

INTERNATIONAL
TRUTH
AND JUSTICE
PROJECT

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Press release: UK review should cancel training programme for Sri Lankan police.

London: Rights groups and journalists have welcomed reports¹ that Scottish training of the Sri Lankan police has been under review since early May 2021 because of concerns over the human rights record of the units being trained. The review follows a sustained campaign by British Members of Parliament this year questioning the training of police units that have long been alleged to have used torture as a mode of interrogation.

Since 2016 the ITJP has called for a review of UK training for units of the Sri Lankan police mired in practices of torture. That year the Sri Lankan delegation to the UN Committee Against Torture brazenly included a policeman named in a UN Investigation² as in charge of one of the worst torture sites at the end of the civil war.

“In Geneva, the Sri Lankan delegation tried to whitewash their record by invoking the UK’s training of their counter-terrorism police unit,” said Yasmin Sooka, the executive director of the International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP). *“We urge the UK Government to cancel the programme until Sri Lanka takes serious action to hold alleged perpetrators to account.”*

The ITJP has gathered evidence of the use of systematic torture by counter terrorism police (TID³), including the names of scores of alleged perpetrators⁴. In addition, the group documented testimony from members of the Special Task Force (STF) of the police describing their complicity in abductions, torture, and execution of Tamils during and after the war⁵.

Investigating UK’s Role

The history of British training of the Special Task Force (STF) was first reported on by journalist Phill Miller who investigated a secretive British mercenary group involved in training the unit which is alleged to have committed executions⁶. *“Scottish police have been training Sri Lankan officers almost continuously since 2007 so it is curious that they have only decided to pause the project now, and it remains to be seen whether they will pull the plug completely,”* commented

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¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/police-training-in-sri-lanka-halted-over-abuse-fears-3w87qk9rp>
<https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/19507167.police-scotland-training-sri-lankan-forces-accused-executions-torture/>

² A/HRC/30.CRP.2

³ Now renamed CTID.

⁴ <https://itjpsl.com/reports/terrorism-investigation-division>

⁵ <https://itjpsl.com/reports/special-task-force>

⁶ <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/keenie-meenie-britains-private-army/>

Phill Miller. "For years my investigations raising concerns about this scheme were ignored by the Scottish police college but perhaps the appointment of a Hitler admirer as State Minister for Community Police Services in May was finally too much for the UK to stomach," he added.

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Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, who have documented recent unreported police brutality in Sri Lanka, welcomed what it called "the long overdue pause in the training" but said even the decision in May "had not changed the brutal practices of Sri Lankan Police". Bashana Abeywardane of Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) said "reports of abductions, arbitrary detention, torture and executions have continued even after May. This highlights the systemic nature of state sanctioned crimes in Sri Lanka, whether it be by the police or the military".

A series of questions were asked in the Scottish parliament in February 2021 regarding security force training for Sri Lanka including whether Scottish police were training the Special Task Force of the Sri Lankan police in the light of allegations in Miller's documentary, *Keenie Meenie: Britain's Private Army*⁷. The Government response was distinctly evasive in that it said Police Scotland had not delivered training specifically for the STF.

A similarly evasive response was received by the ITJP when it submitted a series of Freedom of Information requests between July and October 2018 to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), to establish how many members of specific police units had received training. The FCO did not give the attendance numbers⁸ and merely said it could not "rule out that TID/CID personnel may have attended some of these training sessions"⁹. Asked how many Sri Lankan security officials were screened out, the FCO said "We are not aware of any applicants being rejected for training."

The information requests also asked about the training in Scotland of named individuals in problematic police units but the FCO refused to give the information on the grounds it was personal data¹⁰. This is in spite of the fact that the Sri Lankan press had published photos online of these individuals in Scotland receiving training. The freedom of information requests also asked for copies of the human rights assessments conducted but these were withheld on the grounds they could damage bilateral relations¹¹.

Human Rights Assessments

In 2019, in a joint submission to the UN with Redress, the ITJP raised concerns about the lack of transparency in applying human rights assessments to UK training of the police in Sri Lanka¹². The submission said, "The UK is reported to have previously trained at least three Sri Lankan police officials whose units are alleged to be responsible for the use of torture".

Nevertheless since 2012 there have been 90 separate deployments of police officers or police staff to Sri Lanka to deliver training¹³. In 2021, Scottish parliamentarians asked about the vetting procedures for officers being trained and reports of human rights violations by the police¹⁴. At the time the Scottish Government said the training was suspended because of the pandemic and would be re-evaluated when travel restrictions were lifted¹⁵. The government did confirm that from 2019 onwards training focused on "Sexual and Gender Based Violence prevention and investigation"¹⁶.

"This is of grave concern given the reports we hear of ongoing sexual violence by Sri Lankan police," said Ms. Sooka. "We are now documenting cases of rape of young Tamil men by members of the Counter Terrorism Investigation Division occurring in 2020".

⁷<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-32593&ResultsPerPage=10>

⁸ This was before the name change.

⁹ FOI request reference 0797-18.

¹⁰ Reference 1004-18.

¹¹ Ref 1063-18.

¹² https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/UK-Implementation-of-UNCAT_REDRESS_March2019_Web.pdf

¹³ <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-33122&ResultsPerPage=10>

¹⁴ <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-34885&ResultsPerPage=10>

Neil Findlay MSP: 02/02/2021: To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide details of the vetting procedures for Police Scotland's work with Sri Lanka, in light of the recent recommendation from the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights for all member states to "apply stringent vetting procedures to Sri Lankan police and military personnel identified for military exchanges and training programmes"

¹⁵ <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-34895&ResultsPerPage=10>

And <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-33635&ResultsPerPage=10>

¹⁶ <https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-32591&ResultsPerPage=10>

Aid Budget

In May 2021, the Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey asked the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about plans to continue funding the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund programmes in Sri Lanka which include police training¹⁷ and how any unspent budget might be reallocated¹⁸.

Labour MP Sam Tarry followed up in July 2021 by asking the FCDO if it would “undertake and publish an assessment of the human rights impact of the £6.3 million the Government has spent on supporting security reform in Sri Lanka”¹⁹. In 2017 the then Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, had called for an independent audit of the efficacy of training that never materialised²⁰.

“The Tamil community has suffered enough at the hands of the Sri Lankan security forces and our tax money should not be wasted on trying to teach them that rape and torture is wrong,” said Sen Kandiah of Tamils for Labour. *“It’s an affront to the victims who are still coming here”*.

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¹⁷ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-05-25/7092/>

¹⁸ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-05-25/7091/>

¹⁹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-07-20/36806>

²⁰ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/'time-focus-accountability-sri-lanka'---jeremy-corbyn>

