02 October 2026

Mr. Volker Türk
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Appeal to the United Nations to Ensure the Right to Commemorate Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan

The right of peoples to self-determination, including the right to determine their own political destiny, is a fundamental right recognized under international human rights law. Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) affirms that all peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

In Sri Lanka, the Tamil people have, at different periods in history, expressed their demands relating to their political rights and political future through various means. Non-violent political struggle has constituted an important part of this history. Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan remains in the collective memory of the Tamil people as one of the significant historical symbols of such struggle.

In 1987, during the period when the Indian Peace Keeping Force was stationed in Sri Lanka, Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan undertook a hunger strike, without consuming food or water, placing forward five demands. The hunger strike ended with his death. This act, through which he expressed his political demands without arms and used his own body as the medium of protest, has acquired a profound place in the political history and collective memory of the Tamil people. The fact that this non-violent protest was directed towards the Indian Peace Keeping Force of India, the country of Mahatma Gandhi, who demonstrated to the world the power of non-violent struggle, also gives the event particular historical significance.

It is for this reason that the Tamil people have continued to commemorate Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan over many years. Such commemoration is not merely an act of remembering an individual; it is also closely connected with the collective memory, history, political expression and cultural identity of a community.

Peaceful commemorative activities are connected with a number of rights protected under international human rights law. Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognize freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. Likewise, Articles 19 and 21 of the ICCPR, to which Sri Lanka is a State Party, protect freedom of expression and the right of peaceful assembly. General Comment No. 37 of the United Nations Human Rights Committee emphasizes the protection of the right of peaceful assembly and stresses that any restrictions imposed on that right must meet the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality.

Furthermore, in contexts involving past human rights violations and post-conflict situations, memorialization has been approached by United Nations human rights mechanisms as an important process connected with truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. Therefore, peaceful commemoration cannot be approached merely as a matter of “permission” or a “privilege” granted by the State; rather, it should be understood within the framework of the human rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and collective memory.

Against this background, the governmental and administrative history relating to the memorial of Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan should also be taken into consideration. Documentary evidence exists indicating that State funds were allocated for the memorial under financial allocations made by Members of the Parliament of Sri Lanka, that those funds were released through the relevant government administrative procedures, and that such funds were used for the reconstruction works of the memorial. Accordingly, the memorial cannot simply be portrayed as something established entirely outside governmental administrative procedures.

In this context, the removal of the statue of Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan from the memorial, he being regarded in the collective memory of the Tamil people as an important symbol of non-violent struggle, raises serious concerns in relation to the Tamil people’s memory, political expression and right to peaceful commemoration.

At the same time, it should not be suggested that the Tamil people were able to conduct commemorative activities in the past without restrictions. Human rights organizations and affected communities have repeatedly stated that, on various occasions, Tamil people have carried out commemorative activities amid intimidation, surveillance, restrictions and fears of legal action.

Therefore, our request is not to “restore a permission” that is said to have been granted in the past. Rather, our request is that a human rights environment be ensured in which the Tamil people are able to peacefully and freely commemorate those who have died, persons of significance in their history, and their collective historical experiences, without intimidation, surveillance, unnecessary interference or restrictions.

Accordingly, we respectfully call upon the United Nations, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the relevant United Nations Special Procedures, members of the international community and human rights organizations to give due attention to the removal of the statue of Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan and to help ensure that the right of the Tamil people to peaceful commemoration is respected.

In particular, we request the international community to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure an environment in which commemorative activities can take place without intimidation, surveillance or unnecessary interference; to ensure that any restriction imposed on peaceful commemorative activities complies with the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality under international human rights law; and to take steps to restore the removed statue of Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan to its memorial.

Commemoration should not be approached merely as a privilege granted by the State; it is closely connected with the human rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and the collective memory of a community. It is essential to ensure an environment in which the Tamil people are able to commemorate their history and memories peacefully, freely and without fear.

We believe that your intervention and continued attention to this matter would make an important contribution towards safeguarding the fundamental rights of the Tamil people.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Respectfully,

1. Jaffna Traders' Association
2. Theevaga Virutcham
3. Islands Civil Society
4. Poralikal Welfare Association
5. Voice of the Voiceless
6. Association of the Relatives of the Forcibly Disappeared
7. Makkal Seyal
8. University of Jaffna Students' Community
9. Thaayaga Seyalani
10. Ilankai Aasiriyar Sangam
11. Pottuvil to Polikandy People's Uprising Movement
12. Centre for Social Science Research
13. Islands Commemoration Organizing Committee
14. Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan Commemoration Organizing Committee
15. Thiyaga Theepam Thileepan Archives
16. Centre for Environmental Development – Soozhagam

ThavaThiru Velan Swamigal **Rev. Fr. Jebaratnam**

Prabhakara Kurukkal **Rev. Fr. Vasanthan**

Copy to:

Mr. **Marc-André Franche**
United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka
Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator