



British Tamils Forum

United Kingdom

30 July 2026

Chemmani Mass Graves

An Interim Overview of Forensic Findings and International Legal Frameworks

The forensic evidence unearthed at the Chemmani mass grave site points to potential violations across several major international legal regimes:

- **Genocide** (1948 Genocide Convention / Rome Statute Art. 6)
- **Crimes Against Humanity** (Rome Statute Art. 7)
- **War Crimes** (Geneva Conventions / Rome Statute Art. 8)
- **Enforced Disappearances** (ICPPED)
- **Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions** (ICCPR Art. 6 / UN Minnesota Protocol)

The following updated breakdown details the excavation timeline and key forensic findings through late July 2026.

Updated Chemmani Excavation Tables (2025 – July 2026)

Phase 1: Rediscovery & Initial Excavations (2025)

Period	Recovered / Identified Remains	Key Developments & Observations
February 2025	Initial Discovery	Construction workers preparing land for a Hindu crematorium on the outskirts of Chemmani uncovered human bones, triggering a court-ordered investigation by the Jaffna Magistrate.
Mid-May – June 2025	19 Skeletons	Court-directed excavations led by forensic archaeologist Prof. Raj Somadeva began. Initial digs recovered 19 skeletons, including 3 infants (neonatal, under 10 months old).
July – August 2025	Ongoing Site Expansion	Excavations expanded as satellite and drone mapping revealed secondary burial sectors. Personal artifacts recovered included a child's blue schoolbag, a toy, glass bangles, and clothing fragments .
September 2025	HRCSL Findings	The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka noted a "reasonable likelihood" of unlawful burials and extrajudicial



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Period	Recovered / Identified Remains	Key Developments & Observations
		killings given the condition and manner in which bodies were interred.

Phase 2: Intensive Excavation Updates (June 2026)

Date	Identified Skeletal Remains	Daily Exhumation Milestone & Status
7 June 2026	302	Identified count during expanded forensic digging.
8 June 2026	318	Additional remains catalogued by field teams.
9 June 2026	327	Field operations progress under judicial supervision.
10 June 2026	339	Continued mapping across active sectors.
11 June 2026	341	Incremental additions as deeper layers are cleared.
12 June 2026	353	Total identified count passes 350.
14 June 2026	355	Site clearing and forensic recording.
15 June 2026	360	Identified count reaches 360.
16 June 2026	366	Excavations continue across multiple pits.
17 June 2026	380	Marked increase in unearthed remains.
18 June 2026	387	Ongoing judicial and forensic oversight.



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Date	Identified Skeletal Remains	Daily Exhumation Milestone & Status
19 June 2026	394	Remains catalogued by court-appointed team.
21 June 2026	405	Total count passes 400.
22 June 2026	412	412 identified / 409 fully exhumed from soil.

Phase 3: Latest Developments (July 2026 Update)

Date / Period	Total Skeletal Count	Latest Findings & Context
Mid-July 2026	~425+	Recovery of additional young child remains , personal belongings, and clothing fragments.
20 July 2026	446 Skeletons	Total recovered count reached 446 skeletal remains, surpassing Mannar to become the largest mass grave excavated in Sri Lanka . Findings included possible conjoined twins and seated burials.
24–28 July 2026	480 Identified / 479 Exhumed	* Grim Milestone: Total identified remains reached 480 sets across Phases 1, 2, and 3, with 479 sets fully exhumed over 96 total days of digging. * Forensic Evidence: Investigators catalogued an iron plate found in direct contact with three right-side ribs of the 437th set of remains, along with several recovered nails documented as physical evidence. * Temporary Pause: Phase 3 operations were temporarily halted after 42 days of digging; exhumations are scheduled to resume on 4 August 2026, with the Jaffna Magistrate's Court taking up the case on 5 August 2026.



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Reference: Other Mass Graves Identified and Exhumed in Sri Lanka

Mass Grave Location / Site	Exhumation Period	Skeletons / Remains Exhumed	Historical Context & Conflict Period
Mannar (Sathosa / Thiruketheeswaram)	2013–2014 & 2018–2019	346 skeletons	Uncovered in Mannar town during construction work; included remains of 29 children. Linked to civil war disappearances.
Matale Mass Grave	2012–2013	155 skeletons	Uncovered near Matale Hospital; linked to extrajudicial killings during the 1987–1989 JVP uprising.
Kokkuthoduwai (Mullaitivu)	2023–2024	40+ skeletons	Discovered during water pipeline excavation; remains included female combatant/civilian uniforms and personal items from the final phase of the civil war.
Sooriyakanda (Embilipitiya)	1994	30 skeletons	Uncovered following investigations into the 1989–1990 disappearance of schoolboys from Embilipitiya during the JVP insurgency.
Duraippah Stadium (Jaffna)	1999	25 skeletons	Discovered during stadium renovations in Jaffna; linked to disappearances during mid-1990s military operations.
Chemmani (Initial Digs)	1999	15 skeletons	Initial excavation following testimony by former soldier Somaratne Rajapakse regarding 1996 wartime disappearances.
Kalpitiya Mass Grave	2014	14 skeletons	Uncovered near a naval base in Kalpitiya; believed to date back to wartime disappearances.

020 8808 3224 | news@britishtamilsforum.org

Unit 1, Fountayne Business Centre, Broad lane, London N15 4AG



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Based on standard principles of forensic archaeology, international criminal law (such as the Rome Statute), and international human rights law (including the UN Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death), forensic evidence from mass graves provides critical physical proof regarding the nature and classification of potential crimes.

