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United States Tamil Action Group

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Helping the voiceless gain their voice

CHEMMANI AND BEYOND: MASS GRAVES, ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES, AND THE TAMIL STRUGGLE FOR TRUTH

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Executive Summary

Sri Lanka is one of the countries with the highest number of unresolved enforced disappearances in the world, with an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 missing persons since 1983.¹ For decades, families of the disappeared, predominantly Tamils in the North-East, have waited in anguish for answers. Instead, they have been met with silence, denial, and systematic obstruction from the Sri Lankan state.²

One of the starkest reminders of this unresolved past is the proliferation of mass graves across the island. As of today, more than 32 such sites have been documented.³ Despite clear obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law, domestic investigations have been fragmented, manipulated, or abandoned, leaving families without truth, justice, or closure.

Current Situation Update as of Aug 2026 (Page 6 to 7)

Chemmani: A Symbol of Denial (Pages 8 to 13)

The village of Chemmani in Jaffna has come to symbolize the fate of the disappeared. In 1998, soldier Somaratne Rajapakse testified in court that 300-400 Tamils killed by the army in the mid-1990s were buried there.⁴ Excavations in 1999 unearthed 15 skeletons, many bound and blindfolded, before the process was abruptly halted.⁵ No comprehensive investigation or accountability followed.

In 2025, new excavations at the Chemmani–Siththupaththi site uncovered 209 skeletons (accurate to the time of writing), including infants. Forensic experts warn that this represents only a fraction of what lies buried. Families of the disappeared once again call for international oversight, fearing that, as in 1999, the truth will be buried alongside the victims. Rajapakse himself has again offered to testify, insisting he can identify burial sites and name senior officers.⁶

Sri Lanka lacks forensic archeology, anthropology, and genetic skills to carry out excavations according to international/judicial standards. Sri Lanka also lacks the expertise and technology for DNA-led identification. This is not just a legal issue or a political issue; this is a moral issue and a human issue. The loved ones of the victims need closure. The victims themselves are entitled to a dignified burial.

Mannar: A Pattern of Obstruction (Pages 13 to 15)

Mannar has revealed Sri Lanka's largest mass graves, 83 skeletons at Thiruketheeswaram in 2013 and 376 skeletons, including 28 children, at Sathosa in 2018. Both investigations were quickly undermined. Officials offered contradictory explanations, carbon dating results were disputed, and court-ordered excavations were

¹ Kris Thomas, "Sri Lanka's Uncomfortable Relationship With Its Disappeared," *New Lines Magazine*, April 29, 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/sri-lankas-uncomfortable-relationship-with-its-disappeared/>.

² "Justice for Tamil Families of the Disappeared," *People for Equality and Relief in Lanka*, October 5, 2021, <https://pearlaction.org/enforced-disappearances/>.

³ "Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/index.php/content/explainer-what-are-chemmani-mass-graves>.

⁴ "Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian."

⁵ Jeevan Ravindran, "New Sri Lanka Mass Grave Discovery Reopens Old Wounds for Tamils," *Al Jazeera*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/6/16/new-sri-lanka-mass-grave-discovery-reopens-old-wounds-for-tamils>.

⁶ "Convicted Sri Lankan Soldier Offers to Testify in International Probe into Chemmani Mass Graves | Tamil Guardian," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/convicted-sri-lankan-soldier-offers-testify-international-probe-chemmani-mass-graves>.

suspended indefinitely. To date, families still await answers, while more than 150 boxes of remains remain locked in judicial custody.

A Culture of Impunity (Pages 16 to 17)

Chemmani and Mannar illustrate a broader pattern of state denial: premature closure of cases, refusal to allow independent international investigators, withholding of reports, and deliberate contamination or mishandling of evidence. These tactics reflect a state unwilling to confront its own responsibility for disappearances, while families remain suspended in grief.

Significance of This Report

This booklet is released on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, August 30th, 2025, to honor the families' decades-long struggle and to reaffirm that mass graves are not only crime scenes of the past but demands for justice in the present. The persistence of mass graves underscores that enforced disappearances are not closed chapters of history, but ongoing violations until the truth is revealed, remains are returned, and perpetrators are held accountable. Evidence from mass graves can also be instrumental in the pursuit towards justice and accountability through proving the culpability of the Sri Lankan State in the crime of genocide.

Key Recommendations (Page 18)

To ensure that Chemmani, Mannar, and all other mass grave investigations contribute meaningfully to truth, justice, and reparations for victims of disappearances, we recommend:

- International Process: Engage independent international forensic experts, human rights observers, and legal specialists, including from the OHCHR, ICMP, ICRC, and other credible institutions, to undertake the investigations.
- Victim-Centred Approach: Ensure families of the disappeared are not passive spectators but active participants. They must be given access to information, legal representation, psychosocial support, and decision-making in all stages of exhumation and investigation.
- Transparency and Disclosure: Publish all reports from current and past mass grave investigations, including Chemmani (1998–2000, 2025), Mannar (2013, 2018), and others. Findings should be accessible in Tamil, Sinhala, and English.
- Chain of Custody and Evidence Preservation: Maintain rigorous standards in handling remains and artefacts to enable future prosecutions. Mishandling or contamination of evidence must be treated as obstruction of justice.
- Accountability: Since the Sri Lankan state institutions are permeated with entrenched and pervasive racism, Tamils will not get justice in the domestic process. International powers should bring legal action under universal jurisdiction against the perpetrators. The members of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance should mobilize Article 32 to bring Sri Lanka to the committee.
- Guarantees of Non-Recurrence: Memorialize Chemmani, Mannar, and other sites of atrocity as places of remembrance and education, ensuring they cannot be erased from public memory.

