INTERNATIONAL TRUTH AND JUSTICE PROJECT

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BRIEFING NOTE: ARREST OF SRI LANKAN FORMER NAVY COMMANDER ADMIRAL DAMITH NISHANTHA SIRISOMA ULUGETENNA[1]

Nishantha Ulugetenne served as the Head of Naval Intelligence from October 2010 to December 2013.[2]

In July 2025, former Sri Lanka Navy Commander, Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne, was arrested by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Sri Lankan police in connection with an investigation into abductions, torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings at the country's most secure naval base in Trincomalee.[3]

The alleged victims were reportedly held in an underground complex (commonly referred to as "Gun Site") inside the Trincomalee naval base.[4] According to credible reporting following his arrest, Ulugetenne allegedly admitted to the Sri Lankan CID that "Gun Site" was an unauthorised and illegal detention site.[5] He stated that between 40 to 60 people had been detained there. Corroborating witness testimonies received by the CID indicated that around 60 people were unlawfully detained at "Gun Site".[6]

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[1] *Court sends ex-navy chief Ulugetenne to remand prison for further two weeks*, Lanka Leader, 31 July 2025, https://lankaleader.lk/news/14622-court-sends-ex-navy-chief-ulugetenne-to-remand-prison-for-further-two-weeks.

[2] *See* Sri Lanka Navy Performance Reports from 2010 to 2013: https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-srilanka-navy-2010.pdf; https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-srilanka-navy-2011.pdf; https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-srilanka-navy-2012.pdf; and https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-srilanka-navy-2013.pdf

[3] *Former Sri Lanka Navy Commander Arrested Over Alleged Murder*, News First, 28 July 2025, https://english.newsfirst.lk/2025/07/28/former-sri-lanka-navy-commander-arrested-over-alleged-murder.

[4] Id.

[5] https://www.virakesari.lk/article/221661

[6] Id.

The existence of this underground illegal detention and torture facility was first revealed in 2015 by the ITJP, based on detailed information from Tamil survivors who had been arbitrarily and unlawfully detained there for over three and a half years and were subjected to severe torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment including sexual violence.[7] The survivors provided precise GPS coordinates of the site to the ITJP which were subsequently verified by the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance (WGEID) following its visit to the location in November 2015.[8] The ITJP has estimated that at least 75-100 individuals were unlawfully detained at "Gun Site" during its operation, believed to have spanned from approximately 2005/2006 to 2012, under grossly inhumane conditions and subjected to systematic torture and sexual violence.[9]

In October 2019, the ITJP published a comprehensive report documenting the Sri Lankan Navy's alleged involvement in serious human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances and other grave violations at the secret detention facility known as "Gun Site". These violations reportedly occurred both during and after the civil war.[10] The report drew upon documentary evidence from a past Sri Lankan police investigation into the disappearance of the 11 men in the Trincomalee naval base in 2008-2009 ("Trincomalee 11"), as well as eyewitness testimony from survivors and insider witnesses that spoke to a wider, systematic pattern of violations by the Sri Lankan Navy from 2008 to 2012, the ITJP found that a large swathe of the naval high command was allegedly complicit in the violations or directly responsible for them.[11]

Specifically, the ITJP examined the "Trincomalee 11" investigation which concerned the abduction of eleven victims in Colombo between 25 August 2008 and February 2009. The victims were arbitrarily and unlawfully detained first at naval headquarters in Colombo before being transferred to "Gun Site" in March 2009. The group included six Tamils, two were Sinhalese and three were Muslim. Several other victims – such as Ganeralalage Shantha Samaraweera (arrested in July 2010 and thereafter disappeared), whose name is more commonly circulated in news media – also emerged during the investigation but were not included in the court case.

Beyond this specific case, the ITJP documented the unlawful detention of numerous other detainees – predominantly Tamil – who have been detained illegally at the same site under the pretext of suspected links to the LTTE and terrorism. Many of them are still alive and are potential witnesses to the grave human rights violations they experienced, including torture and sexual violence. However, this group of victims/survivors have been largely ignored by the press and investigative authorities due to the persistent stigmatization of LTTE members and a prevailing perception that they are undeserving of the same human rights protections as afforded to civilians or members of the state security forces, even when hors de combat and in detention. This neglect also risks obscuring the scale, duration and systematic nature of the violations of human rights committed by the Sri Lankan Navy.

Cross-referencing Sri Lankan court documents with testimony from Tamil survivors abroad as well as evidence from Sinhalese security force insiders (including naval officials) and eyewitnesses, the ITJP identified Nishantha Ulugetenne among those allegedly responsible for the gross violations of human rights against Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim individuals.
Nishantha Ulugetenne was the Director of Naval Intelligence and Director of Naval Weapons from October 2010 to December 2013,[12] a period that squarely overlaps with the 2008 to mid 2012

[7] ITJP, *The Navy: A Collective Bind Eye*, 23 October 2019, https://itjpsl.com/reports/the-navy-a-collective-blind-eye.
[8] Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on its mission to Sri Lanka, 8 July 2016, A/HRC/33/51/Add.2.
[9] Id.
[10] Id.
[11] Id.
[12] Id.

