

INTERNATIONAL
TRUTH
AND JUSTICE
PROJECT

Press Release: Sri Lankan security agencies assaulting families of asylum seekers in UK

W ITJPSL.COM
E ITJPSL@GMAIL.COM

24 October 2019

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:
YASMIN SOOKA

Johannesburg: Tamil asylum seekers in the UK say their families back home are being deliberately targeted by Sri Lankan security forces, shown photographs of them in demonstrations in London, threatened and in some cases physically assaulted. Spouses and parents in the villages of the north of Sri Lanka are being visited by police and army within days of the person in London giving a media interview or participating in a protest.

“This shows that surveillance in the UK of Tamils, who have been forced to go into exile, is being used to silence victims and witnesses,” said the Executive Director of the International Truth and Justice Project, Yasmin Sooka, *“state agencies wouldn’t need to silence victims’ families if they hadn’t driven them out in the first place”.*

Interviews

The Sri Lankan authorities monitor Tamil TV broadcasts from the UK and social media sites. In one recent case, security officials found the wife in her village in northern Sri Lanka of a man in the UK just days after he had given a TV interview in London. They warned her he should stop: *“Your husband is doing unnecessary things abroad. If he goes there, he should be silent. We are saying this to you in a polite way but if other people come, they won’t be so polite”.* She was also questioned about his postings on social media accounts. Another Tamil asylum seeker reported threats to his family in Mullaitivu from plain clothes officers of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) following an interview he gave to the media. He says his father was physically assaulted.

The ITJP interviewed 26 Tamil men in the UK, all of them claiming asylum on the basis of post-war torture. They were typically former members or supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with wives and/or elderly parents still living in the interior villages of the Vanni, where the LTTE once had their stronghold. They described an environment of intense surveillance with security agencies hiring former LTTE intelligence wing cadres to spy on their own people.

All reported that their families had been repeatedly visited by security services after they had fled the country – including some as recently as September 2019. The visits were mainly by plain clothes police officers but in some cases military intelligence or the Civil Security Department.

Demonstrations

Several men described the security agencies in Sri Lanka showing their families photographs of them attending protests in London. Two Tamil asylum seekers said their families were shown photographs from outside the Sri Lankan High Commission when the former Sri Lankan military attaché, Brigadier Priyanka Fernando, allegedly threatened Tamils by making throat slitting gestures at them.

“First another family was questioned and shown photos of the event, then they questioned my family and showed the photos of me there. This happened within ten days of the protest.”

Those interviewed said their families had also been shown pictures of them protesting at war commemoration events in May 2019:

“They said they have information that I fled abroad and working against the Government of Sri Lanka. They threatened to destroy the whole family.”

Silencing

The surveillance is not just targeting diaspora activities but also appears to be a means to ensure families inside Sri Lanka do not speak out about why their relatives fled the country in the first place. Those interviewed mainly allege they were tortured in Sri Lanka during the coalition government, namely in 2016 (5 cases), 2017 (9 cases) and 2018 (7 cases) but two cases date back to the Rajapaksa previous government and one victim alleges torture this year.

In 2018, a close relative of a victim of torture and sexual violence that occurred recently, and which has been well documented, was also abducted for a week. The victim in London does not know the details of what happened to his relative in detention but says the person was accused of helping him and is now in hiding.

Male witnesses described their wives being assaulted during searches of their homes after they'd left, their identity cards taken away and being threatened. One woman was told *“you married a terrorist”*. Elderly parents have reportedly been assaulted and told their children are *“working for the LTTE”*. Some extended families are questioned about how their children escaped abroad:

“My family and neighbours were questioned in PTK by the CID plain clothes officers about how I managed to leave the country and who is behind this my activities against the Sri Lankan government in the UK.”

The fear is so intense it can lead relatives to sever communication, rendering the asylum seeker in the UK isolated and without any emotional support.

Political Campaigning

Two men interviewed in London said they'd been detained in Sri Lanka after helping the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) there with low level political work and collecting the names of the disappeared in the war. After his release, one said his family was visited by plain clothes policemen on unmarked motorbikes in their home. *“They threatened to destroy my family,”* he said, explaining that he no longer dares call home lest he endanger them further. The other man's family was also asked by plain clothes policemen about his involvement with the TNA and warned that if they caught him he would not be seen alive again.

Complaining

Only about half of those interviewed said their families had tried to report the surveillance, threats or assaults to the police. Some were reluctant because of their experience when their loved one was first detained:

“My family went to the police soon after I was abducted. They told them, ‘don't worry – he will come back soon’.”