United State Tamil Action Group (USTAG)

The United States Tamil Action Group, originally called USTPAC, is a grassroots advocacy organization committed to work for a political solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Since our founding in 2009, USTAG has coordinated advocacy and political activism among Tamil Americans and our friends across the United States.

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CURRENT SITUATION

Chemmani Mass Graves in Sri Lanka: The Search for Truth and Accountability
UPDATE: August 2026

Purpose and context

The 2025 booklet, *Chemmani and Beyond: Mass Graves, Enforced Disappearances, and the Tamil Struggle for Truth*, documented the long history of mass graves, enforced disappearances, and repeated failures of domestic investigations in Sri Lanka. The situation has since developed significantly. The renewed excavation at Chemmani has expanded the evidentiary record and has brought renewed international attention to the question of who will control the excavation, preservation, identification, and investigation of the remains.

The current information supplied for this update states that the ongoing second phase of excavation at Chemmani in Jaffna has recovered 554 sets of human remains, including women and children, with school bags and other personal items among the material recovered. This figure reflects the current account provided to USTAG and is substantially greater than the figures available when the 2025 booklet was prepared.

A renewed international moment

The excavation follows the first Chemmani investigation in 1999, which began after the 1998 trial testimony of Lance Corporal Somaratne Rajapakse concerning the burial of Tamil victims at Chemmani. Fifteen skeletal remains were recovered during that first phase, but the investigation did not lead to a comprehensive accounting of the suspected burial sites or to accountability for senior commanders. The passage of more than two decades without identification of those remains remains central to the families' continuing search for truth.

The present excavation has therefore reopened an unresolved question rather than creating a new one. The families of the disappeared continue to seek information about loved ones whose fate has remained unknown for decades. The visit to Chemmani by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk on June 25, 2025 gave international visibility to these concerns. In remarks quoted in the current materials, Türk emphasized the continuing grief of families who have waited decades without knowing what happened to their relatives.

The current materials also state that, in June 2026, Sri Lanka's Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara said that the government had no information on suspected perpetrators and indicated that the excavations should be completed before forensic and criminal investigations begin. The Justice Minister's statement suggests that once again, truth and accountability will be buried. The materials further state that, in July 2026, the government confirmed that it would seek international forensic assistance.

The central concern: preservation and independent forensic investigation

The current materials identify preservation of evidence as an urgent concern. They state that Sri Lanka lacks sufficient forensic archaeology, anthropology, and genetic capacity and technology to conduct the work to international or judicial standards and to undertake DNA-led identification at the necessary level. They further record concerns expressed by families and civil society leaders about the safety and integrity of DNA and other forensic evidence, including during any transfer of material out of Jaffna.

These concerns make the chain of custody a substantive accountability issue, not merely an administrative detail. Human remains, associated artefacts, samples, photographs, records, and DNA evidence must be documented and preserved in a manner that allows independent review and, where appropriate, future criminal proceedings. The UATAG's proposal is that international forensic and other relevant authorities should have direct control, oversight, or management of the exhumation and follow-up investigations, with appropriate safeguards for the evidence.

A victim-centred process

The families of the disappeared are not simply interested observers of an archaeological exercise. For them, every recovered set of remains may represent a missing relative and an opportunity to establish identity, recover a name, and provide a dignified burial. The current materials report that threats have prevented victims' families from participating fully in the excavation process. They call for a victim-centred approach in which families have access to information, meaningful participation, appropriate protection, and a voice in decisions affecting the recovery and identification of remains.

The supplied material also draws on the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research report *The Test: Chemmani and Sri Lanka's Accountability Crisis*, highlighting concerns about intimidation and surveillance of families, suppression of mourning and remembrance practices, and technical and prosecutorial failures. These concerns reinforce the need for independent, international monitoring and transparent procedures throughout the process.

International responsibility

The updated materials argue that the experience of Chemmani and other mass graves demonstrates the limits of relying ~~solely~~ on domestic mechanisms. They point to the role that the OHCHR, ICMP, ICRC, Core Group countries, and other credible international institutions can and should play in ensuring forensic integrity, protection of evidence, family participation, and accountability. The immediate objective is not simply to excavate more remains, but to ensure that the evidence recovered can be used to establish identity and, where warranted, responsibility.

The current update therefore asks the international community to move from expressions of concern to concrete safeguards: independent international forensic involvement; secure and transparent chain-of-custody procedures; protection and meaningful participation of victims' families; publication and disclosure of relevant findings; and a credible pathway from forensic findings to accountability.

Priority measures

There is an imminent and real fear/threat that the Sri Lankan authorities will tamper/switch/destroy crucial DNA evidence. Thus, international stakeholders have to take control of the DNA evidence immediately.

