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Joint Press Release: New study estimates 500 Tamils disappeared in Army custody in Sri Lanka after surrendering at the end of the war in 2009.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:
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Johannesburg/San Francisco: The Sri Lankan army must explain to the families of the disappeared and missing what happened to an estimated 500 Tamils who disappeared in their custody at the war end on/around 18 May 2009, said two international NGOs who have been collating and analysing lists of names.

Sri Lanka has one of the largest numbers in the world of enforced disappearances but these 500 represent the largest number of disappearances all in one place and time in the country. For a detailed account of the process of estimating the 500 please see: [“How many people disappeared on 17-19 May 2009 in Sri Lanka?”¹](#).

“The sheer scale of enforced disappearance after surrender in 2009 warrants immediate investigation,” said the International Truth and Justice Project’s Executive Director, Yasmin Sooka. *“Instead, almost a decade has elapsed and nobody has yet questioned the commander of the 58 Division of the Sri Lankan Army whom we know, from UN reports and witness testimony, was present at these surrenders. It is a total affront to the families of the disappeared that Major General Shavendra Silva has been promoted to Adjutant General², which ironically put him in charge of the army’s human rights directorate. The families must have answers – they deserve to know the truth and have a right to the truth.”*

For years the ITJP has been collecting names of those who disappeared at the war end from survivors and now has more than 300 names and photos

¹ <https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HRDAG-ITJPSL-2018-12-12-1.pdf> and <https://hrdag.org/2018/12/12/report-500-tamils-sri-lanka/>

² ITJP PRESS RELEASE: SRI LANKA FLOUTS UN COMMITMENTS BY APPOINTING ALLEGED WAR CRIMINAL TO ADMINISTER ARMY, 31 March 2017, <http://www.itjpsl.com/assets/press/31-March-2017-ITJP-PRESS-RELEASE-3.pdf>

displayed in a [bilingual website](#).³ This and other lists collected by activists and family members inside Sri Lanka were analysed by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) to produce a statistical analysis of what the total number might look like – the names already collected and the ones not yet enumerated.

“Imagine two dark rooms we can’t see inside,” explains statistician Dr. Patrick Ball from HRDAG, “We throw balls that make a noise when they knock into one another into the first room, and listen: click, click, click. We throw them into the second room with equal force: click. Our intuition is that the second room is larger because the balls are able to spread out and therefore strike each other less frequently. This is an intuitive explanation about how we create an estimate indicating the likely range of the total number of disappeared people starting from the overlap of names in the various lists”.

“In 2011 the first report cited 20 disappearances⁴, then we found 103 names in 2014⁵, earlier this year it rose to 280⁶ and now our colleagues at HRDAG believe it’s as many as 500 people. This shows the importance of continuing to gather information and the need to do this both inside Sri Lanka and outside where many of the key witnesses from the war period have fled,” said Ms. Sooka.

The ITJP and HRDAG wish to thank the families of the disappeared, their former comrades around the world, and Tamil human rights activists inside Sri Lanka who helped collect and share the data that made this work possible. These individuals are not named for their own safety. The families have an inalienable right to know the whereabouts and the fate of their loved ones. The Sri Lankan government is under an obligation to provide them with the truth and, where evidence exists, to prosecute those responsible for their enforced disappearance.

Twitter: #Wheretheynow?

³ Website available at <http://www.disappearance.itjpsl.com/#lang=english>

⁴ Sri Lanka: Account for Wartime Disappearances; More Than 20 People Last Seen in Army Custody Remain Missing, Human Rights Watch, 7 April 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/07/sri-lanka-account-wartime-disappearances#>

⁵ ITJP’s online report on 18 May 2009, <http://white-flags.org>

⁶ Press release: New ITJP website lists 280 names of enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka all on one day. 15 May 2018, <http://www.itjpsl.com/assets/press/English-15-May-2018-Itjp-Press-release-Disappearance-Website-english.pdf>

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