timeframe when numerous victims/survivors were held at "Gun Site" by naval intelligence, the exact naval division under Nishantha Ulugetenne's command. According to ITJP witnesses and court documents, naval intelligence personnel enjoyed "free access" to the otherwise heavily fortified Trincomalee base – only naval intelligence and their vehicles bypassed and were exempted from security checks and entry- and exit- logging while others' activities were meticulously controlled and recorded.[13] This allowed the white vans belonging to naval intelligence and widely believed to have transported victims of illegal abductions, arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances and who repeatedly passed in and out of the country's most high-security base without scrutiny.[14]

Given his high-ranking position within naval intelligence, the extremely tight security protocols for the Trincomalee naval base and his own admissions to the CID, Nishantha Ulugetenne was fully aware of the long-term and systematic gross violations of human rights perpetrated under his command, yet failed to take effective measures to punish those responsible and prevent further violations.

Instead of being held accountable for the violations, he was appointed the Navy's Chief of Staff in May 2019,[15] and the Commander of the Navy in July 2020,[16] eventually retiring with numerous honours in December 2022.[17] In October 2023, he was appointed Sri Lankan Ambassador to Cuba.[18] In November 2024, although reports indicate that he was recalled by the government.[19]

Other officials complicit in the violations have faced sanctions from various governments. In December 2021, the United States sanctioned Chandana Hettiarachchi, a Sri Lankan naval intelligence officer, for his involvement in gross violations of human rights in connection with torture and enforced disappearances at "Gun Site".[20] He was also subjected to sanctions in Canada in January 2023.[21] In April 2023, Wasantha Karannagoda and his wife were subjected to U.S. visa bans due to due to Wasantha Karannagoda's involvement in gross violations of human rights committed at "Gun Site" during his tenure as a Naval Commander.[22] In March 2025, the UK also sanctioned Wasantha Karannagoda for human rights violations committed while he was the Commander of the Navy between September 2005 and July 2009.[23]

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[13] Id.

[14] Id.

[15] *Rear Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne assumes duties as Chief of Staff of the Navy*, Daily News, 8 May 2019, https://archives1.dailynews.lk/2019/05/08/local/185044/rear-admiral-nishantha-ulugetenne-assumes-duties-chief-staff-navy.

[16] Sri Lanka Navy, *Vice Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne appointed as the 24th Commander of the Navy*, 15 July 2020, https://news.navy.lk/lead-story/2020/07/15/202007151556/.

[17] *Navy bids farewell to Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne*, 18 December 2022, https://news.navy.lk/eventnews/2022/12/18/202212181045/.

[18] *Former Navy Commander presents credentials as envoy to Cuba*, Daily Mirror, 14 February 2024, https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Former-Navy-Commander-presents-credentials-as-envoy-to-Cuba/108-276997.

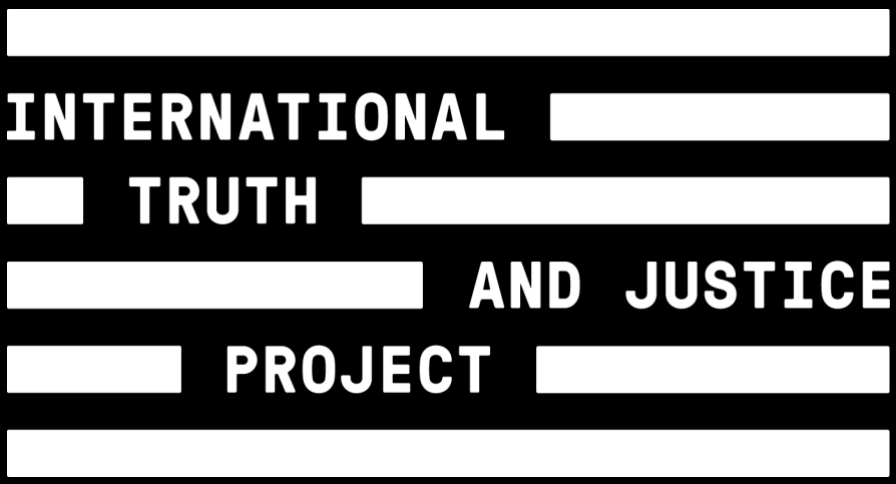
[19] Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, *SL Government Recalls 15 Political Appointees from Diplomatic Missions*, Ceylon Today, 2 November 2024, https://ceylontoday.lk/2024/11/02/sl-government-recalls-15-political-appointees-from-diplomatic-missions/.

[20] U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka, The United States Promotes Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses, 10 December 2021, https://lk.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-promotes-accountability-for-human-rights-violations-and-abuses/.

[21] Canada, Sanctions imposed on Sri Lankan state officials,10 January 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2023/01/sanctions-imposed-on-sri-lankan-state-officials.html.

[22] U.S. Department of State, Designation of Sri Lankan Governor Due to Involvement in a Gross Violation of Human Rights, 26 April 2023, https://2021-2025.state.gov/designation-of-sri-lankan-governor-due-to-involvement-in-a-gross-violation-of-human-rights/.

[23] UK Sanctions List, https://search-uk-sanctions-list.service.gov.uk/designations/GHR0149/Individual.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