Conclusion

Chemmani is now a test of whether the lessons of the past will be acted upon. The discovery of 554 sets human remains, according to the current materials, has created an urgent opportunity to establish the fate of victims whose families have waited for decades. That opportunity will be meaningful only if the process is independent, victim-centred, scientifically rigorous, and capable of preserving evidence for accountability.

The appropriate international response is therefore to take total international control, oversight, and management of the exhumation now before evidence is lost, before identification becomes more difficult, and before another investigation is allowed to fade into uncertainty. The families' demand is straightforward: to know what happened to their loved ones, to recover and identify the remains where possible, to provide dignified burial, and to ensure that credible evidence of wrongdoing leads to individual accountability as well as state accountability.

Introduction: A Nation of Mass Graves

Across the scarred landscape of Sri Lanka, the soil holds a dark secret. Beneath the ground in towns, villages, and even public cemeteries lie the remains of thousands of people who disappeared during decades of armed conflict. They are men, women, and children who were taken by force, abducted at checkpoints, dragged from homes, or detained by security forces, never to return. Their families have waited for decades for answers, clinging to fading photographs and memories while the state has offered only silence.

More than fifteen years after the armed conflict ended in 2009, these questions remain unresolved. One of the most haunting legacies of the conflict is the sheer number of mass graves scattered across the island. In 2014, the Asian Human Rights Commission documented at least 28 such graves, from the north to the south.⁷ Four more have since been discovered, bringing the total to over 32 known sites.⁸

Sri Lanka today holds the second highest number of enforced disappearance cases in the world, with estimates ranging between 60,000 and 100,000 people missing since the conflict began in 1983.⁹ Behind each number is a name, a story, a family. Mothers still protest on roadsides holding faded photographs of their missing sons; children have grown into adults never knowing what happened to their fathers. For them, grief remains suspended. Without remains, there is no mourning. Without answers, there is no closure.



Tamil Families of the Disappeared protest in the North-East. Source: Tamil Guardian

Yet despite international obligations under human rights and humanitarian law, successive governments in Colombo have failed to investigate mass graves properly. Some sites were opened briefly, yielding partial evidence, only to be abandoned. Others have been left untouched despite testimony from eyewitnesses. Still others have been quietly erased by construction or covered by official denial. In every case, families of the disappeared have been left with nothing but frustration and despair.

⁷ Sophie Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2023), 1.

⁸ Thomas, "Sri Lanka's Uncomfortable Relationship With Its Disappeared."

⁹ Thomas, "Sri Lanka's Uncomfortable Relationship With Its Disappeared."

For Tamils in particular, the lack of action symbolizes something larger: the entrenched culture of impunity. The graves, and the silence around them, stand as grim reminders that the violence they suffered has not only been ignored but buried.

One mass grave in particular has come to embody this painful reality. The name of a small village on the outskirts of Jaffna, Chemmani, has entered the Tamil consciousness as a synonym for atrocity, denial, and injustice.

The Story of Chemmani

Chemmani is a quiet village on the outskirts of Jaffna, green with palmyra trees and paddy fields, but beneath its earth lie the remnants of one of the most chilling chapters of Sri Lanka's war. It was here, during the mid-1990s, that the Sri Lankan army dug graves for hundreds of Tamils who disappeared during its occupation of the Jaffna peninsula.

The story of Chemmani is intertwined with the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case of 1996. Krishanthi, an 18-year-old Tamil schoolgirl, was gang-raped and murdered by army personnel at a checkpoint as she walked home from school.¹⁰ When her mother, younger brother, and a family friend went to search for her, they too were abducted and killed.¹¹ Their bodies were later discovered in shallow graves in Chemmani. Public outrage led to the trial and conviction of five soldiers.

It was during these proceedings, in July 1998, that one of the convicted soldiers, Lance Corporal Somaratne Rajapakse, made a revelation that stunned the country.¹² Speaking from the dock, he claimed he was not guilty of Krishanthi's murder but admitted that he had been ordered to bury bodies in Chemmani. He alleged that "300 to 400 bodies" of disappeared Tamils were interred there: victims of extrajudicial killings carried out by the army in 1995-96.¹³



Krishanthi Kumaraswamy

¹⁰ Velupillai Thangavelu, "Gang Rape of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy by Sri Lanka Security Forces...", 2001, <https://tamilnation.org/indictment/rape/960907krishanthi>.

¹¹ Thangavelu, "Gang Rape of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy by Sri Lanka Security Forces..."

¹² "Corporal Rajapakse Implicates Sri Lanka Army Command of Murder, Rape & Torture," Tamil Nation, July 15, 1999, <https://tamilnation.org/indictment/genocide95/gen95105a>.

¹³ "Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian."

This testimony confirmed what human rights groups and Tamil families had long feared. Amnesty International had already reported “reliable evidence” of up to 600 disappearances in Jaffna in 1996, with bodies believed to be

“I was at the Ariyalai camp doing civil administration. At that time I worked under Captain Lalith Hewa. My job was to register family names and the names of youth. We would prepare two lists.

Once, Captain Lalith Hewa and Lieutenant Wijesiriwardene brought soldiers from another section to work under me. We were given a list of people who they said were Tiger suspects. I was asked to show the places where these suspects lived. Thereafter they conducted cordon-and-search operations.

