



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 9

**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related  
forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation  
of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Jeunesse Etudiante Tamoule, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **Militarization of Tamil schools and Racial discrimination against Tamil Children's education**

In the Tamil Eelam, North and East of Sri Lanka, areas which were worst affected by Sri Lanka's long and brutal civil war, soldiers from the Sri Lankan army are today involved in school activities with disturbing frequency. The penetration of the military into everyday civilian life has long been a major concern of Eelam Tamils life.

We highlighting the deep sense of insecurity, fear and mistrust that accompanies their presence. However, efforts to systematically document the military's increasingly visible role in the education sector – and to understand its scale, purpose, and impact – have been relatively limited.

### **An overview of the army's presence in schools**

In recent years activists have raised concerns about military-run in schools the North and East of Sri Lanka. In a major report in 2017, researchers examined the way in which the army, through its Civil Security Department (CSD), was using the employment of pre-school teachers in the Vanni as a means of conducting surveillance and creating economic dependency among war-affected Eelam Tamils life.

Between January 2018 and December 2019, the army website published press releases about a total of 351 occasions where troops visited schools in Sri Lanka or were involved in school activities. The Sri Lanka Campaign compiled this information into a database, which is available to view [here](#).

These press releases document the army's involvement in an extraordinarily wide range of activities during these interactions – ranging from building schools, to conducting leadership training sessions.

For the purposes of our research, we classified these activities into eight broad categories: gift giving, cleaning schools, construction, training, educational tours, seminars, sports, and events. A breakdown of this data – by type and location – is provided in the charts below.

Gift giving was by far the most frequent activity, with the army presenting items to children at schools on 148 occasions. The most common gifts were schoolbooks, stationery, and bags, but also included bicycles, IT equipment, sporting goods, and musical instruments.

Educational tours of military facilities for school children were conducted on 22 occasions, with Palaly military airfield most frequently visited by children, including many of pre-school age. No other activity occurred more than 20 times.

Where are these activities taking place – and how do they vary by location?

In total, the army reported 271 interactions with school children in the Northern and Eastern Provinces – making up more than three quarters of the total interactions across the country. 29 of these interactions were in the Eastern Province, with 242 in the Northern Province.

The Sri Lankan Army almost exclusively employs Sinhalese men, in stark contrast to the demography in these areas. The army interacted with school children less than 20 times in each of the other provinces.

The three districts with the highest number of interactions between school children and the army were Kilinochchi (82), Jaffna (75) and Mullaitivu (49) – all in the Northern Province. These represent more than half of the total number.

Outside the North and East, the district with the highest engagement was Anuradhapura, with 13 events. In the capital, Colombo, the troops participated in activities at school only 12 times. No other district had more than ten interactions between the army and schools.

The types of activities in which the army were engaged during the period varied significantly by area. Cleaning schools, gift giving, and construction took place almost

exclusively in the Tamil-majority North and East, while training and sports were more common in the South.

Almost three quarters of the gift giving ceremonies took place in the Northern Province. Similarly, 90% of the occasions where troops cleaned schools took place in that province. By contrast, the army delivered training events in the North and East only twice in these two years; with 90% of this activity instead taking place outside of these provinces.

Why is the army so heavily involved in schools in the North and East?

Among the most obvious explanations for the disproportionate frequency of army interactions with school children in the North and East, is the fact that the overall presence of the military in these areas is itself highly disproportionate.

Twelve years after the war ended, these war-affected provinces retain alarmingly high levels of militarisation. For example, 14 of 21 of the Sri Lankan Army's divisions are today stationed in the Northern Province. In 2017, researchers estimated that more than 60,000 troops were based in Mullaitivu district alone, approximately one soldier for every two civilians. This presence has been bolstered by the continued high levels of spending on the military since the war, despite the end of the armed conflict.

On another interpretation, the army's disproportionate engagement with schools in the North and East of the country might be seen as a reflection of economic need in this area, and the poor state of public infrastructure and relatively high levels of deprivation resulting from the war. The military has increasingly shifted as occupied forces of Eelam Tamils Land.

The army appears to regard its role as a provider of development and humanitarian services in war-affected areas as uncontroversial. For example, in 2018, nearly all of Sri Lanka's Security Force Headquarters based in the North and East outlined such work as forming part of their key objectives: "maintaining essential services" (Jaffna), "initiat[ing] ... social welfare programmes to enhance the living standard of all communities" (Vanni), "uplift[ing] the livelihood of the people" (Mullaitivu).

Such objectives may appear relatively benign to some observers. However, a closer reading of the army's increasing presence in Sri Lankan schools suggests forms of engagement which are deeply problematic.

#### 'WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS' OR SOCIAL CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE?

When asked about the reason for the military's presence in schools in the North and East, one Tamil activist spoke to – an individual working with the war-affected Tamils across the North and East – was clear: "it's definitely about control." In their view, the expansion of the military into educational settings was part of a wider process of physical and social coercion by the military – with the focus on children designed to entrench and normalise those patterns. "It means that no one will flinch when a new [army] camp crops up. It tells them [the children] that it's normal to pass through 6 or 7 checkpoints every day."

The same activist stressed the wider political function of the army's presence in schools, and its role in advancing the idea of national unity without the need to address the past. In their words: "It's the big agenda of building 'one nation'. Tamil people don't refer to the military as 'our military'. It is about instilling that idea in them."

The army has openly linked its role in social service provision with a desire to build support for the occupation of Eelam Tamils land by Sri Lankan state and foster a unified national identity.

It is vital that the ongoing militarisation of civic space in Sri Lanka, including in schools, continues to be vigorously questioned and challenged. Members of the international community have a key role to play in this and it is essential that they begin to lead by example. Recent events in which the armed forces of key member states – including the US and the UK – have ventured into Sri Lankan schools risks setting a worrying precedent and normalising the role of the military in schools. We take this opportunity to remind those member states, as well as the government of Sri Lanka, of the conditions that they have previously recognised as essential for building lasting peace in Sri Lanka: "the ending

of military involvement in civilian activities, the resumption of livelihoods and the restoration of normality to civilian life.”

To the government of Sri Lanka:

- Instruct members of the armed forces to withdraw from all civilian activities, including in schools.

To members of the international community:

- Urge the government of Sri Lanka to end the involvement of the armed forces in civilian activities, including in schools, in accordance with Resolution 30/1.
- Ensure that aid spending and defence cooperation does not contribute to, or help normalise, the presence of the Sri Lankan armed forces in schools (including, for example, through the presence of members of their own armed forces in school settings).
- Provide support and protection to Eelam Tamil activists challenging patterns of militarisation in the North and East of Sri Lanka.
- To recognize the occupation of Eelam Tamils land by Sri Lankan unitary State
- We invite OHCHR special procedures mandates holders and Treaty bodies expert to have a Commission of inquiry on that occupation of Eelam Tamils land it effects on Eelam Tamils.

To donors and civil society organisations:

- Refrain from supporting initiatives and programmes which contribute to the presence of the armed forces in schools.
- we ask to support Tamil rights activists and victims to seek Justice with Human Rights Council and international criminal court.

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Gouvernement en Exil du Tamil Eelam, GLOBAL TAMIL MOUVEMENT, ASSOCIATION DES CHRETIENS TAMOULS POUR LA PAIX ET JUSTICE, Centre Bishop Rayappu Joseph pour la Justice et la paix, ASSOCIATION DES ANONYMES ET PERSÉCUTES DU GÉNOCIDE TAMOULE, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.