

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 6, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write regarding the current economic and political crisis facing Sri Lanka and the need to center human rights in all American engagement with Sri Lanka during this period of unrest.

As you know, over the past few months, Sri Lankans have experienced severe shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and other necessities that have led to the closure of schools and government offices. In May, Sri Lanka defaulted on its debt for the first time in history. In July, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country and resigned from his post amid massive protests against the government.

The current crisis has exacerbated existing disparities—both economic and political—in Sri Lanka’s north-eastern provinces, where the Tamil population has traditionally resided. These provinces, already the subject of heavy militarization and violence by Sri Lankan security forces, have been the hardest hit by the current economic crisis, which has the potential to entrench economic disadvantages and undermine the already bleak human rights situation in these areas.

We strongly urge the State Department to center human rights and transitional justice for the Tamil population in its diplomatic engagement with Sri Lanka during this crisis and to make every effort to promote an international accountability process for Sri Lanka. As you know, the United States played an important role in the drafting and adoption of the resolution cosponsored by Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council in 2015 (Resolution 30/1). With the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019, the government withdrew from its commitments under the resolution, promising a “domestically designed and executed reconciliation and accountability process.” However, nearly three years have elapsed since then and Sri Lanka has yet to provide any credible or concrete roadmap towards transitional justice.

According to an April 11, 2022 report from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, critical institutions that could have safeguarded human rights have suffered over the past two years. Specifically, the independence of the judiciary continues to decline and avenues for democratic advocacy have been constricted.

We appreciate efforts by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide assistance to Sri Lanka to help alleviate its current economic crisis. The dissolution of the Rajapaksa government provides an opportunity for the United States to engage with Sri Lanka with a renewed focus on human rights and accountability. During this crucial

moment, the United States must hold Sri Lanka’s transitional government to its human rights commitments – particularly towards its Tamil population—and urge the new government to implement all unfulfilled commitments to the UN Human Rights Council.

We strongly urge you to consider measures in line with the April 2022 recommendations of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, including working with victims and their representatives to prosecute international crimes committed by all parties in Sri Lanka; exploring targeted sanctions against perpetrators of grave human rights violations; and reviewing asylum measures to protect Sri Lankan nationals who are at risk of torture or other serious human rights abuses.

We also ask that the State Department work with the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote an international accountability process for Sri Lanka. Further, we strongly encourage the State Department to leverage the United States’ position on the UN Security Council to pursue a referral of Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court, as outlined in the February 2021 report on Sri Lanka from the UN High Commissioner for Human rights, which describes “the referral of the situation in Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court” as one option to “advance criminal accountability and provide measures of redress for victims.”¹

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to working with you to prioritize these areas of mutual concern in our foreign policy engagements with Sri Lanka.

Sincerely,



Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress



Bill Johnson
Member of Congress





Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress





James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

¹ A/HRC/46/20: Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/028/52/PDF/G2102852.pdf?OpenElement>.


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