Major Weerakkody and Major Gunasekera brought people before two Tiger informants and the informants were asked to point out who the Tiger suspects were. The ones they had identified were separated from the rest. About 50 people were identified and were photographed.

At Ariyalai I can show how people were arrested killed and buried. At the beginning some people were arrested and brought to a camp and kept at the Jaya building. Some were kept at a school. The ones who ordered this were Captain Lalith Hewa, Lt. Wijesiriwardene and Lt. Thudugala.

They were also the ones involved in the arrest of the government servant Selvaratnam. He was brought to the camp. The next day his wife came and asked me whether I had seen him. I did not have the answer then. At that camp there was a building used to torture people. I can show it to you now. When I went to the camp, there were 25 people in that building. Selvaratnam was also there. His legs were tied. He pleaded with me saying he didn't have any Tiger connections. I asked Captain Hewa to release him. He agreed. But that night they killed him.

The next day when I went back I saw 10 more dead bodies. When I was working at the Jaya building, another man, one Udaya Kumara, was arrested. His family came and pleaded for his release. I went and asked Captain Jayawardena to do so. That afternoon he was taken to another camp. When I went there they got a radio message asking to release this man. He was hanging by his feet and his body was cut with blades. They couldn't release him. He was killed later. I know the weapons they used for torture very well and I can show them to you in that building.

There was a day when I was asked to bring a mamoty by Captain Lalith Hewa. When I got there, Captain Hewa was with a woman who had no clothes on. This woman and her husband had been brought to the camp earlier. Lalith Hewa raped the woman. Later, he attacked the woman and her husband with the mamoty I brought and he also used some rods. Both of them died. He tried to bury them there but couldn't. Then the bodies were brought to Chemmani. I can show you where they are buried.

dumped in lavatory pits, wells, and shallow graves.¹⁴ In 1999, Rajapakse's testimony to open court in Jaffna gave these allegations a location and implicated senior officers by name.¹⁵

Faced with international attention, the Sri Lankan authorities initiated an investigation. Later that month, Rajapakse was flown under tight security to Jaffna, where he pointed out burial sites. Just one year before, Amnesty International reported that Rajapakse was “hospitalized after being beaten up by prison guards at Welikade prison, Colombo, apparently for refusing to sign a written statement saying that his original statement about the mass graves had been untrue.”¹⁶ Excavations began in June of that year under judicial supervision, with international observers present. After days of digging, investigators unearthed 15 bodies, some blindfolded and bound, others showing signs of violent death. Forensic analysis confirmed that at least two of the victims matched young men who had disappeared in 1996.¹⁷

Families of the disappeared believed they were on the brink of long-awaited answers. If 15 bodies were found so quickly, surely hundreds more lay beneath the earth. Yet the hope was short-lived. By December 1999, the government abruptly announced that no further graves existed beyond those already uncovered.¹⁸ Excavations were halted. Arrest warrants issued for several implicated army officers quietly dissolved into bail and inaction.

Somaratne Rajapakse's Testimony to an Open Court in Jaffna. June 16, 1999.

¹⁴ “Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian.”

¹⁵ Tamil Nation, “Corporal Rajapakse Implicates Sri Lanka Army Command of Murder, Rape & Torture.”

¹⁶ “Further Information on UA 229/98 (ASA 37/22/98, 26 August 1998) - Fear for Safety - Somaratne Rajapakse,” Amnesty International, June 1999, <https://www.amnesty.org/zh-hans/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa370161999en.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian.”

¹⁸ Kumanan Kanapathippillai, *Chemmani Mass Grave: Renewed Excavation Raises Old Questions - Groundviews*, July 7, 2025, <https://groundviews.org/2025/07/07/chemmani-mass-grave-renewed-excavation-raises-old-questions/>.

Chemmani, once on the verge of revealing the truth, was deliberately closed off. No comprehensive excavation followed. No perpetrators were prosecuted. The victims were left unidentified, and their families were denied the chance to bury them with dignity.

For the Tamils, this was not simply a bureaucratic failure, it was proof of a deliberate cover-up. Rajapakse had pointed to multiple sites. Witnesses had corroborated disappearances. Yet the state had chosen silence over accountability.

Over the years, Chemmani faded from international headlines, but it never faded from the memory of those who lost loved ones. Mothers and relatives of the disappeared continued to gather at vigils, demanding the graves be investigated under international supervision. For them, Chemmani became emblematic of a larger truth: that in Sri Lanka, justice for Tamils cannot be entrusted to the same authorities who caused this and are implicated in their suffering.

Today, Chemmani stands as one of the clearest symbols of the gap between truth and justice in Sri Lanka. Beneath its soil lie the bones of the disappeared, mute witnesses to crimes the state refuses to acknowledge. For families, the demand remains the same: proper excavation, identification, and dignified burial, under international oversight. Without that, Chemmani will remain not just a graveyard of victims, but also of justice itself.

Chemmani Today: Truth Emerging from the Earth

For more than two decades, Chemmani was remembered as an unresolved wound. After the 1999 exhumations were cut short, the site fell silent. Families of the disappeared continued to protest, but the Sri Lankan state deliberately stalled any genuine investigation. Chemmani was left as a symbol: of crimes buried, of truth denied, and of justice indefinitely postponed.

That silence has finally been broken.

