



Sri Lankan Presidential Task Forces Signal Deepening Militarization

(Washington D.C.; June 3, 2020) — PEARL strongly condemns this week’s establishment of two presidential task forces in Sri Lanka, which sets the country on a firm course to autocratic governance. The new presidential task forces are a serious escalation in the president’s move to militarize the activities of the state in the name of national security and as a response to the pandemic. Both new task forces appear to be exclusively Sinhala and include suspected war criminals, indicating Sri Lanka’s strengthening of its ethnocracy with the backing of a president who stands accused of mass atrocities.

“Rajapaksa’s new presidential task forces will exacerbate the existing militarization and state-sponsored colonization of the Tamil-dominated North-East, breeding further tension and instability in the region,” said PEARL’s Executive Director Tasha Manoranjan. “His appointment of war criminals to lead the task forces reiterates his absolute disregard for international calls for accountability for the mass atrocities committed against Tamils in 2009.”

The [“Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society”](#) is made up entirely of military and police officials, including those credibly accused of committing war crimes according to the UN and the United States. The goals of the task force are written ambiguously - to “curb illegal activities of social groups” and “take legal action against persons responsible for...anti-social activities”. This gives the task force a wide remit, which solidifies fears that Sri Lanka could strengthen its restriction of human rights organizations, Tamil civil society groups, and political actors. The task force is also given license to “take measures” against those in other countries, which sanctions increased targeting and surveillance of Tamils in the diaspora.

The [“Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province”](#), must be seen in the wider context of state-sponsored Sinhala colonization in the east led by the military, government officials, and the Department of Archaeology. Currently, colonization occurs through the construction of Buddhist temples in this Tamil and Muslim majority province. The task force, which is made up exclusively of Sinhala appointees, will undeniably serve as an extension of this project to identify and safeguard Sinhala-Buddhist 'historical sites', at the expense of Tamil or Muslim sites. It includes several Buddhist extremists, including the Buddhist monk Panamure Thilakawansa Thero, who is notorious for his Sinhalization efforts in and around Pulmoaddai, Trincomalee¹.

This latest move by President Rajapaksa is grounded in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ethos that underpins governance in Sri Lanka. The failure to address the racism that permeates Sri Lanka’s majority will have worsening repercussions, particularly for the Tamil and Muslim populations. Forthcoming parliamentary elections are likely to solidify Rajapaksa’s authoritarian reign. As hopes for reforms from within Sri Lanka remain futile, the international community must take decisive action and cease supporting the increasingly militarized Sri Lankan state. Without that, Sri Lanka is doomed to repeat its tragic past.

¹ See [here](#) for more details in PEARL’s report on Sinhala colonization in Pulmoaddai.