

**Democracy in Peril in Sri Lanka:  
COVID-19 response orchestrated by the Military, followed by Presidential Task Forces  
headed by the Military, consolidate the “informal Military takeover” of the Sri Lankan  
civilian administration.**

The United States Tamil Action Group (USTAG) unequivocally condemns the actions of the President of Sri Lanka who is initiating “an informal Military takeover” of the civilian administration of the country by dissolving parliament, militarizing the COVID-19 response, and ruling by presidential decrees. We call upon the international community of nations to arrest the careening of the country into an unmitigated dictatorship.

The newly elected Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved the elected Parliament six months prior to the end of term of Parliament. The elections to replace the Parliament within the constitutionally stipulated time is not possible due to the world wide Corona Virus Pandemic, but the President adamantly refuses to reconvene Parliament, and rules the country with executive edicts. He has also handed over key civilian administrative responsibilities to military and ex-military personnel and mobilized the military as in a war footing.

When Gotabaya Rajapakse, alleged to have had command responsibility for war crimes and torture during the ethnic war which ended in 2009, was elected President, he wasted no time in appointing the military hierarchy, similarly accused of war crimes, to top civilian posts in the government. The onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic enabled President Rajapaksa to establish a "National Operations Center for the Prevention of the COVID-19 Outbreak" headed by none other than Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva, Acting Chief of Defense and Commander of the Army, an alleged war criminal and *persona non grata* in the United States. Following close on the heels of this unprecedented military inroad into a medical and healthcare issue, the President has appointed by special decree, two task forces. The first of these is designed to be a sweeping control by the military of all aspects of civilian life in the country. The second task force, ominously for the Tamil and Muslim communities, is designed to exclusively appropriate the archeological heritage of the Eastern province into the Sinhala–Buddhist majoritarian narrative and agenda to legitimize the occupation of the Tamil and Muslim Homelands:

1. Presidential Task Force (PTF 1) “to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society....”
2. Presidential Task Force (PTF 2) “for Archeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province...”

**PTF 1** is given a sweeping mandate by the President which includes:

“Taking necessary and immediate steps to curb the illegal activities of social groups which are violating the law which is emerging as harmful to the free and peaceful existence of society at present.....”

“Taking necessary measures for prevention of the drug menace.....and to fully eradicate drug trafficking in the country and to prevent other social illnesses caused by drug abuse”

“Taking legal action against persons responsible for illegal and antisocial activities conducted in Sri Lanka while locating in other countries”

“Investigating and preventing any illegal and antisocial activities in and around prisons”.

The President further directs PTF 1, “to report to me, all cases of delay or default on the part of any Public Officer or Officer of any Ministry, Government Department, State Corporation or other similar institution in the discharge of duties and responsibilities assigned to such public officer or such institution”.

The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) has condemned the proclamation by the Sri Lankan President to establish a Presidential Task Force dominated by the security forces and called for the proclamation to be rescinded. "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, ICJ's 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."

“Sri Lanka is now run by a collection of military officers many of whom will have to answer in a court one day for their complicity in the alleged killings of tens of thousands of their citizens in both 1989 and 2009, as well as alleged corruption,” said the Executive Director of the International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP), Yasmin Sooka.

**PTF 2** has not a single Tamil or Muslim although Tamils and Muslims together constitute two-thirds of the population of the Eastern Province. Neither has the task force any representation from the majority religions of the Tamil and Muslim communities, namely Hinduism and Islam respectively. Incongruously, the task force is placed under the Secretary to the Ministry of Defense, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, against whom there are credible allegations torture, war crimes and crimes against humanity. .

To the question of why there are no Tamil or Muslim archaeologists in Sri Lanka who could have been included in the Task Force, renowned archaeologist of Kelaniya University Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe (a Sinhalese from the majority community) said, “there are at least 10 Tamil archaeologists, some of whom are working in Batticaloa” (in the Eastern Province itself). He added that “the non-inclusion of experts from other ethnic or religious groups was probably due to the existing national agenda to promote the interest of the majority community through an appropriate historical narrative”.

“Archaeological Heritage Management in the East has particular instructions on allocating lands to archaeological sites. It is a move to give legal force to the dubious archaeological claims made by the Sinhala Buddhist groups in the East”, commented Jaffna-based Attorney, Academic and Civil Society activist Kumaravadivel Guruparan. Giving a detailed interpretation and sharing his perspectives on the terms of reference and composition of PTF 2, he said: “If there is one message that the Tamils and the Muslim must take, and particularly for the Muslims I hope, we are in this fight together,” he said urging “Tamils and Muslims to unite as one political force against the Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic machine. “If Tamils and Muslims unite in the North-East, we are an unshakable force against the onslaught,” he said.

These actions by the government of Sri Lanka constitute an "informal takeover" of the civilian administration by the military in Sri Lanka. It is being carried out without the participation of the elected representatives of the people of Sri Lanka, and is especially detrimental to the Tamil and Muslim communities of the island.

The US Tamil Action Group (USTAG) urges the immediate return of Covid-19 prevention and relief efforts to civilian hands. We call on the United States, our allies and multilateral institutions to make coronavirus and all other aid dependent on resumption of civilian control. Furthermore, the international family of nations can ensure democracy and the rule of law to be reinstated in the country by taking action against the individuals at the highest echelons of the government and the military who are the real cause of the erosion of the institutions of democracy.

“Given Sri Lanka’s non-compliance to investigate alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the current rulers and embodied in the UNHRC Resolution 30/1, the international community of nations must refer Sri Lanka to the ICJ, and subject it to Universal Jurisdiction”, said the President of USTAG, Seetharam Sivam. He further added, “the rampant culture of impunity at the highest rungs of the ruling class and the military is what causes the continuation of tyranny we see today”. As an example of what actions could be taken against individual alleged perpetrators of these egregious crimes, Mr. Sivam cited the US barring of Shavendra Silva, the Army Commander and close confidant of the Gotabaya Rajapakse, from entry to the US.