



# British Tamils Forum United Kingdom

26 June 2026

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Mass Graves in the North-East of Sri Lanka: The Continuing Denial of Truth, Justice and Accountability**

Sri Lanka remains one of the countries with the highest number of unresolved enforced disappearances in the world. Estimates suggest that between 60,000 and 100,000 persons have disappeared over several decades of genocide of Tamils. The majority of unresolved cases from the civil war period concern Tamil civilians are from the North-East of the island.

The discovery of numerous mass graves across the North-East, including Chemmani, Mandaitivu, Mannar, Kokkuthoduvai and other locations, has provided compelling physical evidence that demands independent forensic investigation and judicial accountability. Despite the discovery of skeletal remains, personal belongings and other forensic evidence, the Government of Sri Lanka has failed to establish a transparent and credible process to identify victims, prosecute perpetrators, or determine command responsibility.

Families of the victims of enforced disappearance continue to be denied their fundamental right to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones are.

The absence of transparent DNA identification processes, the failure to permit meaningful international forensic participation, and the continued resistance to international independent investigations have deepened concerns that evidence relating to some of the gravest crimes committed during the conflict are in peril of being lost, concealed, or remain unexamined.

### **Background**

For decades, Tamil families in the North-East have searched for answers regarding relatives who were arrested, abducted, surrendered to state authorities, or disappeared during military operations. The issue of enforced disappearances remains one of the most serious unresolved human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. Numerous mass grave sites have been discovered throughout the country, particularly in the Tamil homeland of the North-East. These sites represent potential crime scenes linked to enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of genocide.

The continuing failure to investigate these sites in accordance with international standards has denied victims and their family's access to truth, justice and accountability.

### **The Chemmani Mass Grave and Other Sites**

The Chemmani mass grave in Jaffna first came to international attention in 1999 following testimony by a Sri Lankan soldier who alleged that hundreds of bodies had been buried in the area. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan State abandoned the exposure of human remains after exhuming 15 skeletons at that time.



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Accidental exposure of human skeletons during an excavation for construction works in Chemmani in February 2025 has discovered several human remains and the continuing discovery has reached at least **421 to date**, of which 407 have been exhumed. **Most of the bodies were reportedly buried completely stripped of clothing**, but investigations have failed to deliver meaningful accountability. These skeletal remains include families with children and infants. According to reports from the excavation process, preliminary forensic assessments suggest that **approximately one in ten of the remains may belong to a child**. Personal belongings, including school bags, toys, feeding bottles, clothing and jewellery, have also been recovered.

These discoveries have renewed calls for comprehensive forensic investigations and accountability regarding the circumstances surrounding the burials.

**Table: Mass-Grave Sites in Sri Lanka (North & East)**

	Year (Discovery / Exhumation)	Site (District / Location)	Notes	Where Remains Are Kept (Known Info)
1	1998–1999	Chemmani (Jaffna)	Allegations by soldier (1998); 15 skeletons exhumed (1999). Renewed 2025 excavations uncovered 160+ skeletons (including children).	Remains reportedly under forensic analysis in Jaffna; renewed excavations still ongoing (2025). Final storage/custody not yet disclosed. ( <a href="#">State Department</a> , <a href="#">AP News</a> , <a href="#">adaderana.lk</a> , <a href="#">UN Media</a> )
2	1999	Duraiappah Stadium (Jaffna)	23 skeletons discovered during renovation; forensically assessed; no prosecutions.	Reported sent to Colombo for forensic analysis in 1999. No public record of storage, return, or reburial. <a href="#">no further systematic excavation or prosecutions followed</a> .
3	2000	Mirusuvil (Jaffna)	8 Tamil civilians' remains; soldier convicted, later pardoned.	No public information on where remains were stored or if returned to families. ( <a href="#">Al Jazeera</a> , <a href="#">Amnesty International</a> )
4	2013–2018	Mannar – “Sathosa”	346 skeletons excavated, including 28 children. Dating contested in court.	Stored at Mannar Magistrate’s Court and Jaffna Teaching Hospital during investigations. Current location unclear. ( <a href="#">www.ndtv.com</a> , <a href="#">sundaytimes.lk</a> , <a href="#">srilankachrd.org</a> )
5	2019–2020	Puthukudiyiruppu (Mullaitivu)	9 skeletons uncovered.	Taken to Jaffna Teaching Hospital by Judicial Medical Officer for analysis.
6	2020	Ganeshapuram (Kilinochchi)	Skeleton of a woman recovered.	No public information about current storage or custody.
7	2023–2025	Kokkuthoduvai / Kokilai (Mullaitivu)	13 skeletons (2023) → ~52 (2025). LTTE dog-tags, cyanide vials found. Excavations criticized for poor procedure, halted due to funding.	At least 25 sets of remains sent to Jaffna Teaching Hospital’s forensic dept. Investigation ongoing.
8	2024	Muhamalai (Kilinochchi)	Skeletal remains with LTTE uniform found during de-mining. Magistrate ordered full excavation.	No publicly available information on custody or storage of remains. <a href="#">tamilguardian.com</a>



