couple of months are so crucial. Conversely, any major geopolitical shift (**e.g., a change in the UN Security Council dynamics**) is unlikely to put Sri Lanka on that body's agenda unless things dramatically deteriorate. **So, the focus remains at the Human Rights Council and bilateral engagements.**

**In conclusion**, the trajectory after Volker Türk's visit will depend on **accountability vs. impunity** – which of these forces gains the upper hand. The **optimistic scenario** is that Sri Lanka seizes this chance: enacting promised reforms swiftly, genuinely engaging victims in truth-seeking, and partnering with the UN to address past crimes. That could gradually transform Sri Lanka into the “*story of hope*” that Türk envisioned, with improving human rights and reconciliation. The **pessimistic scenario** is that after the initial fanfare, political will fizzles reforms stall, old patterns re-emerge (**surveillance, denial**), and the international community loses focus. In that case, we'd likely see continued stalemate, with Tamils and human rights groups growing even more disillusioned and possibly radicalizing their calls (**renewing demands for international tribunals, sanctions, etc.**).

**What's certain is that all eyes will be on the promises made during this visit. Each promise now serves as a benchmark:**

- Will the **PTA** be gone by the end of 2025?
- Will any soldiers or officials face trial for **past atrocities**?
- Will families of the disappeared receive answers or **at least acknowledgment and support**?
- Will **occupied land** in Valikamam North, Mullaitivu, and elsewhere be returned to its rightful owners?

The answers to these questions will determine if Sri Lanka is indeed breaking from what Türk called “*entrenched identity politics*” and impunity, or if it remains stuck in the past. Volker Türk's parting words were filled with hope and the promise of “*constructive engagement*”. The baton



is now in Sri Lanka's hands – and the world, especially the UN, will be closely monitoring how the next chapters unfold, ready to engage further or apply pressure as needed to ensure that the tragic lessons of Sri Lanka's past lead to a better future for all its people.

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