In 2025, during construction work at the Ariyalai Sindhubath burial ground, human remains were discovered once more.¹⁹ A court-supervised investigation was launched, this time under the direction of archaeologist Dr. Raj Somadeva. What began as a cautious excavation soon turned into one of the largest mass grave investigations in Sri Lanka's history.

As of August 2025, a total of 209 skeletons have been recovered from Chemmani. Among them were men, women, and even infants. Many were found in shallow graves, bound or blindfolded: clear evidence of extrajudicial killings. Experts warn that the excavated area still represents only a fraction of the suspected burial ground. The true number of victims may well be far higher.

Sri Lanka lacks forensic archeology, anthropology, and genetic skills to carry out excavations according to international/judicial standards. Sri Lanka also lacks the expertise and technology for DNA-led identification. This is not just a legal issue or a political issue; this is a moral issue and a human issue. The loved ones of the victims need closure. The victims themselves are entitled to a dignified burial.

Out of the 177 skeletons, at least 19 infants and children have been found. This grim finding echoes the wider tragedy of Sri Lanka's conflict, where hundreds of infants and children were reported disappeared, many after

¹⁹ "Explainer - What Are the Chemmani Mass Graves? | Tamil Guardian."

being taken by security forces or separated from their families in custody. The presence of so many young victims at Chemmani underscores that the violence was indiscriminate, claiming the most vulnerable lives and leaving families with no answers about the fate of their loved ones. See page 19 for pictures of forcibly disappeared children and exhumed infant skeletons from Chemmani.

For Tamil families who have searched for their loved ones since the 1990s, each skeleton uncovered carries the possibility of an answer. Every set of bones could correspond to a name on a missing-persons list. For them, this is not simply about history: it is about the right to know, to mourn, and to bury with dignity.



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, visits the Chemmani mass grave site. Photo: Tamil Guardian

The scale of the Chemmani discovery has once again drawn global attention. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, on the request of Civil Society Organizations, visited the site in June 2025 and called for “independent experts with forensic expertise” to be involved in the process.²⁰ His words echoed what Tamil families have long demanded: that domestic mechanisms cannot be trusted, and

only international processes can ensure truth and accountability. Following his visit, USTAG thanked him for visiting the grave site and for his words following his visit.²¹

In an extraordinary twist, the soldier whose testimony first brought Chemmani to the world’s attention in 1998 has resurfaced. Somaratne Rajapakse, now imprisoned for his role in the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case, has once again offered to testify.²² He insists that he can still identify specific burial sites and name senior officers who ordered the killings. His willingness to testify again, more than 25 years after his first confession, underscores both the unfinished nature of Chemmani and the continuing impunity of those who orchestrated these crimes.

The stakes are high. Will the Sri Lankan authorities allow Rajapakse’s testimony to be properly heard and investigated? Or will his words, like in 1999, be buried alongside the bodies?

For Tamil families, the answer is clear. After decades of delay and cover-up, they cannot trust the state to deliver justice. They demand an international process that ensures each skeleton is carefully documented, analyzed, and, where possible, identified. They demand the return of remains so families can finally perform funerals and burials in accordance with their culture and faith. And they demand that perpetrators, no matter how senior, be held accountable.

²⁰ “Türk Ends Mission to Sri Lanka,” *OHCHR*, written by Volker Türk, June 26, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/06/turk-ends-mission-sri-lanka>.

²¹ “”

²² “Convicted Sri Lankan Soldier Offers to Testify in International Probe into Chemmani Mass Graves | Tamil Guardian.”

Chemmani today is no longer just a symbol of denial. It is a site where the truth is physically rising from the ground, bone by bone. Each skeleton is silent testimony to crimes committed in the shadows. Whether this testimony will be honored, or silenced once more, depends on the involvement of the international community. Without it, Chemmani risks becoming not only a graveyard of victims, but once again a graveyard of justice.



Chemmani Excavation Site. Photograph: Kumanan Kanapathipillai. 2025.

Mannar Mass Graves: A Pattern of Concealment

If Chemmani marked the first moment when Sri Lanka's hidden graves began to surface, Mannar represents the persistence of those buried truths, and the lengths to which the state will go to obstruct clarity. Across two separate discoveries, in 2013 and 2018, Mannar revealed some of the largest mass graves in the island's history.²³ Instead of seizing the moment to reckon with the past, successive governments responded with obfuscation, half-truths, and procedural sabotage.

Mannar 2013: Thiruketheeswaram

In December 2013, construction workers digging near the revered Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar district unearthed human remains. The find was immediately significant: bones of dozens of individuals were discovered, arranged in multiple layers, in a manner inconsistent with ordinary burials.²⁴ By March 2014, 83 skeletons had been recovered.²⁵ Judicial Medical Officers noted that some remains bore marks of binding, others had bullet wounds, and all appeared to have been hastily deposited in mass pits.

At first, the discovery raised hopes that the fate of some of the disappeared might finally be explained. Relatives gathered, pressing courts to ensure professional forensic excavation. But very soon, the process began to mirror Chemmani.

The Director General of Archaeology, Senerath Dissanayake, quickly claimed that the site was "a cemetery about 50 years old."²⁶ Yet historical maps of the village showed no evidence of such a burial ground. Families and

²³ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*.

²⁴ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 16.