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	Year (Discovery / Exhumation)	Site (District / Location)	Notes	Where Remains Are Kept (Known Info)
9	2025	Sampur (near Muthur)	Court-ordered controlled excavation with Army engineers, GA Dept, JMO, SOCO present.	Excavation just commenced (July 2025). Remains currently under magistrate custody pending forensic analysis. <a href="https://www.tamilguardian.com">tamilguardian.com</a>
10	<i>Alleged</i>	Mandaitivu (Jaffna Island)	TNA MP claims mass grave.	No excavation to date — therefore no custody. <a href="#">Claimed by TNA MP</a>
11	<i>Alleged</i>	Allaipitty, Mankumban, Chatti (Kayts Islets)	Based on survivor/family testimony.	No confirmed remains found; no custody.
12	<i>Historical (1990s)</i>	Velanai (Kayts area)	LTTE cemetery destroyed.	No exhumations done.

Chemmani is not an isolated case. Other mass grave sites discovered across the North-East and elsewhere in Sri Lanka include:

- Sathosa Site, Mannar
- Kokkuthoduvai Mass Grave
- Mandaitivu
- Additional burial sites identified through witness testimony, local knowledge, development projects and previous investigations

Despite these discoveries, most investigations have stalled, been delayed, or failed to produce meaningful outcomes.

## Failure to Identify Victims

Although skeletal remains and biological samples have been collected from several mass grave sites, there remains little transparency regarding:

- DNA testing procedures
- DNA databases used for identification
- Matching processes with biological relatives
- Publication of forensic findings
- Identification of victims
- Preservation and chain of custody of evidence

British Tamils Forum and Families of the disappeared have repeatedly requested information regarding DNA testing and victim identification. However, there has been no comprehensive public disclosure of results, nor evidence of a systematic programme to match remains with blood relatives across the North-East.

Without a credible and transparent identification process, families remain trapped in uncertainty and denied closure.



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## **The Need for an Independent International DNA Databank**

A central obstacle to identifying victims recovered from mass graves in Sri Lanka is the absence of a trusted and internationally supervised DNA identification mechanism.

An independent DNA databank should be established in the United Kingdom or a member state of the European Union under the supervision of internationally recognised forensic institutions. Such a mechanism would provide confidence to victims' families who have little trust in domestic processes due to decades of failed investigations and impunity.

The DNA databank should:

- Collect voluntary DNA reference samples from biological relatives of the disappeared residing in Sri Lanka and throughout the global Tamil diaspora.
- Maintain internationally accepted standards of evidence collection, storage and chain of custody.
- Facilitate DNA matching with human remains recovered from all mass grave sites in Sri Lanka.
- Allow international forensic experts and family representatives to monitor the process.
- Publish periodic reports on the number of samples collected, matches identified and victims confirmed.
- Ensure that identified remains are returned to families with dignity and proper documentation.

Given the significant Tamil diaspora population in the United Kingdom and Europe, such a databank would enable broader participation and substantially improve the possibility of identifying victims whose relatives no longer reside in Sri Lanka.

This mechanism should be linked to future international accountability processes and draw upon lessons learned from forensic identification programmes established in Bosnia, Kosovo, Argentina and other post-conflict contexts.

## **Satellite and Remote Sensing Analysis**

Modern forensic investigations increasingly rely upon satellite imagery, aerial photography and geospatial intelligence to identify, monitor and preserve evidence relating to mass graves and atrocity crimes.

An independent international team should conduct a comprehensive analysis of historical satellite imagery covering all identified and suspected mass grave locations during the conflict period and immediate post-war years.



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This analysis should:

- Examine satellite imagery from the conflict period and immediate post-conflict years.
- Identify evidence of excavation activities, earth disturbances and possible clandestine burial sites.
- Determine changes in terrain and land use around military installations, detention centres and conflict zones.
- Correlate satellite findings with witness testimonies, military movements and disappearance records.
- Preserve geospatial evidence for future judicial proceedings.
- Assist in identifying additional undiscovered burial locations.

Satellite evidence has been successfully used in international investigations involving war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide and should form an integral component of any credible investigation into Sri Lanka's mass graves.

## **Immediate Excavation of Identified Mass Grave Sites**

Numerous locations identified through witness testimony, local knowledge and previous investigations remain unexcavated or inadequately investigated.

