



British Tamils Forum

பிரித்தானிய தமிழர் பேரவை



Canadian Tamil Congress

கனடியத் தமிழர் பேரவை

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Militarisation of governance, demographic change and the future of democracy in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced an all-Sinhala Task Force on Archeological Heritage Management on June 2, which includes Buddhist monks, military officers and the head of the Derana media network, to "preserve the historical heritage of Sri Lanka" in the island's Eastern Province. The announcement, made through a [Gazette No. 2178/17](#), comes after the president met with the Buddhist Maha Sanga to discuss Buddhist sites in the East. The Task Force has several Sinhala Buddhist monks, but no representative of Hinduism or Islam, significant in a region where over 70% of the population is Hindu and Muslim. The Task Force is headed by the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, a retired Major General, Kamal Gunaratne, who is accused of war crimes.

The Task Force is being asked to "identify sites of archaeological importance in the Eastern Province". The Sri Lankan military sent a high-level delegation to the Eastern Province last month, including the war crimes-accused army head and defence secretary, where they pledged to establish a naval sub-unit to protect Buddhist sites. The Eastern Province, which has been claimed by the Tamil people as being historically inhabited by Tamils and was recognized as such in the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, has come under decades of intense Sinhalisation and colonisation from state-sponsored settlement schemes.

In recent years, the state has used the guise of 'archaeology' to take over vast areas of land in the North-East and to mark them as 'Buddhist sites'. The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 said that the construction of such sites and Buddhist statues in non-Buddhist areas in the North-East, despite objections from locals, left civil society with the perception of "Buddhist Sinhalese religious and cultural imperialism".

Tamils have also voiced fears about further appropriation of land by the state through the Task Force, as the gazette announced the body would be able to "identify the extent of land that should be allocated for such archaeological sites and take necessary measures to allocate them properly and legally". "The Presidential Task Force on Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province may issue instructions or request that all Government Officers and other persons

requesting assistance in the provision of services comply with such instructions,” the gazette concluded.

On June 2, 2020, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa also issued another extraordinary gazette establishing a 13-member “Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society.” The Task Force is composed entirely of military, intelligence and police officials. It is also to be headed by Defence Secretary, Retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne.

“This Presidential Task Force constitutes another act of over-reach by a government seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further expand its powers,” said Frederick Rawski, International Commission of Jurists, Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific. “Its mandate is overbroad, and it empowers its military and police membership – including alleged war criminals – at a time when strong, independent, civilian-led policy-making is what is needed.”

The ICJ raised concerns that the task force has not been established on proper legal foundations. It is apparently pursuant to the broad, but ill-defined presidential powers under Article 33 of the Constitution.

The ICJ said that the second task force could effectively usurp the powers and functions normally reserved for civilian authorities, under rule of law principles and as established by the Constitution and relevant enabling legislations.

Article 42 (1) of the Constitution provides that the “Cabinet of Ministers shall be charged with the direction and control of the Government.” Law enforcement and public officials under the direction of the relevant Minister have been designated under existing laws to specifically address drug-related offences and any other illegal and/ or criminal activity that seemingly fall within the mandate of this Task Force. The independence of public officials will be compromised if they are compelled to report to a military-dominated body. The Gazette provides no detail on how this reporting process would operate, or the legal consequences of refusing to act as instructed.

The clear objective of these two task forces is to permanently change the demography of the Eastern Province, drive the Tamil-speaking people (who are 76% of the Eastern Province) out of their historic homelands, and to rule the entire country using a military junta which has been internationally accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Unless the democratic forces in the south, the Tamils and the Muslims unite to form a common front, Sri Lanka will see the rise of a military dictatorship never seen in its entire history. It is imperative that the leadership of all these forces recognise the impending tragedy and form a common front to face this reality.

Common front should be formed on the principles of equality and justice for all, recognising the long-term militarisation of the north and east and its devastating impact on the Tamils. The historic homelands of the Tamil-speaking people as accepted in the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord must be recognised and protected.

The Australian Tamil Congress, the British Tamils Forum, the Canadian Tamil Congress, the Irish Tamils Forum, Solidarity Group for Peace and Justice in Sri Lanka and the US Tamil Action Group call upon the democratic southern leadership and the Muslim leadership in Sri Lanka to join this historic struggle to attain a peaceful and democratic island nation based on equality and justice for all. Failure to do so will without fail lead to a bankrupt nation ruled by a military cabal.

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