

The Rt Hon. Liz Truss MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
King Charles Street SW1A 2AH

Copied to: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of South Asia, the United Nations and the Commonwealth, in his capacity as minister responsible for atrocity prevention; Sarah Hulton OBE, High Commissioner to Sri Lanka; Tom Tugendhat, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee; Sarah Champion, Chair of the International Development Committee

24 June 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

As members and friends of the UK [Atrocity Prevention Working Group](#), we seek to enhance UK contributions to the prevention of mass atrocities. Atrocity prevention, as you recently noted at the International Development Committee evidence session on 18 May, is both a strategic and moral interest of the United Kingdom. For this reason, we wish to draw your attention to the situation in Sri Lanka.

In recent months, the ongoing economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka has raised the risks of mass violence in the country. The crisis, which has generated protests across the island, has led to severe economic privations for many Sri Lankans, and we have observed escalating violence against protestors and the deployment of the armed forces to the streets of Colombo. Given the army's poor human rights record and its role in mass atrocity crimes in the recent past, we are concerned that more violence could ensue if the underlying causes of the economic and political crisis are not properly addressed. In the Integrated Review, HMG made a commitment to atrocity prevention, and the current crisis in Sri Lanka is the most recent test case for how HMG is fulfilling its promises.

As the economic situation in Sri Lanka has continued to [deteriorate](#), with major shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, extraordinary and unprecedented protests have broken out in Colombo and elsewhere in the country, demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Over time, the demands of the protesters have expanded, and space for discussion of crimes committed against Tamils and Muslims by the state has opened up to some extent, which has provided a limited but exceptional window for cross-community understanding in the public sphere. There has been a discussion of the country's accountability crisis, as many of the same politicians blamed for the country's economic woes have previously evaded justice for serious human rights violations. On 18 May, there was even a [small memorial](#) to the tens of thousands of Tamils killed at Mullivaikkal during the final stages of the war, something which had never previously been publicly commemorated in Colombo. While the protests have a long way to go in addressing the concerns of all communities, certain segments of the protesting public have begun to demand real, structural changes to address Sri Lanka's many problems, which ought to be welcomed by the international community.

During the last month, Sri Lankan authorities have cracked down hard on the protesting public. On 9 May, government supporters – allegedly backed by some pro-government Members of Parliament – [attacked the protest](#) site at Galle Face, whilst police officers appeared to do nothing to stop the violence. Retaliatory attacks against government supporters and MPs' property followed throughout the afternoon and evening. In response, the government issued draconian emergency regulations, handing greater power to the Presidency. Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Kamal Gunaratne announced that security forces had been [ordered to 'shoot on sight'](#) anyone who was causing harm to others or engaged in looting public property, and armoured vehicles of the Sri Lankan military, which already maintains a large and highly visible presence in the mostly Tamil and Muslim North and East, were [deployed on the streets](#) of Colombo. On Sunday 19th June, in the Northern district of Mullaitivu 2 people were injured after Sri Lanka's army fired, for the first time, with live ammunition. Tamils,

Muslims, women, and LGBTQI+ individuals are among communities with distinct vulnerabilities that are at particular risk, as are [activists](#) and [journalists](#), several of whom have been arrested or harassed by security forces in recent weeks.

We were very encouraged by the statements of the UK High Commissioner and the Minister for Asia following the crackdown on the protests, which condemned the attacks and called for the protection of civic space, and we are relieved that such large-scale violence has not yet re-occurred. However, we remain concerned that the international community has not done enough to support the varied demands of protestors and victim communities from across the island. Since the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe, there has been little serious talk of structural change in Sri Lanka from the international community. We are particularly concerned that the UK Prime Minister [did not discuss](#) human rights issues during his call with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe on 30 May.

The international community, including the United Kingdom, must engage with both international and Sri Lankan civil society and atrocity prevention experts to understand the rising risks and to understand and support the demands of protestors. The UK is well placed to lead this work thanks to growing prioritisation of atrocity prevention across the FCDO. We welcome the new focus on atrocity prevention FCDO is integrating into its work, including the development of an Atrocity Prevention and Conflict Prevention Hub within the Office of Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation and hope this new focus will be replicated and supported across the UK's Sri Lanka country team. We would be grateful to hear how OCSM is responding to this acute crisis and supporting High Commissioner Hulton? Ambassador Matthew Field said during the International Development Committee's evidence session on 24 May that Embassies needed a combination of country expertise and subject expertise on conflict and atrocity prevention. What atrocity prevention specific support is available to High Commissioner Hulton and her team? Who is currently leading on atrocity prevention and Sri Lanka? Is the High Commission and country team able to collaborate with and learn from other embassies and country teams working in other contexts that have experienced or are experiencing mass violence? The United Kingdom must have a clear and coherent strategy on atrocity prevention in Sri Lanka.

As the de facto leader of the Core Group on Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the United Kingdom will be taking a leading role at the current and September Council sessions, providing opportunity to reiterate the UK's condemnation of ongoing violence and human rights abuses and call for restraint, as it did on 14 June. We urge the UK to prioritise meaningful dialogue to identify pathways for alleviating the suffering of the poorest and most marginalised communities in the country, who have borne the brunt of the economic crisis. The UK should also demand that economic relief addresses the root causes of the crisis and does not compound the impunity enjoyed by the country's political elite, who have long evaded consequences for corruption and human rights violations.

The UK and the international community must condemn the Sri Lankan government's use of force to suppress peaceful protests and ensure that space for such protest is provided and protected. The UK should echo [Michele Bachelet's call](#) for an independent, transparent and thorough investigation into all attacks that have occurred. In aid of this, the UK should request that the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression completes their long overdue country visit to Sri Lanka.

We offer a meeting with the Minister and her colleagues, so that they may draw on the experience of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group and the expertise of the Sri Lanka Campaign and People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL).

We look forward to hearing from you, and are ready to support you and your colleagues to ensure the United Kingdom continues to stand in solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka.

Sincerely,

The Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice
The European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
Korea Future
People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL)
Protection Approaches
Rights for Peace
United Against Inhumanity
United Nations Association - UK
Videre est Credere
Waging Peace