²⁵ "Sri Lanka Mass Grave 'on Old Burial Site,'" Al Jazeera, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/3/8/sri-lanka-mass-grave-on-old-burial-site>.

²⁶ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 16.

forensic experts pointed out that the layering of skeletons, and the absence of cultural markers like gravestones or funeral objects, did not resemble a cemetery at all.²⁷

The Rajapaksa government, facing international pressure, floated alternative explanations. Officials suggested the remains might belong to people killed by the LTTE or even by the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the late 1980s.²⁸ Simultaneously, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) demanded an independent international probe.²⁹ None came.

By August 2014, another grim discovery was made: human bones in an abandoned well near the site.³⁰ Yet even here, the government's methods undermined truth. Human rights monitors expressed alarm that excavation had been conducted with heavy earth-moving machinery, shattering bones and contaminating samples.³¹ As one expert put it, the site was being "handled in a way that makes meaningful forensic analysis impossible."³²

Though 80 boxes of skeletonised remains were sealed and transported to Anuradhapura Teaching Hospital, the investigation languished. Carbon-dating samples were sent abroad in 2015, but only after questionable custody procedures.³³ The results, suggesting the bones predated the 1950s, were immediately disputed by archaeologist Dr. Raj Somadeva, who pointed to possible contamination.³⁴ Nevertheless, the state closed the case, declaring the remains too old to be linked to the war. The report was never made public.³⁵

For the families of the disappeared, the message was clear: even when bodies rise from the soil, the truth can be buried again in government archives.

Mannar 2018: Sathosa

If Thiruketheeswaram revealed 83 bodies, what emerged in 2018 in the heart of Mannar town dwarfed it entirely. On 28 May 2018, during construction to expand a state-owned Sathosa retail store along the A14 highway, workers struck human remains.³⁶ The site would go on to yield 376 skeletons, including those of 28 children, making it the largest mass grave ever unearthed in Sri Lanka.³⁷

The excavation was, at first, cautiously promising. With pressure from lawyers and families, the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) secured observer status. Forensic experts supervised the recovery of remains. Reports

²⁷ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 16.

²⁸ "Mannar Mass Grave Number Rises to 61 – Ilankai Tamil Sangam," accessed August 30, 2025, <https://sangam.org/mannar-mass-grave-number-rises-61/>.

²⁹ "Mannar Mass Grave Number Rises to 61 – Ilankai Tamil Sangam."

³⁰ Michael Safi, "More than 100 Human Skeletons Found in Mass Grave in Sri Lanka," World News, *The Guardian*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/more-than-100-human-skeletons-found-mass-grave-sri-lanka>.

³¹ "Sri Lanka Mass Grave Yields More Skeletons," Asia, *BBC News*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25782902>.

³² Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 17.

³³ *Mass Graves and Failed Exhumations in Sri Lanka* (International Truth and Justice Project, 2023), https://itjpsl.com/assets/ITJP_MassGraves_report_v5.1.pdf.

³⁴ *Mass Graves and Failed Exhumations in Sri Lanka*.

³⁵ "Court Hears Reports on Mannar and Thiruketheeswaram Mass Graves | Tamil Guardian," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/court-hears-reports-mannar-and-thiruketheeswaram-mass-graves>.

³⁶ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 17.

³⁷ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 18.

confirmed evidence of bindings, suggesting killings and hurried disposal rather than natural deaths or epidemic.³⁸ Families who had waited decades travelled daily to the site, watching as skeleton after skeleton emerged.

Yet once again, the same pattern unfolded: delays, disputes, and state interference. In 2019, excavations were abruptly halted after a startling claim. Carbon dating by Beta Analytic in Miami suggested the bones dated to between the 15th and 18th centuries.³⁹ This clashed with expert assessments, which pointed to artefacts (such as clothing fragments and bindings) that clearly indicated a much more recent origin. Dr. Somadeva and other forensic anthropologists openly challenged the results, arguing that contamination or improper sampling may have skewed the findings.⁴⁰

For families, the halt was devastating. What had begun as a moment of hope, perhaps even closure, was reduced to another exercise in deferral. Court orders froze progress. Disputes between the Chief Judicial Medical Officer and lawyers representing the families further complicated matters, with allegations that the JMO had misled investigations.

Though more than 150 boxes of skeletal remains were eventually handed to forensic experts for analysis, the process remains incomplete even today. The bones, now stored under judicial custody, await comprehensive



Forensic Archaeologists Exhuming the Mass Grave site in Mannar. Photo: BBC. 2018.

examination to determine age, gender, and cause of death. Hearings continue at the Mannar Magistrate's Court, but reports remain unpublished.

³⁸ *Mass Graves and Failed Exhumations in Sri Lanka*, 17.

³⁹ Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 17.

⁴⁰ "Court Hears Reports on Mannar and Thiruketheeswaram Mass Graves | Tamil Guardian"; Bisping, *Mass Grave Sites in Sri Lanka: History and Legal Framework*, 18.