The international community should call for the immediate forensic assessment and excavation of all identified and suspected mass grave sites, including:

- Mandaitivu
- Chemmani
- Kokkuthoduvai
- Mannar
- Mullaitivu
- Additional locations identified by victims' families, witnesses and human rights organisations

All excavations should be conducted according to international forensic standards and under independent international observation.

The objectives of such excavations should include:

- Recovery and preservation of human remain.
- Identification of victims through forensic and DNA analysis.
- Determination of cause and manner of death where possible.
- Collection and preservation of evidence for future criminal proceedings.
- Documentation of patterns of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and other international crimes.



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## **Lack of Accountability**

The discovery of mass graves should trigger criminal investigations capable of identifying:

- Direct perpetrators.
- Those who ordered, facilitated or concealed crimes.
- Military and political chains of command.
- Institutional responsibility.
- State responsibility.
- Command responsibility.

Instead, Sri Lanka has demonstrated a longstanding pattern of impunity.

To date:

- No comprehensive judicial process has established responsibility for the deaths represented in these mass graves.
- No meaningful prosecutions have resulted from most mass grave investigations.
- No command responsibility has been examined through independent judicial mechanisms.
- Families continue to be denied truth, justice and reparations.

Mass graves are potential crime scenes that may contain evidence relating to war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of genocide. Consequently, investigations must extend beyond the recovery of remains and seek accountability at all levels.

## **Rejection of International Forensic and Investigative Assistance**

Families of victims, civil society organisations and international human rights experts have consistently called for:

- Independent international forensic experts.
- International monitoring of excavations.
- Participation of international investigators.
- UN involvement in evidence preservation.
- International oversight of identification processes.

Despite these calls, the Government of Sri Lanka has not demonstrated a willingness to establish a fully independent international investigative mechanism. ***International forensic participation and independent international investigators have not been granted an effective role in examining evidence and crime scenes.***

This lack of transparency has significantly undermined confidence in domestic processes.



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## The Rights of Families

Under international law, families of the disappeared have the right to:

- Know the truth regarding the fate of their loved ones.
- Receive information concerning investigations.
- Participate in investigative processes.
- Obtain justice and effective remedies.
- Receive reparations.
- Recover and identify remains.

The continuing failure to identify victims and disclose investigative findings constitutes an ongoing denial of these rights.

## Recommendations

The international community, including the United Nations Human Rights Council, should urgently call for:

1. An independent international investigative mechanism for mass graves and enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka.
2. The establishment of an internationally supervised DNA databank in the United Kingdom or a member state of the European Union.
3. Collection of DNA reference samples from relatives of the disappeared in Sri Lanka and throughout the global Tamil diaspora.
4. Immediate deployment of international forensic experts to all identified mass grave sites.
5. Comprehensive satellite imagery and geospatial analysis of all known and suspected mass grave locations during the conflict and post-conflict periods.
6. Immediate excavation of identified sites, including Mandaitivu and other locations identified through witness testimony and forensic evidence.
7. Independent forensic analysis and publication of DNA matching results.
8. Protection and preservation of all forensic evidence and crime scenes.
9. Full participation of victims' families throughout investigative processes.
10. Investigation of command responsibility, institutional responsibility and state responsibility.
11. Preservation of evidence for future international accountability mechanisms.
12. Regular public reporting on excavation progress, forensic findings and victim identification.
13. Guarantees of non-recurrence and effective remedies for affected families.

## Conclusion

The mass graves discovered throughout the North-East of Sri Lanka represent more than archaeological findings; they are the potential crime scenes connected to one of the world's largest unresolved disappearance crises.



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The recovery of skeletal remains without transparent identification, accountability or justice cannot satisfy the rights of victims and their families. The continued refusal to permit meaningful international forensic and investigative involvement has further undermined confidence in domestic processes. Truth, justice and accountability require more than exhumations. They require independent investigations, international forensic expertise, satellite imagery analysis, DNA identification, preservation of evidence, prosecution of perpetrators and examination of command responsibility. The establishment of an independent DNA databank in the United Kingdom or the European Union, the systematic analysis of historical satellite imagery, and the immediate excavation of identified mass grave sites such as Mandaitivu are essential steps towards uncovering the truth, identifying victims, preserving evidence and delivering justice.

Without these measures, Sri Lanka's mass grave investigations risk of becoming another chapter in a long history of impunity rather than a pathway towards truth, justice and accountability for thousands of disappeared Tamils and their families.

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**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](mailto:info@britishtamilsforum.org) and/or visit: [www.britishtamilsforum.org](http://www.britishtamilsforum.org)