Several men said their families were specifically warned not to report to the police the visits or were too frightened to do so. Most who tried said local police officers refused to accept a complaint as they had no eyewitnesses because everyone was too frightened to testify and they couldn't name the individuals responsible. They were also told there was no indication they were state actors if they were in plain clothes. In some cases police allegedly refused to accept complaints, saying *“your sons are LTTE and trying to regroup the LTTE”* or *“such things don't happen”*. After participating in a protest in London in mid-2019, this man's parents in Sri Lanka were threatened but tried to report the incident despite warnings not to do so:

“My parents went to the police station to report it but the police wouldn't accept the complaint. They asked for the names of the people who had threatened them and they didn't have the names. There are various different intelligence officers who come on different occasions in plain clothes. Now my parents are alone at home and frightened because they live near an army camp.”

Five interviewees said their families had registered complaints with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) but three were reportedly asked for a police report first which the police refused to provide.

“It's easy to assert that the ongoing flow of Tamils claiming asylum on the basis of torture is the work of a few corrupt security officers but reports of systematic intimidation of the victims' families belie such a theory,” said Ms. Sooka. *“These acts of surveillance, intimidation and continued persecution of families indicate the paranoia of the Government of Sri Lanka in wanting to shut down even relatively small protests abroad and penalising those who give interviews. In no way is this approach consistent with the narrative of “reconciliation” that has been fed to donors and diplomats.”*

Summary Chart

Ref.	Years visited	Basis of Asylum Claim	Incident	Tried to go to Police.
S50	2017	Detained & Tortured in 2017, Arrived UK 2018.	Assaulted father.	Yes but refused.
S60	2018	Detained and tortured in 2017.	Mother threatened.	HRCSL asked for police report; unable to get.
S45	2018	Detained and Tortured in 2018.	Assaulted brother.	HRCSL yes; police refused.
S52	2017 on	Detained, Tortured & Sexually Violated in 2017.	TID – threats.	Police refused.
S71	2018, 2019	Detained and Tortured in 2017.	TIS & SLA – detained father; threatened to arrest Mother.	N/A
S61	2019	Detained and Tortured in 2018.	CID threatened father.	Police refused.
W265	2019	Detained and Tortured in 2016.	CSD threatened parents.	HRCSL asked for police report; police asked for evidence.
S62	2017, 2018	Detained and tortured in 2017.	CID & SLA visited parents.	N/A
S63	2017.2018	Detained and tortured and sexually abused in 2016.	CID & SLA visited family.	N/A
S72	2017,2018	Detained and Tortured in 2015-16 – left 2016.	Family threatened.	Warned not to report.
S42	2018	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2018.	CID threats to wife.	N/A
S46	2019	Fled 2018. Detained and tortured in 2018.	MIC came to home. Relative stopped & questioned twice.	Police & HRCSL refused to accept complaint.
S64	2018	Detained and tortured and sexually abused in 2016.	CID in plain clothes visited. Father assaulted.	Reported to HRCSL and Police.
S56	2018, 2019	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2018.	Uniformed police and CID threatened family.	Reported to HRCSL.
S70	2018	Detained and tortured in 2017.	Police threatened parents.	Warned not to report but approached a lawyer.
S44	2014	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2014.	CID threatened family.	Warned not to report
S46	2018	Detained and Tortured in 2015, – Arrived 2018.	CID told his family they would kill him.	Tried to report to police and threatened for doing so.
S66	2018, 2019	Detained and tortured in 2017	CID threatening family.	Police refused to accept complaint.
S67	2018	Detained and tortured in 2010 and 2018.	TID visited relative who was surety for his bail.	N/A
S45	2018, 2019	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2018.	Assaulted wife.	Reported to police.
S68	2017	Detained and tortured in 2017.	CID threatened family.	Police refused to accept complaint.
S42	2019	Arrived 2018, Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2009-12.	Plain clothes officers visited wife.	N/A
S41	2015, 2019	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2009, 2014-15, Arrived UK in 2019.	Family threatened.	Police refused to accept complaint.
S43	2019	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2019.	Family questioned by CID.	Too frightened to complain.
W199	2018, 2019	Detained, Tortured and Sexually Violated in 2016.	Family threatened.	Reported to HRCSL and Police.
S69	2018	Detained , tortured , sexually abused in 2017.	CID & SLA assaulted father.	Reported to HRCSL.

████████████████████
INTERNATIONAL ██████████
██████ TRUTH ██████████
██████████████████ AND JUSTICE
██████████ PROJECT ██████████
████████████████████