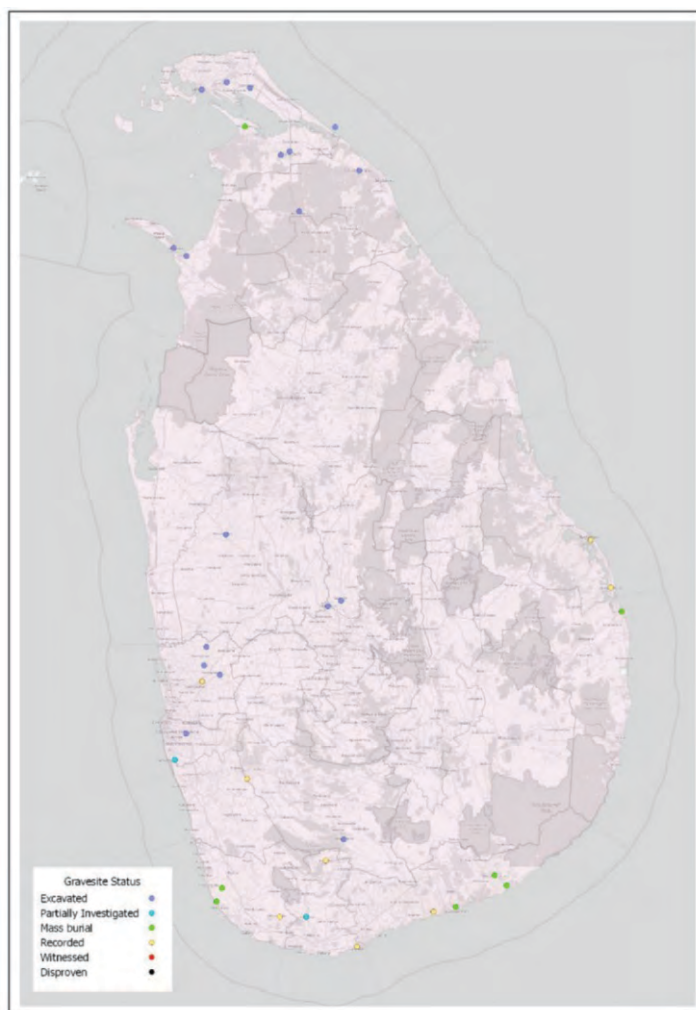
A Recurring Pattern

Taken together, the Mannar graves demonstrate more than just the scale of killing during Sri Lanka's conflict. They reveal a systematic pattern of denial:

- Premature closure of cases before full forensic analysis is complete.
- Contradictory state narratives, shifting blame to the LTTE or foreign forces, even when evidence suggests otherwise.
- Obstruction of international involvement, with repeated refusals to allow independent experts to fully investigate.
- Withholding of reports from the public, ensuring that even when findings exist, they remain locked away from the families most affected.

This pattern is not accidental. Like Chemmani before it, Mannar reflects a state unwilling to confront its own responsibility for mass disappearance and killing. By muddying timelines, fragmenting investigations, and dragging cases across years, the government ensures that public memory fades while families remain suspended in grief.

The result is a cruel paradox: even when mass graves are found in plain sight, truth remains hidden. For the relatives of the disappeared, Mannar stands as another wound layered on top of Chemmani, a reminder that without international oversight, justice in Sri Lanka is consistently delayed, derailed, or denied.



Map of Mass Graves in Sri Lanka, depicting site location and status only. Source: Klinkner et. al., 2025

Conclusion: From Graves to the Disappeared

The graves of Chemmani and Mannar do not stand alone. They are the silent echoes of Sri Lanka's tens of thousands of unresolved enforced disappearances, each skeleton a reminder of the families who still wait, decades later, for truth. With between 60,000 and 100,000 cases of disappearance spanning both the armed conflict in the North and East and the JVP insurrection in the South, Sri Lanka ranks among the highest globally in unresolved disappearances.

The timing of this booklet, released on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, is deliberate. On this day, families of the disappeared march in Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Jaffna, Colombo, and beyond, carrying fading photographs of their loved ones. Their demand is simple but profound: tell us what happened. Each newly uncovered grave site, from Chemmani to Sathosa, reignites that demand. But as long as investigations are manipulated, delayed, or suppressed, those families are denied not only justice, but also the most basic human dignity of knowing the fate of their loved ones.

In a letter from over 100 Civil Society Organizations to the OHCHR dated August 4, 2025, addressed to the High Commissioner and Heads of Missions, the ask with respect to Chemmani is clear. They ask for “a proper re-mapping of mass graves in the North-East” and international monitoring to ensure the safety and proper custody of evidence.⁴¹

At this critical juncture, it is the imperative of the UNHCR, and member states, to listen to those on the ground, including the requests laid out in multiple letters from USTAG and fellow Civil Society Organizations. We reiterate the importance of moving away from a reliance on domestic mechanisms, particularly due to the destructive pattern the Sri Lankan government has repeatedly shown to be its course of action with respect to accountability. As stated, “only international justice dispensed by the International Court of Justice and/or the International Criminal Court can bring forth justice for Eelam Tamil victims. The call for Sri Lanka to ratify the Rome Statute by you and former High Commissioner Al Hussain demonstrates that the ICC can and should play a role in the accountability process for the international crimes, namely genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed in Sri Lanka. The USTAG supports this call, with one corollary note: Only the retroactive ratification, starting since the inception of the ICC (2002), will bring justice for serious crimes committed during the final stages of the armed conflict”⁴² (see Pages 16 to 18 for the letter in full).

