

Outspoken church leader in danger as Sri Lanka regime critics “disappear”

Country/Region: Sri Lanka, South and East Asia

A senior church leader in Sri Lanka is under threat for speaking out against the regime’s abuses as government critics suspiciously “disappear” and international pressure mounts.

Rayappu Joseph, Bishop of Mannar, has been a leading figure in defending the rights of the Tamil people in the north and east of the country; they suffered grave abuses during the 26-year long civil war in which the government fought the Tamil Tigers, and are now marginalised and mistreated.



Anyone who sides with the beleaguered Tamil people is viewed as an enemy. More than a dozen Christian ministers have “disappeared”, suspected to have been abducted and murdered by President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime, which ruthlessly “silences” dissenters.

After the war ended in 2009, the government appointed the “Lessons Learnt Reconciliation Commission” (LLRC), seen as a sham by critics to prevent international intervention and thereby avoid accountability for its own war crimes.

Bishop Joseph and two of his fellow clergy made a detailed submission to the LLRC in which they highlighted the disappearance of 146,679 people, who remain unaccounted for, during the last stages of the civil war.

He was also a signatory of a letter to the US State Department and another to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that call for international intervention in Sri Lanka. The second, submitted by 31 Christian clergy on 1 March 2012, describes the deteriorating human rights situation in the country and calls for an independent international body to investigate “war time abuses as well as pre-war and post-war concerns”.

The UNHRC has responded, passing a resolution on 22 March calling on Sri Lanka to investigate alleged war crimes properly. Intensifying international pressure on President Rajapaksa’s government increases the threat to the regime’s opponents, who have bravely brought the situation to the world’s attention.

“Break the bones” threat

On 23 March, the president’s Minister of Public Relations and Public Affairs, Mervyn Silva, said that he will “break the bones” of Sri Lankans who supported the UNHRC resolution. Many regime opponents have been killed. The owner/editor of the only newspaper in Sri Lanka to be critical of the government was assassinated in broad daylight while on his way to work.

Open threats have been made against Bishop Joseph. One came from the party of the Buddhist monks, Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which means “National Freedom Front”, who called for his arrest and prosecution.

On 8 May, he was questioned by the Sri Lankan CID about his submission to the LLRC in what is being seen as a signal to the Bishop to give up his campaign for the Tamil cause.

Churches in Sri Lanka are also under pressure as the government tightens its control of all sectors of society. The regime is especially suspicious of Protestant groups; it is estimated that more than 40 per cent of Protestant Christians in Sri Lanka are ethnic Tamils.

Churches have received a circular saying that all new and existing places of worship will require prior approval from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, suggesting that the mandatory registration of churches is pending. Attacks on Christians are also on the rise.

Barnabas Fund is helping Sri Lankan Christians whose lives were devastated by the civil war; we are building houses for those who are still without permanent homes, and churches to provide places of worship for Christians who are currently meeting in tents or under trees.

For more information, visit [Housing persecuted Christians](#).