Analysing the key variables unearthed at the Chemmani site yields clear legal and criminological insights:

1. Scale and Mass (Quantity: 480 Identified Remains)

- **Crime Classification:** Crimes Against Humanity (Murder, Persecution, Enforced Disappearance) / Systematic Enforced Disappearances
- **Forensic Interpretation:** Unearthing 480 sets of human remains in a single localised area refutes claims of isolated or sporadic acts of violence. Under International Criminal Law (Article 7 of the Rome Statute), a large volume of interred victims provides strong evidentiary support for a "*widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.*"
- **Legal Implication:** The quantity demonstrates organisational capacity, logistical coordination, and sustained access to a designated burial site over time, pointing toward state, state-tolerated, or command-level institutional involvement or oversight and command responsibility.

2. Age Groups & Demographics (Infants, Toddlers, Children, Adults)

- **Crime Classification:** War Crimes against Protected Persons / Mass Murder of Non-Combatants / Genocide / Crimes Against Humanity.
- **Forensic Interpretation:** The presence of neonatal infants (under 10 months old), young children aged 4–5, and school-aged youth alongside adults establishes that victims were *persons taking no active part in hostilities (personnes protégées)*
- **Legal Implication:**
 - Under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, civilians and children enjoy absolute protected status during non-international armed conflicts. The intentional targeting or indiscriminate killing of children / non-combatants constitutes grave breaches of international humanitarian law (War Crimes).
 - The inclusion of entire family units or multi-generational groups (infants buried alongside adults) provides material evidence of **intent (*mens rea*)** to target a distinct group based on collective identity (e.g., national, ethnical, or racial group), supporting the threshold for **Genocide** under Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention.

3. Positioning and Body Deposition (Seated Burials, Chaotic Overlapping, Intertwined / Embracing Skeletons)

- **Crime Classification:** Extrajudicial Executions / Torture or Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment / Outrages upon Personal Dignity



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- **Forensic Interpretation:**

- **Chaotic/Disorderly Overlapping:** Bodies deposited without order or ritual indicate rapid, secretive disposal aimed at concealment rather than formal or customary burial. Over 90% lacking clothing rules out traditional religious/cultural rites (such as Hindu burial customs)
- **Seated / Bound Positions:** A seated posture or skeletons found in constrained arrangements suggests victims may have been executed while bound, kneeling, or held *hors de combat* under detention.
- **Intertwined / Embracing Remains:** Skeletons found locked together often reflect victims holding one another immediately prior to execution, or being dumped simultaneously into a single pit sector, proving mass execution events.

4. Forensic Artifacts & Evidence (Iron Plate on Ribcage, Nails, Stripped Clothing)

- **Crime Classification:** Extrajudicial Killing / Violent Assault / Physical Torture / Concealment of Identity
- **Forensic Interpretation:**
 - **Iron Plate & Metal Nails (#437 Remains):** Metallic plates or heavy items placed directly against ribcages, alongside recovered nails, suggest severe peri-mortem trauma, blunt-force injury, mechanical restraint/crushing, or execution methods involving physical impalement/fixation.
 - **Stripped Clothing:** Stripping victims prior to burial is a documented tactic used to hinder forensic identification (removing personal tags, IDs, or distinct attire) and inflict pre-execution humiliation (violating prohibition against outrages upon personal dignity under Geneva Conventions Common Article 3).
 - **Personal Items (Toys, Feeding Bottles, Schoolbags):** Artifacts such as schoolbags and toys confirm that victims were abducted or rounded up during routine daily life (e.g., traveling to/from school or fleeing conflict zones) rather than engaged in military operational activity.

5. Stratigraphy & Layers (Multiple Dig Phases, Expanded Sectors)

- **Crime Classification:** Enforced Disappearances / Prolonged and Systematic Mass Executions.
- **Forensic Interpretation:** Distinguishable soil layers and multiple distinct burial sectors indicate that Chemmani was used repeatedly over a prolonged timeframe rather than during a single isolated event.
- **Legal Implication:** Multiple trench layers prove that the execution and burial site operated as an established, recurring execution disposal site. In international law, *Enforced Disappearance* is



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considered a continuous crime until the fate and whereabouts of the missing persons are fully disclosed and human remains are accounted for.

Summary of Primary Offenses Applicable Under Law

1. **Genocide:** The intentional mass killing, targeting, and deliberate destruction of non-combatants - specifically including infants, young children, and family units - based on their national, ethnical, racial, or religious identity (in violation of Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention and Article 6 of the Rome Statute).
2. **Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions:** Arbitrary deprivation of the right to life carried out by state actors or with state acquiescence (Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - ICCPR, and the UN Minnesota Protocol)
3. **Crimes Against Humanity:** Mass murder, extermination, persecution, and enforced disappearance of civilians committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population (Article 7 of the Rome Statute).
4. **Enforced Disappearances:** The arrest, detention, or abduction of persons followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or disclosure of the fate/location of the victims (International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance).
5. **War Crimes:** The deliberate killing, torture, ill-treatment, and targeting of civilians and individuals taking no active part in hostilities during a non-international armed conflict (Article 8 of the Rome Statute and Geneva Conventions Common Article 3).

Contact: BTF MEDIA Tel: +44 (0) 7825 448 753

Email: news@britishtamilsforum.org

Notes to Editors:

British Tamils Forum exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self-determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. For more information info@britishtamilsforum.org and/or visit: www.britishtamilsforum.org