Mass graves are used to cover-up evidence of killings and is an indicator of genocide. Mass graves played an important role in the conviction of Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.⁴³ In those trials the forensic evidence from mass graves was instrumental in establishing that those killings were carried out by the Serbian armed forces. Along these lines, we believe proper exhumation process will produce evidence of the culpability of the Sri Lankan state armed forces in the crime of genocide.

The renewed excavations at Chemmani in 2025, where more than 100 skeletons have already been recovered, mark a critical juncture. They offer the chance to depart from the failures of the past and demonstrate a genuine commitment to truth and accountability. Yet that will only be possible if the process breaks decisively from the patterns seen in Chemmani in the 1990s and Mannar in 2013 and 2018, patterns of denial, political interference, and abandonment of victims.

⁴¹ “Letter to OHCHR and HoMs Regarding the 60th Session of the UNHRC,” August 4, 2025.

⁴² “USTAG Commends Visit to Chemmani.”

⁴³ “Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic Accused of Genocide Following the Take-over of Srebrenica. | International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” November 16, 1995, <https://www.icty.org/en/press/radovan-karadzic-and-ratko-mladic-accused-genocide-following-take-over-srebrenica>.

Recommendations

To ensure that Chemmani, Mannar, and all other mass grave investigations contribute meaningfully to truth, justice, closure to the relatives and the friends of the victims of disappearances, and for a dignified burial to the victims themselves we recommend:

- International Process: Engage independent international forensic experts, human rights observers, and legal specialists, including from the OHCHR, ICMP, ICRC, and other credible institutions, to undertake the investigations.
- Victim-Centred Approach: Ensure families of the disappeared are not passive spectators but active participants. They must be given access to information, legal representation, psychosocial support, and decision-making in all stages of exhumation and investigation.
- Transparency and Disclosure: Publish all reports from current and past mass grave investigations, including Chemmani (1998–2000, 2025), Mannar (2013, 2018), and others. Findings should be accessible in Tamil, Sinhala, and English.
- Chain of Custody and Evidence Preservation: Maintain rigorous standards in handling remains and artefacts to enable future prosecutions. Mishandling or contamination of evidence must be treated as obstruction of justice.
- Accountability: Since the Sri Lankan state institutions are permeated with entrenched and pervasive racism, Tamils will not get justice in the domestic process. International powers should bring legal action under universal jurisdiction against the perpetrators. The members of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance should mobilize Article 32 to bring Sri Lanka to the committee.
- Guarantees of Non-Recurrence: Memorialize Chemmani, Mannar, and other sites of atrocity as places of remembrance and education, ensuring they cannot be erased from public memory.

The exhumations at Chemmani today are not simply about unearthing bones; they are about unearthing truth. They are about affirming the rights of families who have waited too long, and about challenging a culture of impunity that has defined Sri Lanka's history. On this Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the message must be clear: every mass grave is not just a crime scene of the past, but a demand for justice in the present. Only international tribunals and international mechanisms can dispense justice for Tamil victims and victim-survivors.



Ezhilini Mahalingam (3 years old)



Isainila Sathiyamurthi (2 years old)



Kanila Thiruchelvam (2 years old)



Thurka Suthakaran (4 years old)



Sarujan Muralitharan (5 years old)



Piriyalini Parameswaran (8 months old)



Child's toys recovered from Chemmani

Among the most haunting truths of Sri Lanka's legacy of enforced disappearances is that children, even infants, were not spared. They were taken with their parents at checkpoints, abducted from homes, or disappeared when entire families surrendered to the military. Some were no more than babies in their mothers' arms; others were schoolchildren clutching books or toys. They vanished into the custody of the state, and were never seen alive again.

The presence of infants and children in these graves underscores why enforced disappearance is not simply an individual crime but a crime against generations. The failure to return these children to their families, even in death, prolongs the suffering and leaves communities unable to heal. It also speaks to the genocidal intent behind these crimes: to extinguish not only those who resisted, but also their descendants and future.

Mass graves like Chemmani are thus not only crime scenes; they are children's burial grounds. Every toy recovered, every tiny

skeleton exhumed, is a reminder of the scale of atrocity, the cruelty of impunity, and the urgency of international justice.

Chemmani and Beyond: Mass Graves, Enforced Disappearances, and the Tamil Struggle for Truth

Prepared for the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances
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USTAG

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Helping the voiceless gain their voice



“ Justice for the victims and the disappeared demands an independent investigation and real accountability. ”

★
CONGRESSMAN RAJA KRISHNAMOORTHY
U.S. House of Representatives (D-IL)
August 27, 2025



“ Support for Tamil demands for justice and accountability following the gruesome discovery at Chemmani. ”

★
CONGRESSWOMAN DEBORAH ROSS
U.S. House of Representatives (D-NC)
August 2025



“ The Sri Lankan government must place the rights of victims and their families at the forefront of its investigation and engage with the int'l community to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. ”

★
TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
U.S. Congress
September 11, 2025



“ Exhumations in 1999 in the presence of international observers and forensic experts yielded 15 skeletons. Two of the victims provisionally were identified as young men who had disappeared in 1996. ”

★
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE – 2000
Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sri Lanka, 2000

CHEMMANI DEMANDS THE TRUTH.



Justice for the victims.



Answers for the families.



Accountability for those responsible.



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